Game of Stacks

by CommaSplice

Summary

When the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library at Crownlands University loses its most recent library director in a tragic accident, President Robert Baratheon turns to his friend and colleague Eddard Stark to turn the library around.

Notes

Book and show spoilers abound.

I was inspired to write this after reading Against the Cold, which features Stannis as a public library director. I loved the idea of Stannis being a librarian. I work in an academic library and I started thinking of who else could be a librarian, what type of librarian they would be, and how good or bad they would be at their jobs.

There's a lot of library stuff in this story, but hopefully I've struck the right balance and it's not too obscure or deadly dull.
Ages have been altered. Occasionally, I've borrowed snippets of show dialogue. I have tried to remain as canon compliant as possible in terms of personalities with the understanding that characters transposed to a modern setting are going to react somewhat differently.

Crownlands University is on a trimester system.

- Inspired by Against the Cold, by Hedge_witch
Podrick Payne peered into the blackness and then climbed back up the stairs. He marched back to the reference desk. “The lights are off and it’s pretty dark down there.”

A striking redhead appeared seemingly out of nowhere. She sat down next to the librarian who had been helping him. “The night is dark and full of terrors.”

“Is that poetry?” Pod asked.

The hot woman in the filmy scarlet dress was about to reply when the older reference librarian cut her off and smiled tightly at Pod. “There is a motion sensor. The lights will turn on as soon as you walk into the stacks.”

“Stacks?”

“The area where the books are,” she translated.

Podrick glanced dubiously at the pieces of paper in his hands, but thanked her again. The old lady had been pretty helpful and printed out a couple of things for his paper. He spared a glance at the redhead, who was probably what his roommate would have called a MILF. It was probably better she hadn’t been on duty when he’d gone to ask for help; he would have been so distracted. He went down the stairs and stepped boldly into the shadows and was rewarded by the flickering of fluorescent bulbs. He didn’t like this part of the library. It wasn’t like the ones from back home. Those had normal shelves—these were different.

When Pod had started at Crownlands, he had dutifully gone on a tour of the library. His roommate at the time had been horrified. Only the geeks did that. Pod had nodded and assured his beer-drinking, girl-chasing roommate that he was not a geek. This had been the first of several indications that Pod needed to find a better roommate.

Uncool as it might have been, he had found the tour helpful. The librarian had called these “compact shelves,” he remembered. They used them so they took up less space. She demonstrated their use to the tour group. You just pressed a couple of buttons on each side, the shelves would part, and you could go down them just like in a regular library to get your books.

When a student wanted to know what would happen if you were in the row being compressed, the librarian had assured them it was all perfectly safe. There were sensors that could detect if someone was there and the shelves would just stop. Pod thought the whole concept was sensible, but he kind of missed the ordinary shelves. Actually, he missed his old library.

As he moved down and across the floor, sections of lighting flickered on. Ignore the creepiness, he told himself. Just get the books and go back up where it’s bustling and warm and be done with it. “There is nothing to be afraid of.” Had he said that aloud? Not that it mattered. There was no one down here but him. “Nope, there’s no one to care if I talk too loudly,” he said with a smile.

Another section of lighting flicked on. He turned down a row and then moved to the next part of the basement.

It was then that he saw the arm sticking out from between two sections of compact shelving.
Eddard Stark was not having a very good day. Actually when it came down to it, he was not having a very good year.

It had started out well enough. He was finishing out his term as chair of the history department, when he got a call from Robert Baratheon.

Once upon a time, he and Robert had been callow undergraduates, ostensibly studying history at Crownlands University. Truth be told, they had been more interested in drinking and women, or in Robert’s case, women and drinking. Then one semester they had rented a garage apartment from Jon Arryn. He was old even then, a seemingly cranky collection development librarian, but an odd friendship had sprung up amongst them. After a semester or two, they had come to care for him the way they would a father. He had taken them hunting, given them guidance, gotten to tame their excesses, and steered them into more productive directions. Those had been good years.

Ned and Robert parted ways for graduate school, but kept in touch. Robert took a position at a college in the Westerlands and then to Ned’s astonishment had begun to climb the administrative ranks. He would have sworn that Robert was the last man to play that particular game. Give Robert a class of 400 bored undergraduates and the man would have them eating out of his hand in no time. But when it came to department politics, Robert was bored to tears. So why was Robert opting for administrative assignments?

When he’d met Robert’s wife for the first time, that mystery was solved. Cersei Baratheon née Lannister was clearly ambitious for her husband and she had her father’s connections to pave the way. Robert served in increasingly high-ranking academic positions around Westeros before returning to Crownlands as President.

Ned stuck to research and teaching. He assembled a respectable list of publications and presentations. He wasn’t interested in the petty politicking that went with an administrative career.

By the time Cat had given birth to Rickon, they were looking down the barrel of university tuition for five children. The posting for Crownlands had come just in time. He was head-hunted. There was the promise of chair of the department, spousal hire for Catelyn, a sizeable raise in salary, and free tuition should their children want to attend Crownlands University. It was the kind of offer you just couldn’t refuse. Catelyn was not thrilled about it, but she had finally come round. They had been happy for a time.

Until the day that Robert’s plea came.

“I need you to take over as library director, Ned.”

Ned was flummoxed. “You may have missed this, but I don’t have a MLS.”

Robert waved that away as a technicality. “We’ve gone through three directors in the past five years. Chelsted—” Robert swigged down some whiskey. “—he seemed promising enough, but he left a right mess.”

“He had a heart attack,” Ned said puzzled.

Robert snorted. “The security guard found him dead in the reading room, with two hysterical whores. He was naked and tied on top of one of the library tables.”

“Seven hells.”

“We paid a bloody fortune to keep it quiet.” Robert poured them both more whiskey. “Then Rossart—”
Now it was Ned who drank deeply. Being crushed to death by a collapsing card catalog was not a fate he would wish on anyone.

“And now Jon Arryn.” Robert finished off his whiskey.

Ned shuddered.

“We don’t have time to wait out a national search. Stannis wants the job, but you know as well as I do what a disaster that would be. There are a few other optimists on the staff, but I need someone in there now. I need someone I can trust.”

“I’m not a librarian. I love libraries. I’ve used them my whole life, but I wouldn’t have the first idea how to run one. I don’t have the knowledge.”

“Look, the degree is a short one; Stannis was done with his in a year, but I don’t think anyone would quibble if you took two to finish it. The University of Winterfell has an accredited program”

“It’s a good seven-hour drive to Winterfell. Winter is coming. When it hits, it’s going to be more like twelve-to-fourteen hours.”

“They have an online program. You only have to go up there a few times a semester. I have the authority to appoint you. You’ll get the degree while you’re on the job and you’ll whip that place into shape.”

“Robert, it’s not something I really want to—”

“—Ned, I need you.”

Well, now he was halfway through the degree and he was miserable. Oh, the course work was interesting. He had used libraries his whole life, but he had never given very much thought to how the books got on the shelves, the labyrinthine mysteries behind serials, or how the materials were cataloged, or how a good reference librarian could find the proverbial needle in the haystack. No, it was the job itself.

Ned Stark had inherited a mess. The budget was a nightmare. The staff offices were falling apart. User satisfaction was at an all-time low. Half the staff resented his appointment. The other half was mostly, well, nuts.

Faculty dissension across the college had been simmering for some time, but Ned was astonished to learn that the perception among upper administration and more importantly, from the board of trustees was that it was fomenting from the library faculty. Tywin Lannister, Robert’s father-in-law, the library’s biggest donor had a real bug up his arse about that.

That was probably why he was now stuck with the man’s snarky and inexperienced son.

* * *

Tyrion stared at his father in horror.

Tywin Lannister didn’t bother to look up from the report he was reading. “You wanted a position. Well, now you have one and it’s a better one than you deserve.”

“Father, it doesn’t work like this. There is a process for academic appointments. They’re going to think I got the job because I’m your son.”
“I’m sure they will and frankly, you did. They wanted someone else.”

Tyrion didn’t need his father to tell him that. “They’re going to resent me.” They were going to loathe him. This position was, in the library world and with this job market at least, a pretty nice one: reasonable required qualifications; interesting but manageable job duties; decent starting salary; and good benefits. It was tenure track, but if their criteria document was anything to go by, the requirements wouldn’t be too onerous. And it was one of the more prestigious liberal arts college libraries in Westeros. It was also a collection development job which was what he’d been looking for all along.

Tyrion was certain that the search committee had waded through fifty or more applications. He had slaved over his cover letter and vita. He had been confident of the phone interview, until he had it. By the time the phone interview was over, the search committee’s enthusiasm seemed to have cooled. It was probably his sense of humor, he thought, too dark, too cynical, and maybe a little too flip. When he got the email inviting him for an in-person interview, he had been shocked. Then he had grown hopeful, until he went through the two day ordeal. Everyone had been very polite, but Tyrion left thinking it had just been a pro forma thing. Some esoteric academic practices had forced them to bring him in for an interview.

He was already onto his next application when the icy call from Dr. Stark had come in offering him the position.

Well, now he knew why.

“That’s not my concern, nor should it be yours.”

“You can’t just make them hire me.”

"I can and I have.” His father’s attention was on him now. “I simply had a conversation with Robert who had a conversation with his friend, the Director. He understands that the future of the library depends on my good will. He was willing to override the search committee’s recommendation in favor of you. It’s done.”

Tyrion thought he was going to be sick. “Well, I won’t take the job. This is my career, Father. Not yours and if you—”

“I am not without influence in academia, Tyrion. Oh, I’m sure you could find a position doing . . . something . . . somewhere, but all it would take is a few words in a few ears.”

And he would be fucked seven ways from Sunday, Tyrion thought. His father would make sure of that.

To hammer the point home, his father added, “and you’ll be doing whatever that is, wherever that is without my money.”

Tyrion absorbed the threat in shock. Whatever else his father was, he had always been liberal with his money. Tywin Lannister didn’t care what his children spent his money on and he had never cut any of them off before.

“So, you will sign. You may negotiate the contract if you feel it insufficient,” Tywin allowed generously. “But you are going to take the position and you are going to keep an eye on those leftist idiots. They’ve been making waves about how I run this university and I won’t stand for it.”

Technically speaking his father didn’t run the university. A president, a provost, and assorted other academic bureaucrats were in charge. But Tywin Lannister had donated millions; the president was
his son-in-law, and more importantly, Tywin Lannister was on the Board of Trustees. He wielded considerable influence.

“Don’t let me keep you. I know Dr. Stark is eagerly awaiting your call.”

* * *

“Please sit down, Melisandre.”

The religious studies bibliographer gracefully took the chair he offered her.

Ned knew most men would probably consider Melisandre gorgeous, but he was always slightly disturbed out by her. It wasn’t the dyed red hair. “Out of a box,” Cat had said to him after meeting her. She wore all red, all of the time. Then there were what passed for her clothes or rather the fact that she didn’t seem to bother with any undergarments. But mostly it was her religious fervor. This is what had prompted this conversation. “We’ve had some complaints,” he began.

“Oh?” She crossed her legs.

Ned decided now was not the time to have the dress code conversation. “Several student patrons have reported that you’ve been trying to proselytize them to—” he glanced at his notes, “—worship the ‘lord of light.’ I’d like to hear what you have to say about this.”

“The Lord of Light is the one true god,” she declared.

“Well, that may be, but if these allegations are true, your behavior is inappropriate. The one report says the student came to the desk asking for help with a political science paper and said all he could get out of you was information on ‘R’hllor.’ He said that despite asking you repeatedly for material on the use of media in politics, you would not help him. Then he said that when he tried to leave you warned him that ‘the night is dark and full of terrors.’”

“Yes.”

Ned blinked. “So you’re not denying this?”

“No, of course not. R’hllo is the one true god. If you would just open your heart to him—”

Ned stopped her right there. “You can believe in whatever god or gods you want, Melisandre.” The staff was diverse in their beliefs. Some worshipped the Seven. Others believed in the old gods. He had one librarian who worshipped the Drowned God.

“There is only one true god.”

“We receive government funding,” Ned continued as if she had not spoken. “The rules are very clear. You cannot try and convert patrons or staff while you’re on the college’s time. You can do whatever you want on your own time. Olenna said she’s spoken to you about this before.”

She didn’t like that one bit. “A day will come when the Lord of Light—“

Ned resisted the urge to hit his head against his desk. “I don’t know if Rossart or Chelsted or Jon Arryn put up with this, but I can’t tolerate it.”

“Azor Ahai has been reborn.”

Seven bloody hells, he thought. Ned looked at his watch. “What time do you have?”
Melisandre fished out a watch on a chain from her ample cleavage. “It’s 9:30.”

“You’re on our time. You’re working. No religion. No proselytization. No pamphlets. No predictions of doom and gloom. No prophecies. I’m going to type up a warning and it’s going in your file. Is that clear?”

She glared at him, but finally nodded, and then swept out of the room.

Well, that’s one crisis dealt with, he thought, one crisis on a very long list. The Third Semester was in full swing already and the First Semester would start soon. That meant one thing; the students were coming.

* * *

The Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library was at the heart of the Crownlands University campus. Most prospective students and their parents thought it was what a proper library should look like. Ivy-covered walls, stone pillars, grand steps, and carved dragons were some of the architectural features gracing the exterior. Inside were marble floors, stained glass, wood-paneling, a fantastic collection, and of course, rows and rows of computers. No self-respecting academic library was without as much technology as it could stand these days.

The working part of the library was something else entirely. Tyrion did his best to hide the abject horror he was feeling as the student worker led him through the warren of staff offices. Everything was grim, dim, and depressing. Well, he hadn’t gone into librarianship for the money, Tyrion told himself. Nobody did.

“Here we are,” the student told him brightly. She was a tall, pretty girl with blue eyes and long auburn hair. He thought she was maybe about nineteen or twenty. “I’m Sansa, by the way. I work out at Circ.”

“It’s good to meet you, Sansa.” He could tell he was early because half the lights were off.

She stopped in front of a wooden door. “This is your office. I’m supposed to give you these keys. There’s coffee around here somewhere. I think.” Sansa waved her hands vaguely around the work area. “Dad said he had a meeting but he’ll be in later to get you started.”

“Dad?”

Sansa nodded. “Didn’t I say? My dad is the director. I’m Sansa Stark. I should get back to the desk. I still have to process all the holds. The librarians will be in soon if you need anything.” She smiled and then wended her way back out of the staff space.

At least his wouldn’t be the only case of nepotism, Tyrion thought. Although, as he reflected further, it occurred to him that student workers were usually considered to be a different type of animal entirely. Nobody blinked an eye if some professor’s kid was shelving books.

Tyrion unlocked his office door. He was glad no one was around to see his horror. He had not expected much, but this was . . . ? He wasn’t sure what the right adjective would adequately describe the space. There was something that looked like, once, very long ago, it had been a chair. Even then, it must have been the most unassuming of chairs, meant surely to last a few years only, not a decade and a half. There was a computer desk, evidently being held together with electrical tape. The table was, all right, actually, the table was halfway decent. Tyrion thought it was possibly even made out of wood. He put his briefcase on it and was rewarded by seeing the table wobble somewhat alarmingly. Tyrion pulled the briefcase off and again the table trembled.
There were some MDF bookshelves that looked like they had been through a fire. There was also a dented metal three-drawer filing cabinet; upon closer inspection each of the drawers was jammed shut.

The walls of the windowless room had been repainted recently a nondescript shade of beige and it looked like the linoleum floor had recently been washed and waxed. That was about all that could be said for the room.

Tyrion glanced at his watch and waited and waited and then he waited some more.

“Oh, hey.” A man stuck his head in the doorway. “You must be the new guy.”

“That’s me.”

The man pulled his head back and a second or two later pushed a book cart laden with a computer monitor, a tower, and a lot of cables into the room. “I’m Bronn. I do Systems around here.”

Tyrion got off the thing that had once been a chair and shook Bronn’s hand.

“I’ve got your computer. Is it all right if I set it up now?” Not waiting for an answer he started pulling cables out. “Wow, they really stripped this place bare when the last one left.”

“So this wasn’t a special welcome for me then?” Tyrion muttered.

Bronn flashed him a grin. “Is this your first professional librarian job?”

“Yes.”

“There’s almost never a lot of money for staff office furnishings,” Bronn explained as he got down on the floor and started to hook up the tower. “So every time somebody quits or retires, most of the staff descend on the old office like a plague of locusts and pick the place clean.”

“Good to know they don’t hate me.”

Bronn laughed. “They might do, but every new librarian since I’ve been here starts out in a room like this.”

“So what happened to my predecessor?” Did she move on or retire?”

“He.” Bronn corrected. “He died on the job as a matter of fact.”

“Oh.” Well, it wasn’t unheard of. A lot of academic librarians worked till they dropped. “That’s too bad. Heart attack?” Tyrion didn’t really care, but he was going to need all the friends he could get. Polite interest was as good a way as any to start that process. “Wait, did he die here in this room?”

“No, Jon Arryn died downstairs.”

Tyrion was relieved. Not that he believed in ghosts; although by all rights he should have, growing up as he had in the gothic horror that was Casterly Rock. Still, the office was dismal enough without the distaste of some old man dying at a MDF desk held together with electrical tape. “Downstairs . . . I thought that just held the compact shelving.” He had been impressed by its
“Yeah, they found him in the basement stacks. Something went wonky with the sensors and he was crushed between the shelves. The authorities said it was a freak accident.”

Tyrion shuddered. And here he had thought it was state-of-the-art stuff. He had a lot to learn. “Have you been working here long?”

“About five years,” Bronn stood up. “I could make more money in industry, but I like the work here. You know,” he said thoughtfully looking at the object formerly known as “chair,” “I could rustle you up something that won’t break the next time you sit in it.”

Tyrion thought that was a grand idea. “I’ll owe you.”

Bonn flashed a grin, “Yes, you will.” He powered up the pc. “For the rest of it, you want to get on Varys’ good side.”

Varys. Tyrion thought quickly. The name was familiar. He thought he had met him during the in-person interview. “Bald man, heavy set?”

“That’s him,” Bronn agreed. He got Tyrion set up with a password for the computer and took him through the phone system. “He knows where all the bodies are buried, but more importantly, he knows where they keep the good office supplies.”
Problem Patrons

Chapter Summary

Tyrion settles into his new job at the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library where things the patrons are not always nice, the questions can be difficult, and things are not always . . . normal.

* * *

Sansa saw Mrs. Baratheon before Mrs. Baratheon saw her. She cried out in alarm, “Shae!”

Shae let loose a volley of curse words in her native tongue. “And she has your boyfriend with her.” Shae swore again.

“My ex-boyfriend,” Sansa objected. Joffrey Baratheon was possibly the worst mistake of her young life, but he was in the past—except for when he came by to torment her. “Can I go do my shelf-reading?”


Cersei Baratheon swept through the library, dragging her son behind her. She did not look pleased, but then she never did. Joffrey seemed even less happy to be there.

“Sansa, little dove.”

The little dove was trapped.

“There seems to be some mistake. Somehow,” Mrs. Baratheon paused sweeping her green eyes up and down Shae and then turned her attention back to Sansa, “Some . . . person . . . got the idea that Joffrey owes the library fines for books he never borrowed, and now he received this letter informing him that he won’t be able to register for his courses until it’s paid.”

Shae elbowed Sansa out of the way. “Show me this letter?”

Sansa moved over to the other computer and started running reports. She could see Olenna and the new librarian across the room at the reference desk. They were staring with unabashed curiosity at Cersei Baratheon. Sansa thought that the new guy looked vaguely embarrassed although she couldn’t think why.

“No. It is clear. You borrowed these books.” Shae pulled up his record on the computer and swung the monitor so that it faced Joffrey. “See, there is a note here.” Shae pointedly addressed Joffrey and not his mother. “You said you took them out and that you damaged them. You need to pay.”

“My son told me he did not borrow the books. Are you telling me that he is a liar?”

“Mother!” Joffrey hissed. “I can handle this.”

“Let Mother take care of this, sweetling.”
Sansa almost felt sorry for Joffrey, who looked like he wanted to melt into the floor. No, that’s what she would want to do. Joffrey would want to bash his mother’s head in. Since not even he was stupid enough to try that, he would probably come after her.

“You owe $225.52,” Shae informed him.

“My taxes pay your salary,” Mrs. Baratheon said tartly. “My father has donated millions to this wretched university and you have the nerve to demand that my son pay you anything?”

Stare at the monitor, Sansa told herself. Do not make eye contact.

Shae was about to tell Cersei Lannister Baratheon what she could do with her taxes and her father’s millions when Olenna and the new guy, whose name Sansa couldn’t remember, approached them. He looked mortified and angry at the same time.

“Seven hells, Cersei. Your taxes probably bought them half a box of paperclips,” he said sarcastically. “Oh, very well, a full box of large paperclips, but not much more. And you know very well what Father would say. We pay our debts.”

Sansa blinked. The new guy was a Lannister. It made sense now. Dad had been angry about something with the search. She had heard him and Mum talking about it. She had heard the word “favoritism” a lot around the house lately. Joffrey had said his one uncle was a dwarf. He had used a lot of other words too, but now she got it: this had to be Tyrion Lannister.

Mrs. Baratheon whipped around. “What are you doing here?”

Olenna intervened before he could speak. “Hello, Cersei, dear.”

Sansa knew it was going to be all right then. Olenna Tyrell, to quote Bronn, was “not someone you fucked with, ever.” Sansa thought that Mrs. Baratheon was someone you also didn’t want to fuck with ever, either. But put head-to-head, she was pretty sure Olenna would come out as the winner.

Shae tapped Sansa on the shoulder and sent her off to the staff offices with the reports for Stannis. “Go,” she whispered. “Stay back there.”

Sansa obliged. She was relieved to be free of the situation, but part of her wanted to see would happen next. Then she glanced back at Joffrey and realized she was better off out of there. She took one of the back entrances into the Technical Services department. She didn’t need Joffrey following her. When she got back to the processing area, Stannis had his door closed.

“He’s in conference,” Asha told her. “With Melisandre.”

Sansa turned around. “Oh, hi, Asha. Will he be long?”

Asha gave her a wry smile.

Then Sansa heard the sounds coming from his office. “Blessed Mother! They’re doing it in there?” she whispered scandalized.

“No, no, blessed LoL,” Asha laughed some more. “And yes, it sounds like they are.” She held out her hand. “I’ll take those.”

Sansa gave her the reports. “Um, is it okay if I hang out here for a little bit? My ex and his mother are out at Circ. and I’d rather stay away from them if I can.”
The cataloger nodded. “Fine by me.” She glanced over the papers.

The sounds intensified.

“I didn’t know they were a couple,” Sansa said. This felt awkward. She didn’t know Asha all that well and Asha was kind of brash. Sansa scarcely knew Stannis, even though he was Robert Baratheon’s younger brother. For whatever reason whenever she had hung out with Joffrey, it had mostly been his mother’s twin at the house. Stannis seemed like he worked hard, but Melisandre was just plain weird. Sam thought she was hot, Sansa knew, but Sam thought anything in a skirt was hot.

Asha shrugged.

The door opened and Sansa felt her face flush.

Stannis stepped out. “Yes, may I help you?”

“She came to give me these,” Asha pointed to the reports. “Is your ‘conference’ over?”

Melisandre smiled enigmatically and wafted out of the room.

Sansa saw Stannis lick his lips. She had a sudden image of them together in his office and it wasn’t one she really wanted to have. He looked so buttoned up all the time. Plus, he was like her dad’s age. Old people shouldn’t have sex.

“Stannis,” Asha called.

He turned around and looked at Sansa again. “You work in the Circulation department,” he said slowly. “Come in my office. I have something for Shae.”

Sansa saw Stannis lick his lips. She had a sudden image of them together in his office and it wasn’t one she really wanted to have. He looked so buttoned up all the time. Plus, he was like her dad’s age. Old people shouldn’t have sex.

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Arya Stark was languidly rolling up computer cords when the phone began to ring again. She had no idea what she wanted to do with her life, but she was pretty sure that IT was not for her. She hadn’t wanted this stupid internship, but her parents had insisted that she find something this summer. She wasn’t supposed to answer the phone, but it had been ringing on and off for the last seven minutes so finally Arya picked the receiver up. “IT, may I help you?”

“Where’s Reginald? Is he there?” The voice on the other end was irritated, preemptory.

“Um, he’s stepped out,” Arya said diplomatically. Reg Lannister was at dinner. This usually took him three hours. Arya had spent most of her internship cleaning equipment and playing games on her phone and she realized she still probably did more than her supervisor. “May I take a message?”

“No, you may not. I need someone up here right away.”

“I’ll tell him.” Arya had a phone number for Reg. She could call that.
“No. You’ll do.”

“Um.”

“I need someone up here right away, young woman, and if there is no one else down there, that someone is you.”

“Oh, okay.” She paused. “I’m sorry, I don’t know who you are.”

“This is Tywin Lannister.”

Arya didn’t know who that was. There were so many Lannisters in this stupid building. In fact, she’d learned that if you didn’t know who someone was “Mr. Lannister or “Ms Lannister” were usually safe forms of address. If you were wrong, the person was usually flattered to be thought a Lannister. “Okay. I can try and help you. Where is ‘up here?’”

There was a silence and then finally the man spat out some directions and hung up the phone.

Arya thought the man sounded pissed. She didn’t know what he needed, but she didn’t think there could be any harm in trying. Reg certainly didn’t know much more than she did. She wrote a quick note for him just in case he got back before she did, found her shoes, and then headed up the elevator to the executive offices. It was a part of the building she hadn’t been in before.

It was dark on the top floor, but at the end of the hall she saw the lights. Arya pushed through the glass doors. The outer room was probably where the secretary usually sat. She saw an open door and peeked through that. An older man was sitting scowling at his monitor. “Hi, are you Mr. Lannister?”

He looked at her and blinked several times. “Who are you?”

“You just called down to IT. I’m Arya St—“

Mr. Lannister cut her off. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen and a half.”

“I wasn’t aware that my company employed children.”

Arya grinned. “It doesn’t. I’m an intern.” Her advisor had said she was lucky to get this opportunity, especially since she was so young. Arya didn’t tell her it was probably because no one else wanted to spend their break in a dusty basement with a stoner.

“Dressed like you’re about to go on tour with the Grateful Dead,” he said sourly.

Arya looked down at her clothes. She had on her favorite t-shirt, the one her half-brother Jon had given her, a pair of black jeans, and some boots. She supposed she did look like a roadie, but she protested anyhow. “Reg said I could wear whatever I wanted.”

Mr. Lannister clearly disapproved. He was a formidable looking man, but Arya wasn’t going to let him intimidate her.

“So how can I help you, sir?” He seemed like the type of person who would like to be called “sir.”

He grimaced “I am trying to print something, but the wretched machine keeps showing me a message saying that it doesn’t recognize the printer.”
Arya came to his desk and then reaching around his shoulder made a few mouse clicks. “What’s
the name of the printer?”

“What seems like the sort of person who would name a printer?” Mr. Lannister’s voice might have
etched acid.

She looked around. “Where is it?”

He sighed, rose, and walked her to the printer in his secretary’s office.

Arya poked around the printer. “Oh, here we are.” She grabbed a post-it note and a pen from the
desk and scribbled down the name and the network path that she’d found written on the side of the
printer. Then without waiting for his consent, she went back in his office, hopped onto his chair,
and installed it.

“You had better know what you are doing.”

Arya swiveled around. “All set, sir. How many copies do you want? Do you want them double-
sided?”

“It can do that?”

Arya nodded. He was old. You had to be patient with old people. Her parents often had these kinds
of computer problems, and Arya had learned how to teach them. “Here, I’ll show you.” She waited
for him to come closer and then she showed him the options he could select.

He bent over the chair.

Wow, he was tall, she thought. “Why don’t you sit down and you can do it yourself? That way it’ll
be easier for you the next time you have to do it.” Her father had told them about this one night at
dinner. It was something he was learning in library school; he called it a teaching philosophy. Arya
hadn’t thought much about it at the time, but maybe there was something to it.

Mr. Lannister looked at her suspiciously, started to say something, but complied.

Arya walked him through it. She could hear the printer processing the job. She practically galloped
out and got the papers for him. “Is it what you wanted?”

“Yes, thank you.” He tilted his head and considered her. “I wonder if you could assist me with a
few more tasks before you go back to your regularly assigned duties.”

Arya was willing. Anything was better than getting crumbs out from keyboards. What Mr.
Lannister wanted wasn’t difficult stuff. It was like helping her dad, although her dad was better at
this than Mr. Lannister, who didn’t seem to know half the things that his computer and his office
equipment could do. Arya took him through everything he asked, making him be the one to do the
driving. He jotted down a few notes; her mom and dad did that all the time too. She figured it was
something old people did. Finally he seemed satisfied.

“Thank you. What is your name again? Arya?” He pronounced it like “aria.”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

“Is that how it’s pronounced?”

“It’s okay. People say it lots of different ways.”
Mr. Lannister frowned at her. “No, it is not ‘okay.’ It is your name. You have a right to expect that people spell it and say it correctly. How do you say it?”

She pronounced it carefully for him. “ARE-yuh. Arya.”

He repeated it.

Arya nodded. “That’s it.” She smiled at him. That he wanted to say it right was kind of surprising, but gratifying. Most people didn’t bother.

“And how is it spelled?”

“A-R-Y-A.”

He jotted that down as well.

“I take it you’re at university?”

“Yeah,” she paused and corrected herself, “Yes, I go to Crownlands.”

“And you are studying computer science?”

Arya shook her head. “No, I’m undeclared still. My advisor thought I should try working with computers and see if I liked it.” Her advisor wasn’t much older than Robb and she seemed pretty vague whenever Arya had spoken with her.

“And do you?”

“Not really. It’s kind of boring, at least what I’m doing here.” It occurred to her that this was probably not a diplomatic thing to say, but he didn’t take offense.

“On what does Reginald have you working?”

“I’m cleaning keyboards,” Arya said with a sigh. “People eat at their desks and get gunk in them, so Reg has me getting all that stuff out.”

Mr. Lannister grimaced and muttered something about improper use of interns.

Arya couldn’t make out all the words, but she had a feeling he wasn’t too happy with Reg.

“What do you wish to do once you graduate?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to go into martial arts, but my parents say that’s not a career.” Arya was used to this question. She still didn’t have an answer, but the topic of her future was something everyone else seemed to worry about a lot.

Mr. Lannister seemed to agree with her parents. He was looking at her thoughtfully. “Have you considered majoring in something besides computer science?”

Arya thought about it. “My sister is studying literature, but I really don’t like to read all that much. Her ex-boyfriend was studying business and she used to do his assignments for him. I saw some of them. It seemed sort of interesting,” she said. “I hated biology and chemistry. I don’t know. I got started late. I guess still have time to figure it out. What did you major in?”

He was startled. Finally he answered her. “That was a very long time ago, but I studied political science.”
“Oh.” That sounded even duller than literature. All that talking, Arya thought. “So how did you end up here?”

Mr. Lannister gave her a sharp look, but finally replied. “My father’s . . . attentions were divided and I needed to step in. The situation became permanent.” He drew himself up. “However, much of the knowledge was transferable to the business setting, so my studies were not wasted.”

“Yeah,” Arya agreed. “All knowledge is useful. That’s what my dad says.”

“And what does your father do?”

Arya smiled. “He’s a professor. So is my mum.”

“I’m surprised you don’t wish to go into academia.”

“I don’t think I have the right kind of mind for it.”

Mr. Lannister nodded. “You do seem quite practical. You might do well to follow up on that interest in business.”

It occurred to Arya that this was an unjustified slam on her parents’ profession, but he probably didn’t know many academics. “I had to drop a class for the First Semester, maybe I’ll see if there’s anything business-y I can take in its place. Did you need anything else, sir?”

He shook his head. “Thank you again, Arya. I am in your debt.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Lannister.” She gave him a wave and then headed back down to the dungeon.

* * *

Tyrion schooled his features to stay neutral as he listened to the student’s question. The break was typically quiet, they told him, but there were still patrons and there were still Third semester classes in session.

The patron in front of him was a PhD student working on his dissertation. He was hunting down an obscure citation. He couldn’t find it and yet it had been cited by every paper related to his subject since the dawn of time.

Tyrion took the student through the reference interview, paying particular attention to the places the student had already looked and to the citation information. He pulled up Web of Science, which the student was well versed in. They went through a few searches and found nothing. Tyrion glanced over at Brienne, who had been assigned to shadow him on the desk.

Brienne was taller than his father, and nearly as unapproachable, although not, Tyrion thought, for the same reasons. She looked back at him with a blank face.

No help there, he thought. Brienne had chaired the search committee and he thought she had been singularly unimpressed with him.

“Would it be all right if I took your contact information, and got back to you on this?” Tyrion asked the patron.

“I’ve been looking for this for months. What do a few more days matter?” He scrawled down his name and email address and took off.
To Brienne, Tyrion commented, “I’m not sure where I even begin looking for this.”

“It’s a good bet that the first couple of cites were legitimate. Then the rest of them got lazy and just threw it in there because the big names had. Start in the stacks. The citation was probably wrong in the first place.”

Tyrion nodded.

“That was nicely done, by the way,” Brienne told him. “The reference interview, I mean.”

“Good to know I’m not a dead loss,” he muttered.

* * *

Sansa stepped away from the Circulation desk to get some water. She hadn’t gone three feet before she heard the thump of books being set on the counter. She hurried back.

“I’d like to check these out, please,” the patron murmured in an agreeable voice.

She smiled at him automatically and took his ID card. He was faculty. She scanned his card and frowned when a popup menu appeared.

“Is something wrong?”

Sansa read it. “Huh. I’ll be right back.” According to the screen, she was to contact Technical Services.

“You’re Ned and Catelyn’s daughter, aren’t you?”

Sansa nodded. She didn’t know him, but that meant nothing. She had met so many of their colleagues over the years. Every time they moved, there were more names and faces to remember.

“You probably don’t remember me.”

“I’m sorry. I—”

He was quick to reassure her. “It was a long time ago and you were very young. I chair the history department now that your father’s moved on to this place. I’ve seen you around campus.”

Sansa smiled automatically. He looked kind of familiar now that she thought about it. She didn’t think he’d been to the house, but maybe she’d met him on a visit to see her dad.

“The last time I was here there was some difficulty with my account. I believe the clerk was going to report it. She said it was some sort of glitch. Shae, I think her name was.”

Sansa reread the popup. She glanced back at him. He seemed nice. He knew her parents. He had a very pleasant voice. Sansa tried to override it and failed. She hit print. “I’m sorry, I’ll have to get someone else to help. It’s not letting me bypass it. I’ll be right back, Dr. um.”

“Bolton. Roose Bolton.”

Sansa smiled again and took the books and the printout of the popup to the back way back to the Technical Services department. Stannis had his door closed. Sansa really hoped he wasn’t “in conference.” She hadn’t been able to look at him or Melisandre in the eye for days.

“What’s up, kiddo?”
“This came up when I was checking books out for a professor.” She showed Asha the page.

“Fuck. It’s Tip-In. STANNIS!”

Stannis came out. Mercifully, he appeared to have been alone. He read the sheet and his face darkened. “That man is an abomination.”

Sansa was baffled.

Asha grabbed the books. “I’ll pull up WorldCat.” To Sansa she explained, “He’s a problem patron.” After a minute or two, she said, “Well, they’ve both got hundreds of holdings.”

“That is hardly the point. He should not be permitted borrowing privileges.”

“What do I tell him?”

Asha handed Sansa the books. “Check these out.” She scrawled a code down. “That’ll override the block. If he asks what the problem was, tell him, you were putting the books through the ScanQuest PageCounter.”

Stannis snorted.

“No, the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3. That sounds better. Say it back to me.”

“The ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3?”

“That’s it.”

Sansa went back. She had no idea what any of this meant.

“Everything all right?”

Sansa checked out the books for him. “Sorry about that, I had to run the books through the uh ScanQuest PageCounterPro3.” She hated lying. She didn’t know what the deal was with Dr. Bolton, who seemed perfectly nice.

He seemed taken aback and his smile thinned. “Is this a new procedure?”

It was the way his grey eyes changed that suddenly made the lying easier; it was as if their veneer of kindness had been stripped away to show something very hard and very nasty. “The books were flagged. I don’t know. I only work here twelve hours a week. I can ask if you want.” She could get Shae.

“No, that’s all right.”

“I’ll tell my parents you said hello.” She smiled pleasantly and tried not to look into his cold, dead eyes.

* * *
Catelyn heard the yelling as soon as she walked in the door of her home. Sighing, she dropped her bag and her briefcase and climbed the stairs. Before Ned took the job as Director, life had been so much simpler.

“Arya’s in Sansa’s room!” Rickon informed her.

“Shut up, dumbass. I can be in here if I want to.”

Catelyn inhaled. Just a few more years, she told herself, and they will become rational human beings. “Rickon, I’m certain you have homework. Go.” She stepped into Sansa’s room. Arya was tearing through her sister’s closet and there were clothes all over the bed. “What’s going on?

Arya looked a little frazzled. “It’s my internship. I have to find something to wear.”

“What’s wrong with what you’ve been wearing?” Catelyn was vague on what Arya’s internship actually involved. She was only eighteen. The whole point had been to get her involved in something productive for the summer so she didn’t get into any more trouble. “I thought you told me that your supervisor told you jeans were acceptable.”

“They’re changing it.” Arya held up a dress against her body and then tossed it on a chair. “I got a call today from them. The lady said they were moving me to another department and that I needed to have ‘proper business attire’ or casual something. I don’t know.”

Catelyn picked up the dress. “Business casual?”

Arya turned to face her. “Yeah. I don’t know what that is.”

“You have your dress trousers,” Catelyn suggested. “The cream blouse would do too.”

“I tore them and I spilled something on the shirt.”

“Arya! How many times must I tell you, you have to take better care of your things?” Catelyn sighed.

“Mum, I don’t have anything to wear and I have to be there in an hour. They’re changing the times on me too. Nothing of Sansa’s fits! She’s too tall.”

Catelyn guided Arya away from the closet. “You can’t throw your sister’s clothes around like this. Your black skirt, the one you wore to your grandfather’s funeral. Do you still have it?”
“I think so. Maybe.”

“Wear that and find some tights.”

Arya frowned. “Yeah, I think I have a pair. I could wear those with my half boots.”

“Now we just need to find you a top.” Catelyn thought. Sansa and Arya’s figures were disparate. She prepared herself for the unenviable task of entering the mess that was Arya’s room to search for a suitable blouse.

Arya’s face lit up. She kissed her mother. “I have the perfect thing! Thanks, Mum!” She flitted from the room.

Catelyn looked at the mess. She knew she should make Arya put everything back, but it was rare enough to find Arya actually caring about her appearance. Sighing again, she brought order to chaos. She was nearly finishing when she heard the door slam and then the sounds of the ancient Buick Arya drove starting up. Just a few more years, she told herself.

* * *

Stannis Baratheon listened with grudging approval as Eddard Stark went through a list of policy changes. They were ones that he would have made himself, although he would have taken them further. But articulating the expected hours was a good start. It galled him that he was the only who came in at the appointed time and one of the few who stayed his full shift.

It was clear from the looks on the slackers’ faces that he was alone in this belief.

Stark soldiered on, ignoring his increasingly unhappy staff as he handed around the new policies. If Stannis had been in charge—as he should have been—he wouldn’t be making these half measures.

Stannis read over the annual report template they would now all be expected to complete. It seemed sound enough, but he made several suggestions to activities which should also be tracked. He disregarded the groans and eye rolls. Administration cared about metrics. These were data they should be collecting.

“I will take your amendments under advisement,” Dr. Stark told him. He moved on to detailing a university wide policy which would require them all to upload their vitae into special software.

“Now, I would like to turn the floor over to Olenna.”

Stannis found Olenna frustrating. She was a good librarian. She was probably the only person on staff, other than Asha, who he would trust with OCLC permissions. None of the others understood the beauty of cataloging. Olenna was too yielding, however. She was forever suggesting they bend the rules in favor of practicality. Standards were in place for a reason.

“As we are increasing the building hours, we’ve decided that starting in with the First semester, reference desk duty will be done by all librarians on staff.”

Stannis froze.

The reference librarians were supportive. Everyone else was not.

“How many hours?” Asha asked. “That backlog isn’t going down if Stannis and me are stuck out
“Stannis and I,” he automatically corrected.

“Whatever.”

Petyr Baelish leaned forward. “Do you really think this is the wisest use of our time?”

Stannis was shocked to find himself in agreement with Baelish. He was a cataloger. If he had wanted to answer reference questions, he would have become a reference librarian.

“The non-reference librarians will commit to four hours at the desk per week. We all have work that can be done out at the desk. You may wish to save that for your shifts. The point of this,” Olenna said looking blandly at Petyr “is not only to aid in the reference department in helping to serve our patrons, but also to make us better librarians in our official capacities.”

Asha thought about it. “Okay. Four hours isn’t so bad.”

“It has been a long time for some of us, Olenna,” Varys ventured.

It would be a first time for Stannis.

“Yes, of course, but we will be happy to provide some staff training on our more popularly used resources. I have every confidence that you’ll find it within your capabilities and that you’ll find the experience enlightening.”

“What about Ned?” Lysa asked.

Stannis noted the approving look Baelish gave the Arryn woman. The gods knew why. She was mad as Aerys, and it was not wise to encourage her. If he had been made Director, he would have strongly encouraged her to take medical leave a long time ago.

“Ned, Dr. Stark, that is—.”

“—Ned is fine.”

Baelish interrupted. “Considering what some of us earn, it seems a waste of resources to have any of the higher-paid employees at the desk.”

Stannis knew it was over then. Everyone knew what everyone made. A watchdog group posted salary figures on their website. Every Crownlands employee visited the site. Baelish earned an inordinately high salary for the work he did; the rest of the library staff resented it.

“You do have a MLS, Baelish, perhaps it’s time you actually used it,” Varys purred.

The meeting went downhill from there.

* * *

Tywin Lannister raised his eyebrows at his intern’s attire. “Didn’t my secretary instruct you on the dress code?”

Arya looked down. “I’m wearing a skirt.”

He gathered from her tone that skirt wearing was something reserved exclusively for state occasions.
“My mother helped me pick this out.” Arya’s face fell a little. “I’m sorry. I thought I looked good. Is it the shirt? I thought it gave the outfit an edge. It’s like famous. I thought the skirt would be the business part and the top would be the casual.”

“That is not what business casual means.” Evidently she had been raised by idiots, he thought. Her mother was no doubt one of those granola-eating hippies if she thought a garish t-shirt depicting three wolves howling at the moon fell remotely into the realm of appropriate office attire. But the girl was young. It was hardly her fault that she had been born to fools. “It is an improvement,” he acknowledged. “You have gone from a roadie to looking like an assistant for a record company. However, as this is not a record company, it is still not appropriate.” He softened. “I’ll have Ms Westerling give you a copy of the dress code.”

“Okay.”

He went over her new duties with her. “Is there anything that is unclear?”

Arya shook her head. “No, I think I understand everything.”

“Good. Should you come across a term that you do not know, I expect you to ask for clarification.”

“Like ‘business casual’?”

He nodded and went on. “Precisely. You’ll work with my brother, Kevan, and a few of the other executives as well as with me. It won’t be high level work, but I think you’ll find it more educational than cleaning pastry crumbs out of the computer equipment. You’re much too smart for that.”

She looked startled and then she smiled.

“All right, go and see Ms Westerling. She’ll get you started.”

Arya was on her way out the door when Tyrion walked in.

“Great shirt,” Tyrion commented. “Is it as magical as they say?”

“A bit young, isn’t she?”

Tywin rose. He would need to have a talk with Ms Westerling again about letting in visitors without announcing them. He waited till the door had shut behind Arya. “What do you want, Tyrion?”

“What do you want, Tyrion?” he repeated.

Tyrion selected a chair and sat. “You sent the summons, Father, so here I am, regardless of the great inconvenience to me, I might add.”
He spared a glance at his calendar. It appeared he had requested Tyrion’s presence. “I want a report.”

“About?”

“About whatever subversive activities in which your leftist colleagues are engaged,” Tywin snapped.

“Oh, you mean in the job you bought for me.”

Tywin ground his teeth. Not this again. His children often baffled him, but this was beyond comprehension. He had secured for Tyrion a plum position—or what passed for a plum position—in the wretched field his son had chosen as a career and the lecherous fool couldn’t even be grateful.

“I haven’t been there long enough to know anything about anyone, other than the fact that most of them resent the hell out of me.”

“Surely you’ve observed something?” Tywin pressed.

Tyrion sighed. “I have spent most of my time trying to learn my job and the rest of it trying not to be killed by my office furniture.”

He knew his son well enough not to travel down these conversational side roads. They merely led to unproductive and frustrating conversational dead ends. Tywin disregarded the last comment.

“Cersei and Joffrey stopped by and caused a scene,” Tyrion offered brightly. “I gather from the staff that this is a semi-regular occurrence.”

Ignore it, Tywin told himself. He would find out the truth later on. He continued to glare at Tyrion.

“Her brother-in-law, the cataloger, has a stick up his arse, but you probably knew that. Come to think of it, I’m surprised the two of you aren’t—”

If Tywin could have turned his son to stone with a glance then and there, he would have.

“Father, I don’t know anything, except that the place is a death trap. If it helps, I’m going out with a couple of the staff on Friday night—and before you start in on me about my drinking—if I’m going to learn anything, I’ll learn it then.”

He supposed that would have to suffice. Tywin could wait a little before he’d have to take other steps. He had his other source.

“Is the audience over?”

Tywin didn’t bother to reply. He picked up a report and began scanning it. Tyrion was halfway out the room before he stopped him. “What was that about the girl’s shirt?”

“Google ‘three wolf moon,’” Tyrion instructed before heading out the door.

Chapter End Notes
For those of you who have not yet let the magic into your lives, you can see the casual part of Arya's work outfit [here](#). Make sure you read the reviews!
Splitting Infinitives

Chapter Summary

It's the start of the weekend and everyone decides to celebrate in various ways.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tyrion thought they made for an odd looking crowd, but the people at the bar seemed to know the others all pretty well. Certainly no one blinked when they began piling in at a table at the front. Come to think of it, no one had looked at him twice. Maybe that was the Melisandre effect. Nearly every male eye and a few female ones were drawn to her as she stood in the doorway, light from the setting sun streaming through the crimson dress she was wearing.

She had not been at his interview. Tyrion was sure of it. There was no way he would not have noticed a sultry redhead who went commando, nerves or no nerves. What a woman like that saw in Stannis Baratheon was a mystery for the ages.

Varys leaned over and articulated that selfsame question. “It really is quite remarkable. Even Petyr and I agree about it and we never agree about anything.”

The acquisitions librarian had a smile with no warmth to it. Petyr Baelish glanced over at Melisandre. “It makes more sense than her with Selyse.”

“In my experience, men who are so tightly wound often provide certain advantages in other areas,” Olenna commented.

Tyrion didn’t bother following up on these tantalizing leads because he knew very well he was the new guy and not entitled to ask those kinds of questions. Also, Stannis and Melisandre were making their way to the table.

Brienne Tarth came in through the side door. She waved hello to everyone and sat next to Baelish. Tyrion got the feeling she would have preferred to sit elsewhere. No one had said anything about Petyr Baelish, but their body language here and in the staff meeting earlier that week indicated that he was not well liked.

The other cataloger, Asha, came around behind and seated herself by lifting one leg over the seat of the chair. “What are we waiting for?” She hailed a passing server like she was on a shipwreck survivor on a desert isle hailing a passing ship.

“Tyrion is buying,” Bronn said with a grin.

“Now, now.” Olenna Tyrell shook her head. “That wouldn’t be very welcoming of us, would it now? Asha, I think it’s safe to say the waitress has seen us. The first round will be on me”

“And I’ll get the second,” Tyrion said smiling, knowing he’d probably be getting the third and fourth rounds as well. Bronn had produced a halfway decent chair and Tyrion was going to hold up to his end of the bargain. Asha slapped Tyrion across the back so hard he nearly fell into the table.
Sansa and the library school student intern, Sam appeared. Tyrion noted the way Petyr Baelish leapt up and pulled a chair out for Sansa, leaving the hapless Sam to fend for himself.

Shae, who was sitting on Tyrion’s other side, muttered something. She signaled to Sam and she and Melisandre made room between their chairs for him. Tyrion thought the boy should be over the moon, but he looked longingly at Sansa. Tyrion almost felt sorry for the boy.

The waitress appeared and took drink orders. Only Sansa and Olenna opted for non-alcoholic options. No one questioned Sansa’s choice, but Olenna’s drew surprised stares.

“I have a date after this,” she said in a regal manner. “I’ll be leaving shortly, but I wanted to properly welcome our new librarian—”

“—to welcome properly,” Stannis corrected

Olenna’s smile grew slightly fixed. “Indeed.”

“What’s wrong with ‘to properly welcome’?” Shae asked.

“Split infinitive,” Tyrion, Sam, and Stannis said at the same time. They exchanged startled looks. It was rather, Tyrion thought, like a bunch of hitherto unacquainted masons recognizing each other in a crowded room.

Asha snorted. “If it was good enough for Roddenberry, it’s good enough for me,” Asha proclaimed. “Who the fuck wants to say ‘to go boldly where no one has gone before’ instead of ‘to boldly go where no one has gone before?’”

Tyrion noticed for the first time that she was wearing a tight t-shirt emblazoned with the slogan “Today is a good day to die.” Would he gain brownie points for telling her he knew Klingon?

From the way several people at the table shifted in their seats, Tyrion got the feeling that this was not a new debate.

“That is beside the point. It should be ‘to go boldly,’” Stannis stated.

The dark-haired waitress appeared with their drinks. She had overheard. “Oh no. Not on my shift. And don’t tell me that’s not a complete sentence either. I don’t want a repeat of last time.”

Stannis was about to say something, but Melisandre put her hand on his arm.

“Last time?” Tyrion asked after the young woman had moved off to her next table.

Shae shrugged. “I wasn’t here.”

Varys smirked. Brienne and Olenna seemed vaguely embarrassed. Baelish had somehow moved his chair even closer to Sansa and was oblivious to the question.

Bronn shrugged. “It wasn’t much. A few chairs got broken. A couple of tables. Some drinks were spilled. A few bottles were smashed. We had to bail Asha and Stannis out of jail.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows shot up.

Stannis Baratheon’s face turned an apoplectic red. “The authorities dropped the charges,” he spat out.

“Perhaps we should speak of something else,” Varys suggested.
“Have you seen the new movie?” Sam asked Asha oblivious to the hint. “I didn’t think I would care for it, but I thought J.J. Abrams did a good job.”

Asha had a lot to say about the reboot of *Star Trek* and the exchange grew so animated that Shae finally offered to switch seats with Asha.

The drinks began to flow. True to her word, Olenna left quickly.

“Who’s the lucky fellow?” Bronn asked.

Varys frowned. “I don’t know. It could be anyone. Mrs. Tyrell,” Varys explained for Tyrion’s benefit, “doesn’t share her private life with us.”

“So naturally you all speculate about it,” Tyrion concluded.

“Wildly,” Varys replied with a smile.

The talk turned to the patrons. Tyrion was half fascinated and half appalled to learn the staff had nicknames for most of the problem patrons. He wondered if Cersei and Joffrey had been blessed with soubriquets but decided not to ask. Did they have one for his father? That he would have to find out.

“What’s the deal with the man you called ‘Tip-In?’” Sansa asked Asha during an uncharacteristic lull in the conversation.

Shae swore.

“‘Pig Fucker?’” Tyrion translated. “I hope that’s not his literal hobby.”

Her face lit up. “You speak Lorathi!” She unleashed a torrent of words at him.

He tried to follow, but finally gave up. “I can read it reasonably well and I know the important phrases, but that’s about it.”

“‘Pig fucker’ being the kind of term that comes in right handy,” Bronn remarked.

“You would be surprised. That and ‘p’takh.’”

Shae frowned. “That is not Lorathi.”

“It’s Klingon.” Asha slapped Tyrion on the back again. This time, like the crew of the Enterprise, he was braced for impact.

“What was it you said?” Tyrion asked Shae.

“Shae asked you if you had ever been to Lorath.”

Shae turned to Stannis in shock.

“I’m a cataloger,” he said with a shrug. “I know seven languages. I read Lorathi better than I speak it, though.”

Sansa seemed to think they were getting off track. “Tip-In?” she prompted.

Varys leaned forward. “Tip-In is Professor Roose Bolton. History. He likes to tear out the pages in books and journals, but we’ve never actually caught him at it. He is also the chair of the history
“He is a scourge and an abomination,” Stannis declared.

Everyone but Baelish seemed to agree with this. According to Baelish, Roose Bolton was a true library supporter.

“We nicknamed him ‘Tip-In’ because we have to do so many of them,” Asha said with a scowl. “Supporter, my arse.”

“What’s a tip-In?” Sam asked.

Tyrion was glad because he wasn’t about to display his ignorance. He had done well in library school and at his internship, but it was becoming very clear to him that he had large gaps in his knowledge that only practical experience would fill.

Stannis set down his whiskey. “If a page is missing, we order a copy of it through interlibrary loan. Then we insert the page back into the damaged book. The process is called a tip-in. You should do an internship with us, Tarly. You’ll learn more than you will by helping procrastinating students at the reference desk.”

The members of the reference department exchanged a few glances. Tyrion got the impression that Stannis made these gaffes on a regular basis.

“He seemed nice at first,” Sansa said.

“He is not unattractive and he has a very sexy voice,” Melisandre opined.

Bronn rolled his eyes.

“We flagged his account.”

Sansa nodded. “While we’re talking about the problem patrons, can we do anything about The Troll under the Stairs?”

Tyrion looked at Bronn, who translated. “He’s the pervert who hangs out under the staircase and looks up women’s skirts.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Melisandre said grandly.

“We can do something about him,” Brienne told Sansa. “Olenna and Dr. Stark have already spoken with Campus Security. We’re to call them the next time it happens. Dr. Stark’s sending out a memo on Monday morning.”

“What does he look like?” Tyrion asked.

Varys shrugged. “I work mostly behind the scenes so I seldom encounter them and Baelish hasn’t worked a reference desk in what is now, Petyr? Ever?”

Petyr ignored the slight “You can always call me if you need assistance, Sansa, sweetling.”

Sansa smiled weakly.

“We will all get to know them soon enough,” Stannis said darkly.

Petyr’s face darkened, but he didn’t reply.
“Does he have an actual name?” Tyrion inquired.

Shae peered into her empty glass. “The Troll is Walder Frey. He is public.”

“We allow members of the public to use the library,” Sam elucidated.

Asha’s beer was gone and she flagged down the server for another round. “I’ll get this one.” Everyone brightened.

“He’s in his sixties, white, about 5’9” or 5’10”, has grey stringy hair worn long,” Brienne offered.

“He walks with a cane and he cackles,” Sansa finished up.

Tyrion took that in. “Cackles?”

“Like the Emperor in *Star Wars*,” Sansa confirmed. “He also likes to drop things and then pretends he can’t pick them up so the girls have to.”

Shae swore in Lorathi again.

Everyone looked at Tyrion.

“‘Molester of dogs,’” he translated.

“‘Dog botherer,’” Stannis corrected.

“Only if you’re more of a traditionalist.”

* * *

Cersei Baratheon stepped out of the car wearing a smile that might as well have been painted on. It was bad enough having to attend function after function on Robert’s arm, now she had to spend an entire evening socializing with Eddard and Catelyn Stark.

The latter was at the door of their dilapidated rambling home to welcome them.

Cersei wondered if her hostess ever bothered to look in the mirror. Oh, Catelyn had been beautiful once; one only had to look at her cheekbones to see it, but the woman eschewed makeup. Her auburn hair was touched with grey. And those clothes! She dressed in an unremarkable fashion for the university community, which was to say that she favored ill-fitting, dowdy, “comfortable” outfits. She was an utter mess. If she had the slightest bit of self-awareness, she wouldn’t be standing on her doorstep looking so utterly confident.

“What a lovely dress,” Catelyn said politely.

“Thank you.” Cersei thawed ever so slightly. She doubted the Starks had much money, not with all their children. Poor Catelyn probably couldn’t afford the little extras in life.

“Well, where are they?” Robert boomed. “All your little ones?”

Ned shook his head. “Not so little anymore.”

“For once,” Catelyn said, “we are on our own. Rickon and Bran are sleeping over at a friend’s house.”
“Robb?”

“Robb’s in the army,” Ned told his friend. He poured drinks for everyone. “He’s in Dorne these days. Sansa is out with friends, I think.”

Cersei pretended not to hear. She had initially thought Sansa was a suitable girlfriend for Joffrey, but the girl had been an utter disappointment. Adding insult to injury, Sansa had dared to break off her relationship with Joffrey: a Stark rejecting a Lannister. It beggared belief.


“She said something about a party.”

Cersei swallowed half her gin and tonic in one gulp. “What about the other boy?” She saw Cat stiffen. “I’m afraid I’ve forgotten his name.”

“Theon is in the service with Robb,” Cat said smoothly. “He’s not ours. We just sort of adopted him.”

“No, that’s not the one I was thinking of. Jon wasn’t it?” She watched the arrow strike home.

“Jon is in the Night’s Watch,” Ned replied quietly. “And how are your children?”

Cersei brightened and spoke of glowingly of Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen.

Robert drained his drink. He looked brightly at the liquor bottles and smiled even more when Ned poured another round.

He and Ned began to play “Do you remember?” It was a game that bored her to tears. It was nothing to do with her. The memories were so stupid, so banal. Even Catelyn seemed unengaged by the conversation.

“All these years, I don’t think I’ve ever asked,” Catelyn began.

“What’s that?” Cersei took another large swallow.

“How did you and Robert meet?”

“There’s not much to tell,” Cersei replied. “We met at a party and it was love at first sight.”

“Ah.”

It had been love at first sight for Cersei. Looking back, she thought it had probably been merely lust at first sight for Robert.

“Were you at university with Robert?”

“He had a post as a lecturer in the Westerlands. I was finishing up my degree and I went with my father to a party at the university there.” She could cry when she thought about what a fool she’d been. Jaime had abandoned her for the military. She had never felt so alone in her life. Robert was so handsome, so gregarious. She’d mistaken Robert’s lechery for passion and his genial good nature for interest. Before she knew it she was pregnant. Oh, he’d done the right thing and married her. Her father had seen to that. But by the time she’d lost the baby in her last trimester, her marriage was a sham.

Cersei knew her father could have gotten her out of the marriage. Robert had never impressed
Tywin Lannister. But she refused to be a failure. She was a Lannister. She wasn’t going to be the
girl who had made the unfortunate marriage. Any doubts she had were sealed when Jaime finally
came home on leave and sired Joffrey on her.

Getting Robert out of the classroom had the advantage of eliminating his easy access to a ready
stream of eager young students willing to jump into his bed. It also meant more money and more
prestige. He still found women of course. She could have locked him in a monastery and he still
would have turned up hot and cold running whores.

“Why don’t we go into the dining room?”

They were talking about Crownlands now. No one seemed to care that once again she was left out
in the conversational wasteland. She didn’t know half the things they were talking about.
Someone’s stupid book about Aegon Targaryen’s invasion was revolutionizing something. As if
anyone who was important cared about what had happened hundreds and hundreds of years ago.

The food was adequate. The wine was better. The discussion was mind-numbing. Cersei hated
academia. Every year her loathing grew deeper. She hated the conversations. She hated the looks
of pity the women gave her when they found out she didn’t work. She positively despised the way
they all looked down on her for not finishing her undergraduate degree—not that she disclosed it;
she didn’t have to, they all seemed to know somehow.

They moved into the living room for coffee and dessert.

Robert asked about the library. Gods, she was tired of hearing about that stupid library. Robert,
Tyrion, Father, even Jaime—Jaime who hated to read—all of them were always talking about it.

Catelyn seemed to share her irritation.

“Excuse us for a few minutes?” Ned wanted to know. “There’s something I want to show Robert.”

They nodded. It wasn’t as if they would have stayed if Catelyn or she had objected.

“You don’t seem very enthused about Ned’s promotion,” Cersei commented quietly.

“Oh, it’s a marvelous opportunity.” Catelyn stirred her coffee. “It’s changed our lives quite a bit
though. More than either of us expected. I can’t even imagine how it must be for you and Robert.”

“Mmmm,” Cersei said noncommittally.

Catelyn set her spoon down. “It’s just our life was established. There was a rhythm to it. Now with
this new position and with the children growing up and leaving, it’s not the same. He’s never
home. I’m never home. It’s not—”

Cersei found herself in unlikely and unexpected sympathy with her. “It is not the life you wanted to
have.”

* * *

Tywin tapped his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. He was glancing at his watch for the
fifth time when Olenna’s car pulled up the driveway. He unfolded himself out of his own and
strode up to greet her. “You’re late.”

“I told you I would be. You just chose not to listen.”
He ground his teeth, but followed her into her house.

“Call the restaurant. I’m sure they’ll be happy to move our reservation for the mighty Tywin Lannister,” she told him blithely. “I’m going to get ready. Thirty minutes.”

It galled him that she was right. He rung the restaurant and they were suitably obliging. He reluctantly sat on the delicate gilded loveseat. Everything in Olenna’s house was very feminine. She favored Myrish furniture. Everything was in cream and gold. Her taste was impeccable, but it was not his.

“Stop grinding your teeth,” Olenna called out. “I can hear you all the way up here.”

He pulled out his phone.

“And no email. You’re irritable enough as it is.”

Tywin swallowed a retort and brought up a browser. He tapped in “three moon wolf” and proceeded to read the Wikipedia entry. The girl had told him her shirt was famous and it appeared it was, although not for any sensible reason. He was scanning the Amazon reviews when Olenna came in.

“I told you no email.”

He held up the phone so she could see it.

“I doubt even you could carry that off,” Olenna said with a smile. “Or did you mean it for me? It’s not really my style.”

“My new intern thought it was suitable work attire,” he explained.

Olenna laughed. “Is that why you’re in such a terrible mood? Are you in the market for a new intern then?”

He shook his head. “It was her first day. She has a copy of the dress code now. She is bright. The girl will not make the same mistake again.” He shut off his phone.

“Tell me how I look.”

Tywin obeyed. “Very striking as always.”

She sighed. “It’s most unfortunate we didn’t meet years ago. I was a stunner then.”

“You still are,” he said gallantly.

“Well, come along then. We’ll be late.”

Tywin felt his irritability returning.

Olenna bent down and kissed him. “I’m teasing.”

* * *

By the time they’d gone to the second bar, they were down three people. Sansa had gone to a party. Varys pleaded a prior engagement. With Sansa’s departure, Baelish simply left.

“Back to the bat cave,” Bronn suggested.
Tyrion snorted. He had thought Petyr’s accent affected and now he had confirmation of it.

Bronn drifted over to the dartboard to join Sam and Asha. This left Tyrion with Brienne, Shae, Melisandre, and Stannis.

“So does anyone else from the library come to these things?” Tyrion asked Brienne.

“Ros comes sometimes. I think she had a date tonight.”

“What about Dr. Stark or Lysa Arryn?” He knew there were a few others but he was damned if he could remember their names.

Brienne shook her head. “No, I don’t think they’ve ever joined us.”

Tyrion was glad about the latter. She had been on his search committee and his instant impression was that she was manic. He would have welcomed the chance to try and charm Ned Stark though. His father despised him; that had to mean the man was worth knowing.

Melisandre leaned over and put her hand on Tyrion’s. “Are you a religious man?”

“Not particularly.”

Brienne suddenly became very engaged in poking the lime in her club soda.

In a low very throaty voice, Melisandre began speaking about the Lord of Light, the one true god.

Tyrion believed in the gods in an abstract sort of way. He believed they existed. If he wanted to worship them, he would go to a service. Otherwise, he preferred to keep his drinking separate from his religion. He had to admit it, though, there was something compelling about this woman and he found himself listening.

Shae wafted over to the jukebox and dropped in some change.

“You should come to our services,” Melisandre was saying.

Tyrion felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up.

“Dance with me,” Shae ordered.

Tyrion blinked.

Shae didn’t wait for him to answer and instead dragged him out to what passed for a dance floor. “She never shuts up about her stupid god,” she murmured in her native tongue, speaking slowly so he would understand.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Stannis move behind the bar to a sign that read: “No checks accepted under no circumstances.” Stannis took out a pen, crossed out the second “no” and inserted the word “any.” Tyrion applauded his attention to proper grammar, but he doubted the bartender shared the sentiment.

“Hey, what the fuck are you doing?”

As someone threw the first punch, Tyrion realized the evening was going to be a memorable one.
Chapter End Notes

It's my universe so our cultural references are their cultural references too.

"Dog botherer" is straight out of Terry Pratchett...
Mornings can be brutal even when you're not hung over.

Usual disclaimers about how these are all GRRM's characters...

There were times when Brienne really hated her life. This was one of them. Here it was a gorgeous Saturday morning and here she was trapped with a bunch of her drunken, snoring colleagues.

She didn’t like to drink much. A half glass of wine once a week was usually all she wanted or needed. Brienne just didn’t get the appeal of drinking yourself senseless.

Looking back, she realized she should have skipped out around the same time as Sansa, Varys, and Baelish. Failing that, she should have left at the same time as Sam. She probably shouldn’t have gone out with them at all. The only reason she had joined them was Olenna.

“You have to make an effort,” Olenna would say. “Spending all your spare time at the gym is not a social life.” You just didn’t say no to Olenna. She had never been able to anyhow. And Brienne would agree and go out with her co-workers.

Well, this wasn’t a social life either. At least at the gym, the people were sober and conscious and better smelling, well, she amended, at least as compared with her colleagues. Brienne sat up and got a whiff of her own attire. She reeked of cigarettes, alcohol, and other people’s vomit, and she had been sober for almost the entire evening. The leather sofa had been the only thing long enough for her to stretch out on and while it was a beautiful piece of furniture, it was not meant for sleeping. She got up and stepped over Bronn, who was dead to the world.

They were in Tyrion’s apartment. Brienne had been astonished at the place when he’d drunkenly let them in. It was all glass and chrome and modern art. Brienne made do with a grim cookie-cutter, one-bedroom apartment in a complex.

“You will buy a house after you make tenure,” Olenna had instructed her. “Meanwhile, save your money, and try and make some friends, dear.”

Brienne had no idea where the others were. There were bedrooms upstairs, but she was damned if she was going to see who had ended up where. She poked around in search of a shower. Along the way she found a laundry room and the linen closet. Finally she found a full bathroom. She glanced at her phone. This lot would be out for hours.

“Make yourselves at home,” Tyrion had said.

She would.

An hour and a half later, Brienne had laundered her clothes, showered, washed her hair, and changed. Now if she could only find her keys. They had hid them on her. She was about to start
tearing the living room apart when a buzzer from the intercom sounded. Brienne stepped over a pile of clothes, she wasn’t sure whose and she wasn’t about to check, and made her way to the door. Whoever was there was impatient because the buzzer went off repeatedly. The intercom looked like the control panel for the space shuttle. Brienne hit a couple of buttons and the noise stopped. “Hello,” she tried tentatively through what had to be the speaker, but no one replied.

When she heard a heavy knock on the door, she realized she had buzzed someone into the building. The knock sounded again, harder and more impatient. Bronn groaned but just turned over. There was nothing for it. Brienne opened the door.

An older man only slightly shorter than she stood in the doorway. “It’s about time. In future—” He stopped. “You’re not Tyrion.”

Brienne thought this should be obvious, but from the looks of it, it wouldn’t be the smartest thing she could say. The man was furious. “No,” she acknowledged in a mild voice. “He’s still sleeping, I think. May I take a message?”

“No.” He pushed past her.

“Hey,” she objected.

He turned around.

“You can’t just come barging in here.”

“I can and I have. It’s my money that paid for this place.” He glanced around in disgust at the bottles, the rumpled clothes on the floor, and Bronn.

For one wild moment, Brienne wondered if this man and Tyrion were an item and she was about to be subjected to a lovers’ quarrel, and then it hit her. She’d seen him before. She suddenly recollected reading about him in one of the University newsletters. There had been a photo of him with some of the higher-ups. Gods, he was on the board of trustees. This had to be Tyrion’s father. “Are you Tywin Lannister?”

“Yes,” he said shortly. “And you are?”

“Brienne Tarth.” She held out a hand out of habit.

He considered her and at the extended hand a full moment before taking it. “What are you to my son?”

“We’re colleagues from the library,” Brienne explained. “They . . . we took him out last night for drinks. I was the designated driver. We ended up here.”

He absorbed that. “And you are still present because?”

Brienne sighed. “They took my keys.” It sounded incredibly pathetic, but she didn’t know what else to say. “I think they thought it was funny.”

To her surprise, he thawed ever so slightly. “That sounds like Tyrion’s juvenile sense of humor,” he replied.

“I was going to make some coffee. Would you like some?” She wasn’t sure why she offered except that maybe in the time it took to make it, Tyrion would wake up and then she wouldn’t be the one dealing with his furious parent.
“Thank you.”

The kitchen was comparatively untouched from last night’s revels, but there were bottles all over the place and she nearly died from embarrassment when she saw him eye a black lace bra that had been draped on one of the bar stools. “Gods,” she muttered. She picked it up and left it in the living room.

He watched her as she came back into the kitchen and began hunting for the coffee. She made some guesses as to how the machine worked and was relieved when they appeared to be accurate. Brienne cleared some of the beer bottles off the island.

“You shouldn’t have to clean up other people’s messes,” he commented.

“I can’t stand the smell of stale beer.”

“I’m not fond of it either.”

Brienne located some coffee mugs. “How do you take it?” She was starting for the refrigerator in search of milk, when his voice stopped her.

“Black is fine. I hope you don’t require cream because all you will find in there, I expect, are takeaway containers and olives.”

Brienne opened it anyway. “He has cocktail onions too,” she announced.

Tywin Lannister snorted. “What’s your name again?”

She repeated it.

“Are you any relation to Selwyn Tarth?”

Brienne smiled. “He’s my father.”

He unbent a little more. He proceeded to ask her a number of direct questions. How long had she worked at the library? What was her position there? Where had she attended university? What had she studied?

She found herself answering them. She had been there a year and a half. She worked as a reference librarian. She had gone to the University of the Stormlands to become a physical education teacher. He wasn’t the type of person you told to mind his own business. Besides, she had the sense that the intent behind the questions wasn’t actively hostile.

He took that in. “However did you end up as a librarian?”

Brienne set down her coffee mug. “I had a job at Crossroads High School. You need a Master’s degree if you’re in the public school system. I was working on the research portion of my thesis so I went to the library at Crownlands. The librarian was really helpful. She showed me how to find things I didn’t know were available. I would go back and share everything with my classmates. Then I would go back in for appointments with her and it made everything so much simpler. She sort of took me under her wing.”

He listened.

“I finished it and I wanted to thank her for her help so I brought her a gift. I was in her debt, you see.”
Tywin Lannister nodded with approval.

“And she sat me down and told me that she thought there was a librarian in me.”

He frowned.

“I had never really thought about it as a career and frankly, I thought she was mistaken, but there’s something about Olenna that you can’t really dismiss.”

“Olenna Tyrell?”

Brienne was surprised, but then she recollected that Olenna had money. Of course, she would know the Lannisters. “Oh, do you know her?”

He gave her the briefest of nods. “Go on.”

“She printed off some literature for me and she arranged for me to visit the library school up at Winterfell. Before I knew it, I was enrolled. Even then I thought I would do school media, but she persuaded me to go for the academic track.”

“Hmmmm.”

“They have me as the bibliographer for business and it’s not my strength. The sources are so different, but I like the work even though I’m still learning the subject matter.”

He was about to ask her another question when they heard the sound of a phone ringing from somewhere in the apartment. Then they heard the sound of the phone being flung across the room.

“I think we are being entirely too quiet, Ms Tarth.” He rose and began clearing the rest of the bottles into the sink. He was not silent about it.

Brienne hesitated.

“Was this how you planned to spend your Saturday? Babysitting drunks?”

She grinned in spite of herself and ran the water to rinse the empties.

Groans sounded throughout the apartment. He looked pleased with himself and moved into the living room. The air was stale and Brienne opened a window.

“Shall we see if we can find your keys?” Tywin Lannister made no effort to lower his voice, which was deep, distinctive, and impossible to ignore.

Brienne was about to reply when she felt her jaw drop as Melisandre strolled buck naked across the open walkway above them into the upstairs bathroom. She saw his face darken with rage. Brienne shut her eyes.

Tywin Lannister turned to face her accusingly. “You didn’t tell me they’d brought whores here.”

“That’s not a prostitute. That’s Melisandre,” Brienne said in what she felt was a truly inadequate voice.

“You know that woman?!” he thundered.

Brienne nodded.
Asha stormed out of one of the bedrooms. “For fuck’s sake, shut the fuck up down there. People are trying to sleep.”

Brienne supposed she should be grateful that Asha had on clothes. Well, she amended some clothes. She had on her Star Trek t-shirt and a pair of panties.

“Who the fuck are you?” Asha demanded looking down at him.

This man, Brienne thought, had donated millions to the university. He was on the board. She didn’t have tenure. Asha didn’t have tenure. “This is Tyrion’s father, Tywin Lannister.”

Asha evidently never read the University newsletters. “Oh, hi.”

Asha looked around. “Hey, have you seen my bra?”

Brienne turned scarlet. Tyrion’s father’s face had turned a dull brick red—not from embarrassment, though. He looked like he was about to have a stroke. Brienne grabbed the garment in question and marched up the stairs and handed it to Asha. “Where are my keys?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“Is that what’s poking me in the backside?” Bronn rolled over.

Tywin reached down and picked them up. He gave Bronn a look of utter disgust.

Brienne pushed Asha back in the bedroom. She lowered her voice to a whisper, “Unless you want to commit career suicide, you’re going to get dressed, and get the hell out of here.”

Asha didn’t like being told what to do. “You’ve got a bloody nerve. Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Brienne shut the door and hissed, “That man is Tywin Lannister and he’s got way more power than any of us combined. If you want a job to go back to on Monday you’re going to do as I say.”

Sobriety was slowly washing over Asha. “What about the others?”

“Bonn and Shae have permanent appointment. Stannis and Melisandre have tenure. We don’t. Tyrion . . .” Tyrion could take care of himself. It was his father. It wasn’t their problem.

“Okay,” Asha agreed. “Hey, do you know where my jeans are?”

Seven bloody hells, Brienne thought. This was the last straw. She gave up. She pulled the door open and stomped down the stairs. Bronn had gotten up and wandered off somewhere. Tywin Lannister was standing in the living room fuming. “May I have my keys please?”

He handed them to her silently.

“I’m sorry we didn’t meet under better circumstances,” she told him. She picked up her phone. “You’re right, Mr. Lannister, this is not how I want to spend my morning and I don’t think this is how you want to spend yours either.” With that, she fled.

* * *

Ned Stark was a morning person. His wife was not. By the time Catelyn staggered down to the kitchen, he had worked on a paper for his collection development class; completed the memo regarding the latest problem patron; written several performance reviews; and most importantly made the coffee.
Catelyn dropped into a chair. He rose and poured her a cup. He couldn’t cook, but he could at least make toast so he did so now. The Sunday paper was already at the table waiting for her.

She sipped her coffee and gradually transformed into the woman he loved more than anything. “Where is everyone?”

“Bran and Rickon are playing video games. They had cereal earlier. Sansa went out to breakfast with the Tyrell girl. Arya went running. She said something about needing money for clothes for work. She has a dress code, she said. She wants to know if you can take her to the mall today.”

Catelyn nodded.

“I thought she was just doing IT.” In his experience, all anyone demanded sartorially of people in IT was that they showed up fully clothed and wearing shoes.

Catelyn managed a few bites of toast before replying. “They changed her internship.”

“What?”

“I forgot to ask,” Catelyn admitted.

Ned frowned. “That seems odd. Why would they do that?”

“I have no idea. Does it matter? She’s staying out of trouble. For the first time in her life, she actually cares about her appearance.”

She had a point. Saving Sansa and Bran, none of their children were particularly academic. The only reason Robb had been willing to attend university was so he could become an officer. Rickon struggled with dyslexia. Arya . . . Arya excelled at anything physical. She took to every sport like a duck to water, but academics were not her strong suit. It wasn’t that she wasn’t smart. She was. Arya simply didn’t think school was important. It had taken every bit of their influence, a succession of tutors, reward and denial to get her through high school with a B average. Contrary to all expectations, she’d managed high college entrance exam scores and somehow had gotten into Crownlands University.

Getting Arya to university was one thing. Keeping her there was going to be another. If this internship, wherever it was and whatever it was would help, well, they probably shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

“I’ll go with her when she gets back,” Catelyn said. “What’s that you’re working on?”

“Performance reviews.” He made a face. It couldn’t be put off any longer. “Cat, when is the last time you saw your sister?”

His wife took that in. “I wish she’d go to grief counseling.”

“I think it’s gone beyond that.” Lysa Arryn had a long and troubled mental history. There would be periods where she would be fine and then suddenly she’d break down. Until he’d taken on the directorship, Ned had never been immediately involved with his sister-in-law’s health. First Hoster Tully and then Jon Arryn had dealt with it. If Jon Arryn were still alive, he could have gone to him, but that was no longer an option.
Catelyn set her mug down. “Damn.” She thought a bit. “Maybe Petyr might be able to help.”

Ned considered his next words carefully. “I think Petyr is part of the problem. He’s in her office a lot and the paranoia is always worse afterward.” He held up a hand when he saw her about to protest. “Maybe he doesn’t know it, but he’s setting her off somehow.”

She poured some cream into her coffee and stirred it. “What do you think we should do?”

“I think,” he said slowly, “we should persuade her to take a leave of absence and we should ask her and Robin to stay with us for a while.” It was not a prospect he relished, but he didn’t see what else they could do. “They could stay in the garage apartment.”

“It’s that bad?”

“My head of reference thinks she’s gone beyond the bend. Cat, you have to understand most of that department is pretty eccentric. They’ve looked the other way about the breast pump. If they’re saying she’s having issues, trust me, she’s having issues.”

“The what?”

Ned was startled. “I thought you knew.”

Catelyn stared at him. “Knew what?”

Ned ran his hands through his hair. “She has a breast pump in her office. On ‘Take your child to work day,’ the Systems guy walked into her office to deliver a new monitor and saw her breastfeeding Robin.”

Catelyn spit coffee out across the table.

“You didn’t know this was going on?”

“No! He’s nine-years-old.” She wiped the coffee up. “You said that wasn’t the worst?”

Ned sighed. “She’s been talking to Sansa about conspiracies. I’m not sure why Sansa didn’t come to us. For some reason, Sansa chose to tell Olenna. I asked Sansa about it and they’re pretty wild. Then Lysa started in on the patrons.”

“She’s talking to the patrons about conspiracy theories?”

“No, she’s hitting on them. One of the post docs reported that she groped him in the stacks. That might be why Olenna’s concerned, I don’t know. He’s her grandson. He complained directly to me about it and I believe him. It’s not the only complaint I’ve received. A few people seem to be taking her up on her offers. There are at least two of them—that I know about—only because two patrons have reported seeing them in the stacks.”

“Holy Mother.”

Ned put his hand on Cat’s. “Look I’m sorry to dump this on you today of all days, but I didn’t want to have this discussion in front of the kids and we’ve been so busy this weekend.” They’d gone to university functions the past two nights and had all but collapsed into bed after them.

She nodded.

“Something needs to be done, though. I’d rather we took control of the situation before someone else does.”
“Tywin Lannister—”

He shook his head. As much as he would have liked to blame this on the Lannisters, he couldn’t. “—I am not supposed to be supervising her. Jon wasn’t supposed to be supervising her. She’s family. There’s library policy about this.”

“Sansa—”

Ned interrupted. “— is a student. The rules are different for students. Lysa is faculty. I’ve overheard a couple of comments already. We could get her transferred to the medical or the science library after she comes off of medical leave. She has tenure. She won’t be out of a job. But first we have to get her some help, Cat.”

Catelyn thought a bit. “She’ll be up by now. I’ll ring her and invite them both to dinner.”

He tried to focus on the reviews while she made the call from the other room. Finally she entered the room, just as Arya came trotting into the house.

“Arya, go get showered and changed. I’m taking you to the mall.”

“Can’t we go after lunch?”

“No, your aunt and cousin are coming to dinner. I’ve got a lot to do today.”

Arya made a face but vanished up the backstairs.

Ned rose and hugged Cat. “We will get through this.” He sounded more confident than he felt.

Chapter End Notes

While I’ve aged the other characters, Robin Arryn is still a child.
Chapter Summary

As Ned deals with some of the weirder and seamier activities plaguing the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library, his daughters face new opportunities. Meanwhile Brienne meets another Lannister and Jaime discovers the perils of not listening to his brother.

Brienne stood uneasily in Olenna’s living room gripping a glass of club soda like it held the cure to cancer. She hated parties and this was the very worst kind of party. You needed to mingle at this kind of event. You needed to mingle and make clever and witty small talk. She was starving, but she didn’t dare eat anything. Not in this dainty room with its cream colored carpet and antique furniture. She didn’t think most of the people here ate as a general rule. Everyone was impossibly thin.

“Ms Tarth.” Tyrion’s father approached and greeted her. He had a glass of red wine.

Brienne thought it unlikely that Tywin Lannister had ever spilled a drop of anything in his life.

“Mr. Lannister.”

They stood there silently for a few minutes.

Brienne racked her mind for something to say.

He saved her the trouble. “Olenna thinks highly of you,” he commented quietly.

“Oh. That’s kind of her. I didn’t realize you were close.”

He stiffened, looked her suspiciously, and stated that while he had some acquaintance with his hostess, they were not “close.”

With her spare hand, Brienne smoothed her blue dress. It wasn’t the type of thing she would ever have picked out herself. On the few occasions she needed to wear anything dressy, she would pull out a black skirt, a top that didn’t require ironing, and some flat shoes. Last week, Olenna had shown up at her office door at lunchtime and persuaded her to go shopping with her. An hour and several hundred dollars later, Brienne had ended up with the outfit she was wearing now.

“I took your advice,” he commented.

For a moment she didn’t know what he was talking about. Then she realized, “Oh.”

Mr. Lannister tilted his head toward her, “Tell me, Ms Tarth. Is that sort of debauch common for your colleagues?”

She hesitated. She knew he was an important man and that a few words from him could advance or destroy her career, but she was not about to tell tales. He had seen more than enough of their behavior to make whatever inquiries he wanted without involving her.

“Well?”
“Do you still beat your wife?”

“I beg your pardon.”

Brienne kept her gaze even with his. “I think you know very well what I mean.”

He coughed out something that she thought might have been a laugh. “I suppose I do.”

“Look, I’m not very good at politics,” she told him. She watched Olenna’s granddaughter making her effortless way through the room. “Or at parties.”

He shrugged. “You are wise to stay out of the former. I wish all of your colleagues were as sensible as you.”

Brienne realized he wasn’t talking about the events at Tyrion’s apartment anymore. “I don’t follow you.”

“I mean, Ms Tarth, that there are far too many instigators trying to stir up trouble, and that it is good that you don’t appear to be one of them.”

She nodded. “Thank you?” She honestly had no idea what he was referring to and she thought it was probably best that she didn’t.

He started to reply.

“Hello, Father.”

“Jaime.” Tywin didn’t precisely smile, but he seemed to unbend slightly.

Brienne looked at Tyrion’s brother curiously. Tyrion had mentioned he had two siblings who were twins one day when they were at the reference desk. She also remembered him saying he was close to his brother. Jaime Lannister was almost as tall as she was and he was a rather splendid looking man. From the way he moved, she had the sense that he thought so too.

“This is Brienne Tarth,” Tywin Lannister was saying.

“How do you do, Ms Tarth,” Jaime greeted her sounding slightly bored.

She smiled tightly. This was her chance to escape. She’d been there a full hour. Mr. Lannister would want to speak with his son. Brienne could thank Olenna and still make it to the gym for a couple of hours.

“She works with Tyrion.”

Jaime looked at her with slightly more interest.

“I enjoyed our chat, Ms Tarth. Jaime.”

Before she could blink, he had left his son and her alone.

Jaime Lannister seemed as surprised as she was.

Gods, now she had to find something to say to this man. “Is Tyrion here?”

“I don’t actually know,” he admitted. “My father told me I’d been invited. I’ve been out of town.”
She nodded.

“How do you know my father?” He was scanning the crowd.

She knew what that meant. He was looking for someone, anyone else to talk to. Brienne’s feet hurt like hell. The Spanx and the bra that Olenna insisted that she wear in order to give her some semblance of a figure were digging into her flesh. She didn’t want to be here and she was damned if he was going to be the one to leave her. She spotted Olenna talking to the caterer. If she was going to get out of here anytime soon, the time was now. “I met him at Tyrion’s apartment.”

Jaime arched his eyebrows. “At Tyrion’s apartment,” he repeated. “My father.”

“Yes.”

“My father was at Tyrion’s apartment?”

She repeated it back to him. “Yes, I met your father at Tyrion’s apartment. I didn’t realize you were hard of hearing.” She resisted the urge to tear off her shoes then and there. “It was good to meet you,” she said politely. “Take care.” Trying not to wobble on her heels, she walked away.

*

Library school, Ned was finding, was great for theory, but hell on practical applications. His management class did not prepare him for the kinds of problems he was facing on a day-to-day basis.

The meeting had gone on for scarcely fifteen minutes and already his legal pad was filled with notes. Security problems were rife. They weren’t even normal security problems and Ned’s definition of “normal” had already rapidly expanded since assuming the directorship. In none of his courses, had it ever been explained what to do about a mystery patron who had taken to defecating in the potted plants. Varys had just discovered that Study Room 6 on the third floor was listed on an unofficial and unsanctioned student social networking site as a great place for hookups. The HVAC units on the roof were leaking into the stacks upstairs and their operations budget for the year was already strained.

Varys, who was plugged into the university’s gossip network at a truly unbelievable level, was in the middle of detailing a complicated effort on the part of one of the fraternities to liberate some of the instructional technology when Petyr Baelish stormed into the room.

“We’re in the middle of something, Petyr.” Ned didn’t have a lot of use for Baelish. Aside from the fact that the man never seemed to stop sniffing around Cat or Lysa, he oozed untrustworthiness. He was constantly implying that Ned was unsuited to be the director.

“I have just come from the history department faculty meeting. I was supposed to be discussing journal cancellations.”

Varys rolled his eyes.

Ros kept her face focused on her notes.

“I think I have some time at 2:00, Petyr. I’d be happy to—”

“I need to be informed when we make expensive purchases! How can I justify the cancellation of core titles when you’re authorizing the purchase of the latest equipment? They practically tore me apart. Roose Bolton was livid.”
Ned raised his eyebrows.

“What purchase is this?” Varys inquired. “We haven’t bought any equipment in months other than the shredder for the confidential paperwork and that was well under $100.”

“The monitors?” Ros suggested.

“Those come from the University IT’s budget, not ours,” Varys told Ros.

Petyr aggressively pulled a chair away from the table, sat, and then pulled out his notes. “According to Bolton, he knows we bought the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3. He wanted to know how much it cost and how many journals we could have purchased for the price. I tried to explain about continuing commitments—”

“The what?” Ned didn’t bother to hide his ignorance.

“ScanQuest is one of our vendors, but I don’t recall anything by that name. Ros, would you be so kind as to retrieve the file for us? Oh, and would you bring the catalog too?”

Ros nodded and disappeared. She came back a few minutes later. “There’s nothing about it in the file.” She thumbed through the catalog. “What’s the name again?”

Petyr shoved his notepad across the table.

She looked for a few minutes. “Are we certain that’s what it’s called?”

“He was very specific.” Petyr’s face was white with anger.

Ned exchanged glances with Varys. “All right. You’ve brought this to our attention. We’ll look into it. Roose and I are old friends. I’ll talk with him and reassure him.”

Ros copied down the name of the mysterious piece of equipment and walked the notepad back to Baelish.

Ned waited for Petyr to leave. “Varys, will you investigate?”

Varys nodded acquiescence. “I’ve already made a note. Where was I? Ah, it appears that the Brotherhood without Banners decided they needed to steal our classroom control hardware. One wonders why.”

No, Ned’s courses didn’t prepare him for this sort of thing at all.

* * *

Arya thought her clothes looked boring, but everyone else seemed to think they were fine. Mr. Lannister had even nodded approvingly. His only comment after her second week was that she needn’t wear all black every day.

“You don’t have to worry about matching if you wear all black,” she explained.

“Ah.”

She didn’t really understand the projects they had her doing most of the time, but it was more interesting than hanging out in the basement with pothead Reg and playing games on her phone. Mr. Lannister usually talked with her once a day. Sometimes she had to help him with his computer, which she quite liked. Mostly she worked with his brother, Kevan.
Kevan was cool for an old guy. After two days of addressing him as “Mr. Lannister,” he had told her to just call him “Kevan.” He suggested though that she continue to address his brother by his surname. Tywin liked a certain amount of formality.

Arya handed him the folder she’d been working on.

He glanced through it. “You are good at this,” he told her.

“Thanks.”

“Do you understand what it’s about? What it is we’re trying to acquire?”

Arya shook her head.

He launched into an explanation. She had heard this before. It had something to do with some company that they wanted to buy. She understood a little more this time around, but it was kind of like the time they’d gone to Braavos on vacation. She had a tiny bit of Braavosi from her language class and she’d understood about one word for every ten. By the time they left, she felt like she knew one word for every five.

She nodded. “Okay.”

Kevan laughed. “You’ll pick more up as you go on.”

“My internship is over soon,” Arya said frowning.

“I think Tywin means to offer you some part-time work. He thinks—we think—that you’re very bright.”

“Oh.” University was hard for her. She didn’t know that she could maintain the average her parents wanted and work too. She thought her parents would be happy, though. She did like that Mr. Lannister and Kevan thought she was smart. It wasn’t a term most people used with her.

Kevan leaned over conspiratorially. “When he makes you an offer, hold out for more money. He’ll like that.”

Arya grinned. “Do you need anything else for today?”

“Not unless you can help me figure out what to get my wife for her name day.”

“What does she like?”

Kevan sighed. “She always says she likes everything I get her and I know she means it, but I’d like her to appreciate the gift for its own sake for once.”

Arya thought about it. He had her picture on his desk. She had a kind smile. She was wearing a pink dress in the photo. It looked expensive. “What about jewelry or fancy clothes?” She would personally hate those things, but she knew most women liked that kind of crap.

“She has drawers full of jewelry.”

“What does she like to do? Does she have any hobbies?”

Kevan considered. “Dorna likes to do crafts. She knits and crochets. I wouldn’t have the slightest idea what to buy for those though.”
“My sister knits. I bet she would know.” Arya called Sansa, who was initially irritated at being bothered at work, but who eventually agreed to advise Kevan.

“What about a knitting bag?” Sansa suggested, her voice wafting through the speaker phone.

Kevan frowned. “I want this to be a special gift.”

“Oh, the ones I’m thinking of you would need to buy at a specialty shop or online. They can run in the hundreds of dragons,” Sansa told them.

“What would pay hundreds of dragons for a knitting bag?” Arya demanded.

“There are over three million knitters and crocheters on Ravelry alone,” Sansa said mildly. “These are not inexpensive hobbies. The stores wouldn’t sell this stuff if people didn’t buy it.” She rattled off the names of a couple of sites. She also suggested that they check one or two for wish lists that his wife might have. Sure enough they found one.

Arya was shocked at the prices, but Kevan didn’t blink an eye. He ordered several things and thanked Sansa profusely for her help.

“My grandnephew, Joffrey, was seeing a girl named Sansa,” he said thoughtfully after they’d ended the call.

Arya frowned. “That’s my sister.” Joffrey had been a shit boyfriend and everyone in the family was thrilled when they broke up, but she wasn’t about to say that. “Is Mr. Lannister Joffrey’s grandfather?” If that was the case, it meant that Mrs. Baratheon, who was a total bitch, was his daughter. She didn’t know how someone as nice as Mr. Lannister had a daughter like Mrs. Baratheon.

He blinked. “Your last name is Stark?”

“Well, yeah.”

Kevan’s eyes widened. “Your father is Ned Stark?”

She nodded, puzzled. “Oh, do you know him?”

“It’s been some time, but we’ve met.” He considered her. “What does he think about your working here?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. We haven’t talked much about it. They just told me to find something to do this over the Third Semester. I think they’re busy with family stuff.” It had something to do with Aunt Lysa, but Arya didn’t know the specifics.

The intercom buzzed and Arya was summoned to see Mr. Lannister. Arya said her goodbyes to Kevan and walked across the hall to Mr. Lannister’s office.

True to Kevan’s word, Mr. Lannister wanted her to work for them part-time. They would work around her schooling, he told her. Mr. Lannister suggested that she consider a major in business and offered to help her select the appropriate classes. Arya wasn’t sure how she felt about that and said so.

“You might take a few courses and see how you like them,” he suggested.

“Okay.” She could do that. She still needed one more class and she thought she could postpone
taking one of the required literature classes till the next semester. If she didn’t like this business thing, she could take something else later on.

The hourly wage he offered her almost made her jaw drop, but she remembered what Kevan had said and asked for several dragons an hour more. Mr. Lannister made a counteroffer which she accepted.

She remembered something she’d seen on *Mad Men* one night. It wasn’t the type of show her family watched typically, but one night Sansa had wrestled the remote away from Bran and made them all watch it. Arya held out her hand. She thanked him for the opportunity and promised to do her sincere best.

* * *

Margaery’s new apartment was fantastic. It was in a great part of King’s Landing; close to restaurants and shops and bars, but not too close. The street was lined with trees. The apartment had hardwood floors, two functioning fireplaces, and beautiful leaded glass windows. Sansa ran her fingers over the moldings on the fireplace. “This is unbelievable.”

“I’m so glad you like it.”

“You’ll have to let me visit.”

Margaery laughed. “I want you to do more than that; I want you to live here with me.”

Sansa’s face lit up. “Really? Oh wow, that would be ama—” Then she stopped as reality set in.

Margaery linked her arm around Sansa’s. “And now you’re going to tell me all the reasons why you can’t.” She pulled Sansa to one of the window seats. “That’s okay,” she said laughing. “Because then I’m going to deal with every one of them.”

“My parents would never let me live off campus. Besides, this place must cost a fortune. I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. My parents bought it for me. You can stay here rent free. If you can go halves with me on the utilities and the groceries, that will be more than enough. I’ll have Grandmother speak with your father. Your parents will agree to it.”

Sansa swallowed. “What about Joffrey? I don’t—I can’t handle being that close to him all the time. It’s bad enough seeing him on campus, but I couldn’t deal with him being in the same apartment.”

“That’s over with,” Margaery told her. "I only went out with him to please my family. They know what a shit he is now. Joffrey will not be visiting us here.”

“I don’t know how you do it,” Sansa said half relieved and half fascinated.

“Do what?”

“You do whatever you want and you make it seem so easy. No one can say no to you.”

“What about you?”

Sansa laughed. “Least of all me.”

“I’m glad about that.” Margaery smoothed a lock of Sansa’s hair and tucked it under her ear. “I like you so much, Sansa.”
It took Sansa a moment to remember she needed to breathe. “All right,” Sansa said.

“All right?”

“Let’s do this.”

* * *

Tywin was reading the latest edition of the *Chronicle*. The article responsible for his ire quoted several unnamed Crownlands University faculty who were highly critical of Robert’s administration. One even had the gall to suggest that the Board of Trustees was exercising undue influence. “I’ll have Ned Stark’s head on a spike for this,” he muttered.

“I hope you don’t talk like that in front of that little girl.”

“Kevan.” He set the paper down. “I didn’t realize you were still here.” Then he registered what his brother had said. “What little girl?”

“Arya. Have you spoken about him in front of her?”

Tywin arched his eyebrows. “No, although I fail to see why it should matter.”

“I wish you had told me. Don’t you think it was dirty pool hiring her?”

“What are you talking about?”

Kevan ran his hand through his hair. “Seven hells, you don’t know.” He sat down. “Arya is Ned Stark’s daughter.”

Tywin stared at his brother. “What?”

“That little girl, your intern, is Arya Stark, daughter of Ned Stark. Didn’t you ever ask her last name? Didn’t she ever say it?”

Tywin thought back. “No,” he said slowly. “Now that you mention it, I don’t think she did. He put her up to this?” As soon as he said it, he dismissed it as a possibility. Stark wasn’t that clever.

“I don’t think he knows she’s working here. The girl said they haven’t really discussed her internship.”

They sat for a few moments thinking.

“Well, as long as you don’t have her working on anything that deals with Crownlands and you keep your comments about her father to yourself, I don’t think it’ll matter.”

Tywin glared at him. “I cannot possibly have Ned Stark’s daughter working here.”

“You offered her the job already, didn’t you?”

Tywin nodded reluctantly.

Kevan frowned. “If you renege, she’ll be very hurt.”

“This is business, Kevan. She’ll get over it.”

“She’s not some hardened entry-level piranha looking to claw her way up the corporate ladder.
She’s eighteen and I doubt she has the faintest idea how beneficial your interest could be. She
doesn’t seem to get a lot of attention at home. Every time I’ve called her smart, she looks shocked.
You’re the one who took her on up here. You’re the one who offered a job. She has no idea you
loathe her father. She has no idea her father loathes you.”

Tywin did not allow many people to speak to him this frankly. Kevan was one of the few who
could and who would.

“You know I’m right.”

It was galling but he did.

* * *

Ned was parking his car when Arya’s Buick rumbled and thundered into the driveway.

“Hi Dad!” She greeted him and she threw her arms around him in a hug.

He hugged her back. “It sounds like the muffler is going.”

“Going? It’s been gone for a while now,” she told him.

“We’ll take it in this weekend. I think your mother and I can afford to pay for the repair.”

Arya shook her head and grinned. “That’s okay. I can pay for it myself.”

“Sweetling, it’ll run at least a few hundred dragons.”

“Oh. Well, I can chip in anyhow. I got a job!”

Ned unlocked the side door. The house was blissfully quiet. Cat had left a note. He read it.

“Where is everyone?”

“It looks like your mom took your brothers, your cousin, and Aunt Lysa out to dinner. So it’s just
you and me. We’ll get a pizza, okay?”

Arya smiled. “Cool.” She pulled a menu off the refrigerator and called in an order for them.

Ned watched her wondering where his wild little girl had gone. She looked very different in her
work clothes, almost grown up. “So tell me about this job.”

She bubbled over with excitement. It was at the same place where she was doing her internship.
She spoke of the classes she was going to take and the things she would be doing.

He was surprised at her enthusiasm. Other than P.E., Arya had never seemed to care about school.
He was frankly shocked that she had been willing or able to go to university. “Where did all this
interest in finance and business come from?”

“I don’t know,” Arya said kicking off her shoes. “But I think I like it. They said I’m good at it
too.”

“Good at what exactly?”

Arya frowned. “I don’t really know. There are a lot of spread sheets. I do computer stuff for them
sometimes. I was fact checking something today.”
“I’m glad you like what you’re doing, but that might not translate to a career. There’s probably going to be a lot that you won’t like.” Ned didn’t want to dampen Arya’s enthusiasm, but he doubted she had it in her to be some sort of faceless cog in a corporate machine.

“That’s why I’m going to take the courses. They said I should see how I liked them and then decide later. I’m going to go change before the pizza comes, okay?”

“Who told you this? Your advisor?”

Arya’s reply was muffled as she pulled her sweater off and ran up the stairs.

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There was something about Margaery Tyrell that set Cat’s teeth on edge. She couldn’t pinpoint the reason for her dislike—no, that wasn’t the right word; it was impossible not to like Margaery. She was so personable, so considerate, so very charming. But still there was something off about her.

Margaery finished her very rational, very reasonable proposal and she and Sansa waited for them to reply.

Cat glanced at Ned, whose face was impassive.

“Why don’t you girls go watch some TV with the other kids while we talk this over?” Cat suggested.

“Of course, Dr. Tully, we appreciate your consideration.”

Sansa shot them both a pleading look

Cat waited until the study door shut behind them before turning to Ned. “What do you think?”

He shrugged.

Sweet Mother, he thought it was a good idea. “She’s still a child,” Cat objected.

“She’s twenty, Cat. She’ll be twenty-one soon. We let Robb move out when he was nineteen.”

“That was different. It was on campus and he was rooming with Theon.”

Ned arched his eyebrows. “The Tyrell girl has a lot more sense than Theon did at that age.”

“We know Theon,” she said sharply. “We don’t know Margaery Tyrell.”

“They’ve known each other for two-and-a-half years. She’s never gotten Sansa into trouble, not like—” he stopped abruptly.

Not like Joffrey, is what he was going to say, Catelyn realized. She had encouraged Sansa to date Joffrey; Ned had been firmly against the relationship. He had never cast that up to her, not even when Sansa had come home covered in bruises. “Margaery was dating Joffrey,” she said softly.

“She brought it up herself,” Ned pointed out. “It’s over. She learned her lesson.”

“But—”

“—if Sansa can make that mistake, so can Margaery.”
He was right. She knew he was right. But still, there was something off about the girl.

* * *

Jaime followed his brother down a rabbit warren of dismal corridors and rooms until they got to his office. They’d just come from dinner. Tyrion was working the evening and Jaime had been invited back to see the library.

Tyrion unlocked the door and turned on the lights. “It’s not much.”

“Gods, you aren’t kidding.” He tried to find something complimentary to say. “I like the lamp and the rug.”

“Thanks. I brought those in.”

“You have a plant.” Jaime still didn’t understand what had prompted his brother’s career change or where he had found the courage to defy their father by choose it, but he wanted to be supportive. Librarianship sounded like hell to Jaime, but Tyrion seemed happy with it.

“Olenna assures me it does not need natural light, which is good because I think several people would need to die, retire, or leave for me to get an office with a window.”

Jaime turned around. “Olenna as in Olenna Tyrell?”

“The one and the same. She is our head of reference. She is something of a legend in library circles.”

The Tyrells were only slightly less wealthy than the Lannisters. While he hadn’t exactly grown up with them, they were familiar to him. Jaime had no idea Olenna worked, much less as a librarian. If he had ever thought about it, and he had to admit he never really had, he would have considered her a charter member of the Ladies Who Lunched. He frowned. “I was at a party of hers two weekends ago.”

“Cersei needed an escort, I take it?” Tyrion shut the door.

Jaime shook his head. “She wasn’t there. Father told me I had to go so I went. The granddaughter was all over me. It was deadly. There was a string quartet. And there were canapés.”

Tyrion laughed. “Most of the staff went out the other night. She pounded back tequila shots and drank everyone under the table.”

“Olenna Tyrell?”

Tyrion nodded.

Jaime took that in. “I have a hard time reconciling that image with the gracious lady who insisted I try the crab puffs. Oh, I met someone you work with there.”

Tyrion pursed his lips. “Who was that?”

“A very tall woman. Blonde. She looked incredibly uncomfortable in the outfit she had on.” He thought back. “No, she looked uncomfortable in her own skin.”

“That would be Brienne Tarth. Hmmm.”

“What?”
“I didn’t realize she was on those kinds of terms with Olenna.”

“Father introduced me to her. She said she first met him at your apartment.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows shot up. “You must have misunderstood.”

Jaime leaned back on the wooden table in the corner of the room. He thought back to the party. “No, I thought it was strange and she repeated it, unless she was lying.”

“Um, that table is none too stable. Let me go find a chair.”

“It’s fine.” To demonstrate Jaime leaned on the table harder.

It collapsed beneath him.
Divine Right of Chairs

Chapter Summary

In which Brienne learns why it's always good to have your own reading material on hand; Tyrion learns that you're never too old to endure parental embarrassment; Jaime learns not to overplay his position; and Tywin learns about the O.S.H.A. defying standards at the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Brienne paged through an ancient issue of Field & Stream wondering why the gods were so anxious to punish her. She hated hospitals. She especially hated emergency rooms and here she was stuck in one at a peak time. Tired of waiting, Jaime had played the “Do you know who I am?” card. Brienne tried to stop him, but he persisted and of course it backfired. He would have been better off trying to flirt with the nurse.

Tyrion’s phone kept vibrating. He would glance at it and then roll his eyes. The noise would stop and then it would begin again.

After the tenth time, she asked about it. “Why don’t you just answer?”

“It’s my father,” he said as if this explained everything.

“Shouldn’t you take the call?”

“No,” Tyrion and Jaime cried in unison.

Brienne turned back to the magazine. It wasn’t her place to get involved in his family squabbles.

“If you’d met my father, you would understand,” Tyrion offered.

“She has met him. I told you.”

“Meeting Father at a party is not the same as meeting Father.”

Brienne looked on the end table. Her other choices were Car & Driver and Highlights. She turned back to Field & Stream.

“Father is pretty much the same no matter where he is,” Jaime pointed out. “The only difference at a party is that he’s got a glass of wine in his hand.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Tyrion admitted.

“And she said she met him at your place.”

It was aggravating the way they spoke about her like she wasn’t even in the room.

“Because Father and I get along so well that I invite him over for drinks and introduce him to my friends. You must have misunderstood.”
“No, I didn’t.”

“No, he didn’t,” Brienne agreed.

Tyrion frowned. “I think I would remember hanging out with you and my father.”

Brienne stared at him. “How could you forget? It was the night we all ended up at your apartment. Well,” she amended, “the morning after.”

Tyrion was alarmed. “What?”

“He came by. Everyone was passed out at the time.” She thought a bit. “Oh, he did say he took my advice. Maybe he left before you woke up?”

“Brienne, I know we’re all tired, but what in the seven hells are you talking about?”

Jaime forgot about his right hand and put pressure it down on the arm of the chair to push himself up. “Owwwwww.”

“How do you keep forgetting not to do that?” Brienne asked in exasperation. “You have splinters five inches long.” They’d tried to pull some of them out at the library, but Jaime had been worse than a toddler fighting having a Band-Aid removed.

Jaime groaned.

Brienne caught the eye of a bearded man who had been waiting an hour or so. From his conversation with the nurse at reception, she knew there had been an accident with a saw. Blood was soaking through the bandage on his hand. “Stop whining,” she told Jaime.

“Forget about him.”

“Well, I like that. Hello? I’m the one who’s injured. Remember me?”

“There are people here far worse off than you.” She tilted her head toward the man with blood-soaked bandage. She noticed that in his other hand he was holding a Ziploc bag with four fingers on ice in it.

He gave her a rueful grin.

Brienne smiled back uneasily. How could someone be so chipper after having lost four fingers?

Tyrion ignored his brother. “Brienne? Father was there? That morning? I need you to tell me exactly what happened. This is important.”

She sighed and recounted the events of the morning. When she got to the part about Melisandre parading around naked, he had his head in his hands. “This is what happens when you drink to excess,” she told him. “I tried to do damage control, but when Asha started telling him to shut the fuck up, I couldn’t take it anymore.”

Jaime stopped groaning. “What?”

“Oh my gods.” Tyrion was horrified. “How do you still have a job? How does Asha still have a job? Melisandre?”

“I wasn’t the one who was naked and I didn’t tell him to fuck off,” Brienne pointed out. She shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you.” She reflected a little. “Melisandre has tenure. I don’t
know what happened with Asha. Maybe she apologized and he let it go.”

“Ha!” Jaime snorted.

Tyrion shook his head. “Father doesn’t let things go.” As if to confirm his assertion, his phone started vibrating again.

“What about Shae?”

“What about her?”

“Who is Shae?” Jaime wanted to know.

“Did my father see her?”

“Who is Shae?”

Tyrion ignored him. “This is very important. Did Father see her?”

“Not while I was there.” Brienne told him. To Jaime, she said, “She’s in Circulation.”

It was evident from the expression on Jaime’s face, that this explanation was meaningless to him.

Tyrion relaxed visibly. “Why was Melisandre naked?”

Brienne made a face. “I didn’t think to ask. I was too busy picking my jaw up off the floor. Your father thought she was a prostitute.”

Tyrion groaned.

“And to think that I believed librarians were boring,” Jaime remarked.

The man with the Ziploc bag seemed horrified and fascinated at the same time. Brienne couldn’t exactly blame him. “Maybe you shouldn’t have had sex with her while you were both drunk.”

“I did not have sex with Melisandre!”

The triage nurse slid the glass window open. “If you people don’t keep it down, I’ll call security. Trust me: you do not want me to do call them.” She slid the window shut.

Brienne blushed. She lowered her voice. “I’m sorry. I just assumed that you had.”

“I was with Shae.”

“Oh.”

Jaime whipped his head to look at his brother.

“Where was Stannis in all this?” Tyrion asked. “And Bronn?”

Brienne did not understand why she had to be the one with all the answers. “I have no idea. Bronn was passed out on your living room floor. Stannis and Melisandre must have been in the third bedroom.”

“My apartment only has two bedrooms.”

The realization dawned on them at the same time.
“When I pushed Asha back into the bedroom, it was dark. I must not have seen him.”

“Wow,” Tyrion said slowly.

“What? Who is Asha and who is Melisandre?”

Brienne ignored Jaime. “He and Asha have been getting along a lot better lately and Bronn did tell me once he thought they were an item.”

“Stannis in a threesome,” Tyrion commented. “Going boldly where no Baratheon has gone before. Although, no. Robert probably has some experience in that area already.”

Jaime shifted and hit his hand. “Seven hells,” he moaned. “Oh my gods, that hurts. Wait. We’re talking about Stannis Baratheon? Robert’s brother? Wait until I tell Cersei.”

Tyrion wheeled around. “No. You will not tell Cersei. Promise, me Jaime.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” Brienne screeched scandalized. She didn’t know who Cersei was, but this was not something that should be public knowledge.

The man with the bloody fingers made a gesture of zipping his lips and throwing away the key.

“Jaime, I am serious. Promise me you will keep quiet about this.”

“Fine, fine.”

The phone vibrated again.

“At least Father didn’t see it.”

“Not while I was there,” Brienne said. “I don’t know what happened after I left.”

“Trust me, if Father had witnessed Stannis with two women, he would have said something.” Tyrion looked at her “I’m sorry about Father,” He told her. He seemed deeply ashamed.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I know what he’s like. You shouldn’t have had to deal with him.”

Brienne shook her head. “We had coffee before it all went to pieces. He seemed nice.” Well, maybe nice wasn’t quite the right word, but she hadn’t blamed him for being upset. He had been polite enough with her.

Jaime’s jaw dropped.


“Is that him?”

Tyrion looked at the number. “Yes.”

“Give it to me.” Brienne didn’t wait for permission. She took it and answered it. “Hi. Oh, hello Mr. Lannister. This is Brienne Tarth.”

Tyrion was making violent semaphoring motions which she ignored. “We’re at the hospital right
now. No, Tyrion’s fine. It’s his brother.”

Now Jaime was trying to signal her.

Their hand motions would have been sufficient to flag down a 747. “Jaime had a slight accident. I don’t know.” She paused. “Really, there’s no need for alarm. He’s sprained his ankle. Well, I think he was sitting on a table and it collapsed under him.” She paused again. “Somehow it splintered and some pieces of it went into his hand.”

Tyrion put his head in his hands again.

Jaime tried to reach for the phone. He hit his leg this time. “Owwwww.”

“No, Jaime is fine. Really, Mr. Lannister, I think you’re overreacting.” She held the phone away from her ear. Mr. Lannister was quite loud as he demanded to know where exactly they were. She sighed and gave Tyrion’s father the name of the hospital. She ended the call.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” Tyrion demanded.

“He is your father. He is Jaime’s father. Of course, he wants to be here.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

Brienne rolled her eyes. The phone began to vibrate again. She looked at it. “Cersei? Is she the—”

Tyrion snatched the phone out of her hands. “NO.” He switched it off. “I can possibly survive Father. I cannot survive the two of them together.”

“Is she your stepmother?”

“Sister.”

Jaime’s phone began to vibrate.

Tyrion looked at him in a pleading manner.

Jaime switched it off with his left hand. “Well, I’d like to thank you both for this delightful evening and to think, the fun is just getting started.”

Brienne had a close relationship with her father. She knew there were plenty of people who didn’t get along with their families, but it always baffled her. “It’s that bad?”

“You have no idea,” Tyrion muttered.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally.

Tyrion threw up his hands. “It’s done.”

They sat silently for about twenty minutes.

“I’ll be back,” Tyrion said. “I need some coffee. Do you want anything?”

“A bottle of water would be great.”

Tyrion nodded and took off.

Jaime gritted his teeth and called after his brother. “Some morphine would be lovely.”
She picked up the magazine for the umpteenth time.

“So who were you with that night? Bronn whoever he,” he looked at her appraisingly, “or she is?”

Brienne ignored him.

“Oh, come on, we live in modern times. I bet a lusty wench like you likes a good time with whomever or whatever comes by.”

She found an article on trout fishing that she hadn’t yet read.

“I had no idea Tyrion’s new colleagues were so adventurous. He’ll have to invite me along sometime.”

“You couldn’t keep up with us,” Brienne couldn’t resist commenting.

“Ah, that’s a challenge I will gladly take up, wench.”

“Brienne,” she corrected.

“I like wench better.”

Brienne kicked him in the leg that wasn’t injured.

He groaned again, but he stopped talking.

She was able to read about trout fishing in earnest. She didn’t care for fishing of any kind, but it was something to do. Halfway through the article, she felt the atmosphere in the room change. She didn’t even need to look up to realize that Tywin Lannister was in the hospital.

“Jaime.” He registered her presence. “Ms Tarth.”

Brienne set the magazine down. “Mr. Lannister.”

“Where is Tyrion?”

“He went in search of a functioning vending machine.”

He looked utterly disgusted.

“We have been here for six hours,” Brienne pointed out.

He sat down next to Jaime. “You should have called me the instant it happened.”

“We didn’t think it was that serious,” Brienne said.

“You were there?”

Brienne shook her head. “They were in Tyrion’s office. We heard the crash and then the yelling.”

Tywin took that in. “Who is ‘we’?”

“The cataloger and I,” she explained. “Does it really matter?”

Jaime winced.

Tyrion came back bearing beverages. “Father.”
“How did this happen?” Tywin Lannister demanded.

“I told you my office is a death trap.”

“What happened?” Tywin repeated. “Do not make me ask again.”

“Jaime leaned on a table that was a table in name only.”

“Forgive me for not realizing it was made out of balsa wood.” Jaime held up his hand. “Or thorns.”

It did look horrible, Brienne admitted, but she thought he was being overly dramatic.

Tywin inhaled sharply.

Brienne felt her phone vibrate and pulled it out. “Oh, hi St—” She saw Tyrion give a minute shake of his head and this time she decided it might be prudent to heed him. She went out into the corridor to take the call.

When she came back, the three men were staring straight ahead. If she didn’t know any better she would have sworn they were strangers. The man with the bloody hand looked like he had been to see some particularly grim production of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*.

She turned back to Tyrion. “He wanted to know how your brother was doing.”

“Who?” Tywin asked.

“The cataloger,” Brienne explained. Her phone rang. It was Stannis again. She answered it. “Hi, I told you he’s fine.” She put her hand over the mouthpiece. “Um, Tyrion? He wants to talk to you.”

Tyrion took it from her. “Yes?” The expression on his face changed from resignation to something like bafflement. “What? Could we talk about my chair later?”

Tywin glanced at Brienne who shrugged.

“Bronn found it for me. The one they gave me when I started was little better than a stool. Look it’s nearly midnight. Can we deal with this tomorrow?” He held the phone out and looked at it before putting it back to his ear. “What do you mean the chair is yours by right?”

Jaime started laughing.

Brienne sipped her water and stared ahead at the poster for tobacco cessation like it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“It’s a chair!”

Tywin drew in a series of sharp breaths.

“Fine. Talk to Dr. Stark. I don’t care. Seven fucking hells. No, do not, I repeat, do not take it out of my office. We can discuss your divine right to my chair tomorrow.”

Jaime bent over with laughter.

Brienne wondered if Tyrion’s father was on any kind of medication and if she ought to suggest that he take it now.

Tyrion handed the phone back to Brienne.
“This is a fine career you’ve chosen,” Tywin commented acidly.

Brienne drank more water.

“Your brother has been seriously injured and you are concerned with the disposition of your office furniture.”

She thought that was a little unfair. It was Stannis who was focused on the furniture, not Tyrion.

“It’s the only thing in my room that isn’t actively a danger to use.”

“Do you realize how idiotic you sound?”

“Do you realize that the only reason Jaime is here is because the table fell apart when he touched it.”

“You had a career—a career suited for your station and you tossed it aside.”

Brienne locked eyes with the man with the bleeding hand. He gave her a look of sympathy.

A sultry dark-haired nurse with an olive complexion came out into the waiting room. “Mr. Seaworth?”

The fingerless Mr. Seaworth practically sprinted toward the nurse and into the treatment rooms.

“I wanted a chance to make my way without you constantly waiting for me to fail.”

“You seem to be failing quite well on your own.” Tywin rose.

“Where are you going?”

“To make certain that these idiots know who they’re treating,” he retorted. “You should have done that when you first got here. If they knew that your brother was a Lannister—”

Tyrion groaned.

“They don’t care,” Brienne said bluntly. “Sit down.” It was not a request.

Jaime stared at her in horror.

“Brienne, this isn’t a good—”

She ignored Tyrion. “Sit.”

Tywin’s glare was glacial.

“This is the ER. It’s a busy night. The nurses and staff here are treating gunshot victims and people who were in car accidents. Your son has a sprained ankle and a lot of splinters. They don’t care that you are a Lannister. They don’t know what that means. The people who do won’t be in until the morning. Jaime tried using that tactic earlier and it backfired. Now sit down.”

He sat.

Brienne could see Tyrion’s mouth starting to form words. “No,” she told him. “Do not speak.”

Tyrion obeyed.
“You are not a doctor, Ms Tarth. My son’s injuries could—”

“I have first aid certification. I taught physical education. I coached and played soccer. I played lacrosse. I have a black belt in Karate. I fence. I run. He has a sprained ankle.”

Tyrion started to speak.

Brienne held up a hand.

Tyrion shut up.

Jaime’s jaw had dropped. “It’s almost too bad we didn’t tell Cersei what happened. I would like to see what—”

Brienne just looked at him.

Jaime shut up too.

Her phone began to vibrate again. Stannis. She picked it up. “No, you cannot talk to Tyrion. No, I don’t mean may not. He is unable to talk to you right now. Why? Because if he speaks one more word I am going to do something I’ll regret. You can discuss the chair tomorrow.” She powered off the phone.

“I see your colleagues have the same puerile concerns as my worthless son.”

Brienne set down her phone and her water. “Have you ever seen the staff library offices, Mr. Lannister?”

“I have donated millions to the university and to that library, Ms Tarth. Do not try and shame me. Stark’s office may not be grand—”

“I’m not talking about the administrative offices. I’m talking about where we work.”

Tyrion shook his head alarmingly at her.

She had already committed career suicide; she might as well go down in flames. “If you want to be angry that your son got hurt, you can be angry with me. When Jon Arryn died, I swapped out his table for the one I had because I thought it would be nice to have a functioning surface. Asha took the desk. Bronn got to the chair and that’s why Stannis is upset; he had dibs on it, you see. Olenna scavenged the credenza.” She took a breath. “My office is about 55F at any given time. Tyrion’s is infested with mud wasps.”

Tyrion blinked.

“Varys had the exterminator spray but they always come back,” Brienne explained. “Melisandre’s has neon-orange carpeting and leaking ceiling tiles. Olenna’s,” she stopped. “Okay, Olenna has a pretty nice space, but she’s been there since the dawn of time and she is always first on the scene when someone leaves or dies to get the good stuff. The point is I can see why someone would get upset over a mere chair. He should have expressed it at a more appropriate time, but the frustration is understandable.”

“Mud wasps?” Tyrion said weakly.

“I don’t think they sting. If you see one, just tell Varys.”

“Got it.”
Tywin was looking at her.

Brienne wondered if she should just give her resignation tomorrow or wait for the axe. She’d talk with Olenna. There had been a posting for Dorne. She could try applying for it.

“Mud wasps,” Tyrion repeated quietly.

“Myranda has yellow jackets in hers.”

“Who’s Myranda?” Jaime asked baffled. “Was she at this party too?”

“She works over at the medical library.”

“Oh.”

“And it wasn’t a party,” Brienne told him.

Tywin came to a decision. “I think you should go home, Ms Tarth.”

Brienne would have given just about anything in the world at this moment to oblige. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“We took Jaime’s car and my purse is back at the library, which is now closed.”

“You can stay at my place,” Tyrion offered.

Brienne thought she had spent enough time with the Lannisters for a lifetime. A nice park bench sounded like it might be a better option.

Tywin strode out of the waiting room.

“I’m sorry, Brienne. I tried to tell you.” He looked at her. “Shutting up now.”

“I have to say, wench, that was almost worth getting injured for.”

She stretched out her legs and leaned back, closing her eyes. Dorne. She hated spicy food. She tried to remember the position description. Was she qualified?

Tyrion kicked her.

She sat up.

Tywin Lannister was back in the room. “My driver will be here in five minutes to take you back to the library. Campus Security will let you in so you can retrieve your bag and your keys.”

“How did you get Campus Security to agree . . .”

“I called Robert of course.”

“Robert?”

“Robert Baratheon, the university president,” Tyrion explained. “Cersei’s husband.”

Maybe she could go to the Free Cities. There had to be a community college somewhere in Essos that had never heard of the Lannisters. Brienne got up. “Thank you, that’s very kind of you.”
Tywin waved it away. “I am in your debt, Ms Tarth. Besides you made Tyrion stop talking. I didn’t think there was a person in Westeros with that power.”

Chapter End Notes

I wish I could say I was really exaggerating about academic library staff office conditions. Okay the table accident is exaggerated, but every library I’ve ever worked at has had furniture and offices like what Brienne describes here.
Controlled Vocabularies

Chapter Summary

Things go bump in the night at the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library and elsewhere in King's Landing. Meanwhile, Olenna demonstrates just how persuasive she can be; Cersei is finding her hollow life harder to bear; Sansa faces interest in her academic career; and Brienne and Stannis deal with unexpected gifts of office furniture.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Ned arrived at the library just in time to see Brienne being escorted in by Campus Security.

“Hi, Dr. Stark.” Brienne looked absolutely exhausted.

“Call me Ned, please.” No matter how many times he told the junior librarians to call him by his first name, none of them took him up on it. “What in seven hells happened?”

“Did they call you?”

They waited for the officer to unlock the door.

“I just heard about this from Robert.”

“Robert Baratheon?”

Ned smiled. He heard the slight awe in her voice. “Robert and I go back a long way. All he said was that Tyrion’s brother was injured in the library. Can you wait here, please?” Ned asked the officer. “I’ll escort Ms Tarth to her office and then I’ll need you to walk her back to her car. I can lock up.”

The officer nodded.

“This isn’t necessary, Dr. Stark. I can take care of myself.”

Ned was sure she could, but he wanted to see Tyrion’s office. “Tell me what happened. Is Jaime Lannister all right?” They walked back into the staff offices, turning on a few lights as they went. Brienne told him what she and Stannis had done and what she thought was Jaime Lannister’s prognosis was. When she mentioned that Tywin Lannister was at hospital with his sons, Ned closed his eyes briefly.

Brienne got her things and joined him at Tyrion’s door.

Ned was taken aback at the mess. “Go home. Take tomorrow morning off.”

“I have meetings, but thank you. Good night.” She disappeared down the semi-lit corridors into the darkness.
Ned poked at the table and was alarmed to see it collapse into additional bits. He would talk to Varys. He hoped that this sort of hazard was an exception and not something with which has staff was regularly having to contend. Finally he locked Tyrion’s door and started weaving his way out of the warren of the staff offices shutting off the lights as he went.

The library felt very different in the dark. There was a moon and slivers of light shown through the windows at the entrance. He was passing underneath the upper balconies when he heard a sound like a footfall above.

“Brienne? Are you still here?”

No one answered.

Ned caught a glimpse of someone where the moonlight was hitting the top level. He started to move quickly toward the staircase. He had taken two steps as he heard the whoosh of something falling followed by five rapid, loud thuds inches behind him.

Not knowing what had just happened, he retreated into the darkness and fished out his phone. He called Campus Security.

The library was silent now.

The same officer who had let him in came rushing back followed by two patrol cars. Lights were turned on and they swept through the building. Ned took one of them to where he had been standing when the objects had fallen.

“It’s lucky you moved,” the officer commented as Ned turned on the lights for the area under the balcony. He pointed to the red five volume set of the Library of Westerosi Subject Headings, now in its 32nd edition, which conservatively weighed over 50 pounds. “If those had dropped on you, you’d be dead by now.”

* * *

Despite his objections to desk duty, Stannis prepared for this ordeal with his usual thoroughness. He attended every one of the training sessions the reference team had offered. He reread his notes from graduate school.

Asha scoffed at this. “You went to library school over twenty years ago. Things have changed.”

“I’ve also conducted a current review of the literature,” he informed her.

“It’s just the reference desk; it’s not rocket science,” Asha said.

Melisandre agreed. “You are Azor Ahai reborn. This is nothing.” She reached over and stroked his chest.

Asha nipped at his neck. “I don’t know what you’re so nervous about.”

Stannis found it difficult to argue with her when she was naked. “I am not nervous. I am approaching this the way I approach anything. I wish to be prepared. I want to do my utmost.”

“That’s what we love about you, Stannis. The way you do your utmost with us.”

* * *

The cluster of upper level library staff listened to Lieutenant Slynt of Campus Security with marked
incredulity.

“The officers conducted a thorough search of the building, but found no one. They are of the opinion, which I share, that there was no one in the building at the time. You must have imagined the sound you thought you heard,” he said smoothly to Dr. Stark.

“I saw someone up there.” Ned was annoyed it had taken this long for Slynt to report the events of last night.

“Moonlight can play tricks on the eyes,” the man went on.

“What about the books?” Ned asked pointing to the dented stack on the conference room table.

“Students being careless.” Slynt waved away the question. “Someone probably piled them on the railing and forgot about them.”

Stannis snorted.

“No student or professor is likely to have touched any volume of the Library of Westeros Subject Headings let alone the entire set,” Olenna said sharply.

Ned nodded. “And even if they had, how did they fall from the balcony? The railings aren’t large enough to hold them.”

“Have you taken prints?” Varys inquired.

Lt. Slynt practically laughed in his face.


“They are. They’re supposed to be back in the Technical Services area.”

Everyone looked at Stannis.

“My set is missing.”

Slynt suddenly became very interested in Stannis Baratheon and asked if he could speak with him privately.

Stannis shrugged and followed the man out to the empty office they had let Slynt use.

“The man is a fool,” Olenna pronounced once the door was shut.

Ned found himself in agreement with her. Lt. Janos Slynt was pompous, arrogant, and stupid. It was a bad combination in an officer of the law.

“Don’t you find it interesting that the books are housed in Technical Services?” Baelish asked silkily.

“Slynt is the same officer who was lead on the investigations for Chelsted, Rossart, and Arryn,” Varys commented.

No one said anything.

“Stannis has wanted to be library director for a long time,” Baelish continued in a low voice.
Ned watched through the glass wall as a uniformed officer escorted a grim-faced Stannis to the anteroom area.

“He’s never made a secret of it.” Olenna walked around the table to get a better view of the books. “And he would never damage books to remove an obstacle.” She pointed without touching to where the spines had split open.

Petyr smirked. “A directorship is worth a great deal more than a few cataloging volumes.”

“You clearly do not know Stannis Baratheon,” Ned commented. He glanced up and saw Melisandre being escorted into the office with Slynt. She was there a few moments and then was succeeded by Asha.

“It appears that none of us do,” Varys remarked.

* * *

“Come along dear,” Olenna told her.

“It’s very nice of you to offer to take me shopping. I have plans though.”

Olenna looked at the salad on Brienne’s desk. “You can eat that later and I’m sure you can watch men fighting with sticks anytime. Don’t you already own the DVD?”

Brienne sighed. “It’s a good movie,” she protested. She should never have invited Olenna over to her apartment. Her mentor had eyed her multiple versions of *The Lord of the Rings* saga with pity and then again stated the need for Brienne to widen her social circle. Brienne put the lid on her lunch and shut down her browser.

“Yes, Brienne, but the fact is your clothes are terrible.”

“Everyone in our profession dresses so well,” Brienne muttered sarcastically, even as she followed Olenna out to her Mercedes. “Besides I don’t have your money.”

“That’s why we’re going to a sale,” Olenna said brightly. “If you want to rise, you need to dress to the level to which you aspire.”

Brienne prepared to adjust the passenger seat to accommodate her long legs, but was surprised to find it already back as far as it would go. “I didn’t realize making tenure required me dressing better.”

“It doesn’t,” Olenna agreed. “But you did tell me your paper was accepted for the conference and I thought you said you were being inundated with instruction requests.”

“Yes, but—”

“Of course, if you want to wear clothes that cause people to mistake you for an employee of Target —”

“That was just the once,” Brienne objected.

“Or Best Buy—”

Brienne folded her arms across her chest.

“Or perhaps you would like to emulate the style of Lysa Arryn. I’m sure you could find something
at the local thrift store.”

Brienne glared at her. “I have never dressed like Lysa Arryn.”

“All right, perhaps I took the comparison a bit too far.”

“Asha wears the same kind of thing I do and you don’t drag her out shopping.”

“I am not as fond of Asha as I am of you.”

“Oh.”

Olenna expertly guided the car through the streets of King’s Landing until they came to the mall. Brienne stopped protesting. There really wasn’t much point. She would need something in which to present. One outfit, she would let Olenna help her pick out one outfit. That would be her line in the sand.

Two skirts, two pairs of trousers, and four tops later, she realized just how expert Olenna was at getting her own way.

* * *

“Where the hell were you?” Cersei pushed past Jaime into his apartment. “I called and called and you never picked up!”

He held up a bandaged hand and a crutch.

“What happened?” Her anger melted into concern.

“A table attacked me.” He shut the door behind her and hobbled over to an armchair. “It’s a bad sprain and I had thirty-seven splinters picked out of my hand. There was—is—a lot of pain and they gave me a tetanus shot, but the doctor assures me I shall recover.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Jaime waved his hand at her again.

“I would have taken you to the hospital.” It would have been difficult—Robert had been bent at on drinking himself into a drunken stupor after an epic battle about the cost of Joffrey’s upcoming name day party—but she would have done it for Jaime.

“Tyrion was with Brienne and me. And then Father joined us and the fun really started.”

“You called Father and not me?! Who is Brienne?”

Jaime rubbed his eyes. “Brienne works with Tyrion. No, Father called Tyrion about something and Brienne, who didn’t know any better, picked up Tyrion’s phone, and told Father we were at the emergency room.”

Cersei grimaced. Father must have been unbearable. Jaime was his golden boy.

“We didn’t get back here till 3:00 AM and I wasn’t about to call you at that hour.” He leaned forward and pulled an ottoman closer in order to prop his injured leg up. “There are some pills in the bathroom. Could you possibly get them? It’s amazing how much I find I depend on my hand and my foot.”
She grabbed the pill bottle from the bathroom and a glass of water from his kitchen. “What did they give you?”

“Mild painkillers.” He popped two pills and swallowed. “I don’t think I’m going to be, forgive the pun, up for anything today, Cersei.”

“No, of course not. What about ice for your ankle?”

“Twenty minutes on, twenty minutes off.” He pointed to an ice bucket with a package of frozen peas resting inside. “I am in the off portion of my highly advanced therapy.”

She looked around his apartment. It wasn’t terribly large, but she judging by the dishes in his sink, the pieces of clothing draped over the chair and the pillow on the sofa, he was already starting to be overwhelmed. “You’re coming back to the house with me.”

He laughed bitterly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. How can you possibly take care of yourself?”

“Tyrion is coming by twice a day. I already telecommute. I start physical therapy for the ankle in a week. It will be fine.”

“I’d feel better if you came home with me.”

Jaime shook his head. “Father wanted me to stay with him. If I go to your house . . .”

Father would take it as a personal affront, she finished silently.

Jaime set the water glass down. “What’s going on?”

“Just the usual. Forget about it. How did you hurt yourself?”

He looked at his watch. “I cannot go through the story again.”

“Jaime.”

“All right. But only the short version: I was visiting Tyrion at his new job and I leaned on a piece of furniture which collapsed beneath me, rather spectacularly.” He pulled the ottoman closer with his crutch. He leaned forward and tossed some cushions on it. “He seems to like being a librarian.” Jaime carefully elevated his leg. “Can you put that towel on my ankle? Thank you.” He put the package of peas on the towel.

Cersei rolled her eyes. “He enjoyed making fun of me the other day.” She adjusted the towel slightly. “Would it be better directly on the ankle?”

“No, Talisa said it might burn the skin.”

“Talis?”

“The nurse.”

Cersei narrowed her eyes.

“I didn’t want to go back out there with Father,” he explained. “It took all my considerable charm to get her to let me sit in the hallway back in the treatment area for twenty minutes more. We were on a first name basis after my abject begging.”
She laughed in spite of herself. He seemed so forlorn.

“Why was he making fun of you?”

“Joffrey had library fines that they should have waived. I went there to straighten it out.”

“Why couldn’t Joffrey handle it?”

She only did what any mother, any proper mother, would do. Her son was being victimized and she was damned if she would let anyone attack him.

“You’re going to have to let him grow up sometime,” Jaime commented.

Cersei felt her bad mood coming back.

He yawned.

“Am I boring you?”

“It’s the medicine,” he apologized.

Cersei knew she was being irrational, but she wanted to smack him. She came here because she needed him. Every other part of her life was unraveling. It was endless: Robert’s string of undergraduate sluts; chauffeuring her children to sports and dance classes, friends’ homes; deadly dinners and receptions; lunching with backstabbing bitches. She was so tired.

“Tyrion seems happy,” Jaime was saying. “I think it’s a good fit for him. Like he’s finally doing something he was meant to do.”

Why should Tyrion get to be happy when she was so utterly miserable?

* * *

Sansa saw Tip-In approaching the Circulation desk. Now that her hours were different, she was seeing him a lot. He was a regular who usually came in just when she was alone at the desk. At least today he appeared to be merely returning books. She wouldn’t have to face his scary eyes and lie about needing to run them through the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3.

“Hello, Sansa. How are you?”

She smiled automatically. “Hi, Dr. Bolton. I’m fine, thanks.” Sansa took the books from him and scanned them. Ordinarily, returns went on a cart. Tip-In’s returns had their very own section on one of the shelves. After he was gone, the books went first to Shae and then back to Stannis and Asha, who meticulously went through them to see if pages had been removed. She knew Stannis was trying to build a case against him so they could revoke his borrowing privileges.

“I ran into your father the other day. He tells me you’re minoring in history. I’m surprised you didn’t choose to major in it.”

If Sansa could ever get five minutes alone with her father, she was going to have to tell him a thing or two about Roose Bolton. She didn’t think her dad knew what a freak his former colleague was even though he was Library Director. The trick was getting a chance to see him. He was always working on something or dealing with some crisis. It was worse now that she lived away from home. Whenever she went over to the house, Dad was never there. “I’m studying literature,” she told Tip-In.
"Yes, that’s what he said. Would you be able to tell me what else I have checked out?"

"Of course, Dr. Bolton. I’ll need your ID card, please."

He removed it from his wallet and handed it to her. His fingers brushed hers accidentally.

She tried not to shiver at the coldness of his fingers. She hated dealing with him. There was something really off about him. When he was irritated, his eyes were invariably like two pale chips of ice and his pleasant voice became very nasty. But she had a whole list of weird patrons with whom she had to interact regularly, and he was the history department chair so she was always polite and cheerful.

"Ned said you were concentrating on medieval poetry?"

Oh joy, he wanted to chat, she thought with annoyance. "I’ve done a lot of coursework on it. Florian and Jonquil. Some of the Valyrian epic poems, but I’m also interested in the Northern legends from the Age of Heroes."

"Which ones?"

"The ones from the Nightfort like the Rat Cook and the Night’s Queen and the—"

"Ah, the woman ‘with skin as white as the moon and eyes like blue stars’.” There was an intensity in his eyes that was really strange.

"Yes.” Maybe if she was terse he would go away.

"You should have taken my class."

"I tried,” Sansa told him truthfully. Margaery was taking it. She said he had a really sexy voice, but Margaery said those kinds of things about a lot of people. She also said he was a good instructor. Sansa had helped Joffrey through one of Tip-In’s classes a year ago and had heard few of the lectures Joffrey taped. Dr. Bolton did know his stuff and he sounded engaging. Of course, now that she knew he was a weirdo, she wasn’t too upset it hadn’t worked out.

"But?"

Sansa handed him the printout showing him what he still had checked out. “It was full.”

"Next time, come see me. I would be happy to force register you in. I'll be teaching HIS 432 next semester. I think you’d find the historical context quite usefull for analyzing those legends of yours."

"I saw. It didn't fit my schedule," she lied.

"Pity." He collected himself. "Oh, and I believe a book I requested is in.” He handed her a copy of an email notification.

Sansa looked the paper. She went and got the book from the interlibrary loan shelf. She scanned it, dreading the inevitable popup, where she’d have to go through the fiction of the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3. To her surprise, there was no flag.

"Is anything wrong?" It was the smirk that ticked her off. It felt like he thought this was a little game they were playing and he’d figured out a way to do an end run around her. Because she knew he probably wanted her to react, Sansa kept her features pleasantly neutral. “No.” Sansa double
checked. It was now charged out to him. She desensitized the book. “It’s due back on the 25th.”

He gave her a friendly smile and left.

Sansa stared after him for a good three minutes. The new Circ student came up and Sansa made
him take the desk. Tip-In had left the copy of his email with the name of the ILL title, so she took
it with her and she walked back into the staff offices.

Stannis hit the roof.

“I don’t know why the system let me check it out to him without the code.”

Asha picked up her phone. “It’s not your fault, kiddo. The interlibrary loan system is different from
ours. I’ll call over to Jeyne and let her know about him. The good news is if he damages this we
can charge him for fines.”

Sansa nodded. Stannis was still gnashing his teeth so she quickly left. She headed back the other
way and almost walked straight into a huge box. It was blocking the way. Brienne, Varys, and
Tyrion were staring at its contents.

“He sent me a chair?” Brienne said incredulously.

Tyrion seemed as taken aback as she was.

Sansa looked. Inside was a fancy looking black leather computer chair.

“There’s a card,” Tyrion told her helpfully.

Brienne slit it open. “He thanks me for my assistance the other night.”

“You really made an impression on him.” Tyrion seemed shocked.

“These run in the thousands of dragons,” Varys commented thoughtfully. “I’ll have Willem move
it into your office for you. We can give Stannis your old chair. It’s newer than the one Bronn gave
to Tyrion. That should appease Stannis.”

Brienne shook her head. “I have to send it back.”

“Uh, that is probably not a good idea.”

“Tyrion, I can’t possibly accept a gift like this.” Brienne thought for a moment and then seemed to
come to a decision. “I’ll send him a thank-you note.”

Varys and Tyrion looked at her dubiously, but Brienne was adamant. She was about to say more
when they finally saw Sansa.

“I’ll go back the other way,” she offered.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Tyrion moved so Sansa could pass. “Hey, are you all right?”

“Tip-In.” Sansa shrugged.

“Did he do anything?”

Sansa shook her head. “He’s just really weird. I can’t explain it. I know all he does is rip pages out
of the books, but he creeps me out.”
Brienne nodded. “You need to trust your instincts. If alarm bells are going off, there is probably a reason for them.”

* * *

Stannis looked at the chair suspiciously. His attempt to seize what was rightfully his had been forestalled by a series of demands on his time. He had been expecting a pitched battle, and was therefore startled when Tyrion approached him of his own volition toward the end of the week.

“Well, do you want it or not?”

“Why are you ceding this to me, Lannister?”

Tyrion gritted his teeth. “You rung me up in the middle of the night while you knew I was at the hospital with my brother to harangue me about your rights to this chair. Well, here you are. Take it.”

Stannis inspected it from top to bottom. “You have adjusted the height.”

“You may not have noticed, but I’m much shorter than you. I believe you can use that lever there to set it however you want it.”

Perhaps he had been mistaken about the man. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Tyrion turned to leave.

Stannis scowled. “You may have my old one. It will be better than whatever was in your office before.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Thanks.”

Stannis wheeled his old chair over to Tyrion’s office.

“Do you have lunch plans?” Tyrion asked suddenly.

“Why?”

“My brother and I are taking Brienne out to thank her for helping him the other night. We would like to invite you as well.”

Stannis frowned. He didn’t have much use for Robert’s brothers-in-law. “I didn’t do anything remarkable.”

“You helped extricate Jaime from the table. You and Brienne got him to the car.”

“Anyone would have done that.”

“I couldn’t have,” Tyrion pointed out. “And most notably, you persuaded Petyr Baelish to take my shift at the reference desk.”

Stannis grunted. That had been a Herculean effort. He had all but dragged the man physically to the desk.

“Come to lunch, Stannis. We can discuss the evils of comma splices and run-on sentences. You can make fun of Jaime’s grammar.”
“I have plans with Melisandre and Asha.”

Tyrion made a sort of strangled sound. “Sorry,” he said. “Frog in my throat. Bring them along. Our treat.”

Stannis wasn’t used to overtures of friendship. He thought about the invitation for a full minute. “All right, I will have to ask them.”

“Of course, of course. Meet you out front at noon?”

Stannis grunted assent. He was dimly aware he ought to say something else, but he wasn’t sure what would be appropriate. He was not used to winning his arguments.

Chapter End Notes

I have modeled the *Library of Westeros Subject Headings* after these.
Lunch with some of the librarians of the Aegon Targareyn Memorial Library widens Jaime's world view. Sansa tries to teach Petyr Baelish a lesson: a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, especially when it's been bound in oversize format. Olenna learns that it's not always a good thing when your protegee takes your advice.

* * *

Jaime kept his promise to Tyrion and Brienne. It was killing him not to tell Cersei, but the ménage à Stannis remained a tightly kept secret. Now that he had met the two ladies in question, he felt he would have a much easier time keeping his mouth shut. It was not because he didn’t want to say anything; he was dying to. It was just that he knew no one would believe him, especially not Cersei.

Even now, he was hard pressed to believe it. The women in question were as different from each other as night from day. The exotic Melisandre had dyed red hair, but she was quite striking. She wore a filmy red dress and red heels of a type he had once heard Cersei refer to as "fuck me pumps" and she didn’t seem to be wearing anything underneath. She didn’t appeal to Jaime, but he believed she could definitely do a lot better than Stannis.

Asha Greyjoy, while not at all conventionally pretty, had an earthy sexiness to her. She was dressed like a nerdy dockworker. She had on heavy boots, torn jeans, and a tight t-shirt proclaiming “So Say We All” across her chest. He also thought she could do a lot better than Stannis.

Loras Tyrell was not far wrong when he said that Stannis Baratheon had the personality of a lobster. How then had he scored not just one, but two very attractive women?

“Stop staring at my tits,” Asha told Jaime. She wasn’t angry. Her voice was good humored even as she told him what part of his anatomy she would stick her fork into if he didn’t cease and desist.

“I was just wondering—”

“It’s from Battlestar Galactica,” Tyrion said without looking up from his menu.

Jaime frowned. He dimly remembered the show. “Wasn’t that the one with the actor from Bonanza, in it? And the robot dog?”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“He doesn’t like sci-fi,” Tyrion explained apologetically.

Jaime saw everyone around the table look at him with expressions that ranged from pitying to patronizing. He realized with a start that he was the odd one out in this group. Tyrion was totally at home. Jaime was the one who didn’t fit.
He caught the eye of another diner who was observing them with unabashed interest. There was something familiar about the man, but Jaime couldn’t place him.

“They did a reboot of it,” Brienne said. “With Edward James Olmos. It’s nothing like the show you’re thinking of.”

“Of which you are thinking,” Stannis corrected.

Asha looked around for the server. “Whatever.”

Jaime almost spat out his water when he saw that she had placed her right hand on Stannis Baratheon’s upper thigh.

Stannis gave Asha a look, which Jaime interpreted as “not now, we’re in public.”

She shrugged and removed her hand.

“So,” Tyrion began after they had given their orders to the server. “Stannis, are you going to Joffrey’s name day party?”

It was an abrupt change of topic and Jaime wondered why Tyrion had made it.

“Who’s Joffrey?” Brienne and Asha asked simultaneously.

“Little Lord Shithead,” Melisandre commented in an absent manner.

“I knew it!” Tyrion slammed the table in triumph. “I knew he had to have a nickname. What do you call his mother?”

Melisandre shrugged. “‘Bitch’? I don’t think we’ve given her a nickname yet. She only comes in once in a great while.”

Jaime knew he should object. He was about to, but he knew what Joffrey was like. He knew what Cersei could be like.

Tyrion grinned.

The man who sat a few tables away hadn’t stopped staring at them. Again Jaime was struck with the feeling that he knew him from somewhere. He looked to be in his early forties or fifties. His beard was neatly trimmed. He wore a collared shirt and khakis, but he had the air of a man who earned a living with his hands. Where did he know him from?

Their food came and they started to eat.

“Why would Stannis be going to a problem patron’s name day?” Asha wanted to know.

“He is my nephew,” Stannis explained, glaring at Melisandre. “Woman, I know he is not much, but he is my brother’s son. I’ll thank you not to refer to the boy by that name again.”

Tyrion swallowed his smirk. “Are you going?”

“Yes. Robert issued a royal command,” Stannis said with bitterness. He viciously stabbed one of the three lemon wedges in his water with his straw.

“Who are you bringing?”
“Shireen, of course.”

“Shireen is his daughter,” Jaime said to Brienne.

Brienne seemed surprised at his explanation. “Yes, I know. She comes by in the afternoons sometimes during the school year.”

“Oh.” Of course, she knew Shireen. She probably knew Stannis better than Cersei did, perhaps better than Robert did, although clearly not as well as Melisandre and Asha.

“Well will you bring a date or,” Tyrion gestured to Asha and Melisandre, “dates?”

Jaime felt the attention shift to his brother. “Tyrion, what are you doing?” he murmured. Cersei wouldn’t blink an eye at Shireen. She would say unkind things about her out of the girl’s earshot, but she wouldn’t quibble with her presence there. She would barely tolerate Stannis, but she would tolerate him. She would hit the roof if he brought either or both of these particular women. He could only imagine Father’s reaction.

The bearded man got up from the table and walked over to the bar. He glanced at them.

Stannis frowned. “Do you want to go?” He looked at both Melisandre and Asha. “It’s the day after next.”

Seven hells, Jaime thought. He would actually bring the both of them. Jaime saw a series of images fly before his eyes: Robert’s face; Cersei’s face; Father’s face.

“I have services for the Lord of Light,” Melisandre said. “You should be there too.”

“Why would I want to go? Because we’re fuck buddies?”

Brienne blushed to the roots of her hair. Jaime’s jaw dropped. Tyrion smirked. Melisandre looked bored.

Stannis made a face. “You know I do not care for that term.”

“Friends with benefits?” Asha suggested. She shrugged. “I’ve got plans, but thanks.”

“Well, then, Stannis, why don’t you bring Brienne?”

Everyone was perplexed.

“I’ve never even met your nephew,” Brienne informed Tyrion.

“You knew who he was the minute you heard he was called Little Lord Shithead,” Tyrion countered.

Brienne stared at Tyrion and then looked awkwardly at Stannis. “I know who the Troll under the Stairs is too, that doesn’t mean I want to spend my day off hanging out with Walder Frey.”

Jaime was confused at the mention of Aunt Genna’s father-in-law. But there was a more immediate concern here. What the hell was Tyrion doing?

“You wouldn’t be hanging out with Little Lord Shit—with Joffrey. You would be hanging out with us, or if we got boring, you would be hanging out with Father.”

Now Jaime understood. For whatever reason, their father liked Brienne. It baffled both Tyrion and
him. Father didn’t like many people. Until the incident at the emergency room, neither of them could ever have imagined anyone telling Tywin Lannister to sit down and shut up and living to tell the tale. Father had not only complied, he had sent Brienne an expensive desk chair to thank her for helping his son. When Brienne dared to return it with a graciously worded note, he had simply nodded with approval. Jaime had been at the office at the time or he would never have believed it. If Brienne came, they might get through the afternoon without wanting to stick toothpicks in their eyelids for an excuse to escape.

“I would have thought Tywin Lannister,” Stannis said with derision, “would have the courage to make his own dates.”

Brienne started to choke.

“No, no, no,” Tyrion interjected. “She’d be there as, well, as a shield.”

Brienne made a face.

Stannis thought about it. “Why don’t you bring her yourself?”

“I thought about that,” Tyrion commented. “But if I bring her or if Jaime brings her it adds another layer that might . . . complicate things.”

“How?” Stannis wanted to know.

Tyrion made his case. He liked Brienne, but he didn’t like Brienne. If he brought her, they ran the risk of their father actually becoming actively engaged in promoting a relationship that neither Tyrion nor Brienne wanted. If Jaime brought her, Cersei would have a fit and their father would not think she was good enough for his favorite son. Tyrion didn’t want Brienne to suffer any ill consequences.

Tyrion spoke eloquently and Jaime understood every word, but he noticed Melisandre and Asha exchanging looks. Brienne sat there silently taking it all in, her face turning a dull red.

“Oh.” Stannis came to a decision. “All right then. Shall I pick you up at 12:00?”

“No.” Brienne rose. “Excuse me.”

Melisandre and Asha got up and followed Brienne to the ladies’ room.

“I have to pick up Shireen too,” Stannis complained. “It will take at least an hour to get out to their house. If we leave much later . . .”

Jaime tuned out their chatter. A few minutes later, Melisandre and Asha made their way back to the table. They were decidedly chillier to Stannis than they had been earlier and they were positively arctic to Tyrion. Both men seemed oblivious to the change in their manner. The bearded man had stopped Brienne and was chatting with her. She said something to him. The man was taken aback but then smiled. He knew he knew that man. Where did he know him from? They pulled out phones and appeared to be taking each other’s details. Finally Brienne rejoined them.

“12:15 is the latest I can pick you up. Otherwise we will be late. I do not like to be late.”

“I have other plans,” Brienne said bluntly.

“Doing what, wench?” Jaime wanted to know. “Scrubbing your bathroom grout? Come on, be a sport.”
Brienne drew herself up. “As much as I would like to go to your sister’s to be insulted, hang out with your book-vandalizing nephew, and make small talk with the father you’re both terrified of, I have a date.”

Jaime scoffed. “With who?”

“With whom,” Stannis corrected.

“With that gentleman at the bar,” Brienne said, nodding her head toward the man with the beard. She tore into her chicken with her knife.

It suddenly clicked for Jaime. The man with the beard was the man with the bloodied hand, the one had been in the Emergency Room the other night.

* * *

Sansa pushed the book cart down the aisle. She didn’t care for the basement; none of the Circulation students did. It had always been weird down there, but it had gotten a lot weirder since poor Uncle Jon had been crushed to death between the shelves.

She pressed the buttons and waited for the shelves to part. She grabbed a handful of books and began putting them back in their proper places. She made her way back to the aisle and checked the next couple of books. They weren’t in the right order so she rearranged them. It would save time.

“Dusty work, isn’t it?”

Sansa jumped. Petyr Baelish stepped out of the darkness. “Oh my gods, you scared me.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Sansa smiled weakly. He was a family friend, but he did have a way of appearing out of nowhere that was really unsettling and she found his intensity around her unnerving. But whenever she mentioned it at home, her mother brushed it off. “Why aren’t the lights on back there?”

He glanced back to where he’d come from. “Something must be wrong with the motion sensors.”

Sansa swallowed. She had at least half a cart to shelve in that part of the basement. She thought about what had happened to her father.

“Why don’t I help you get these put away?”

She accepted his help. She didn’t really like him, but she didn’t like the idea of being in the dark basement by herself either.

“I missed you at dinner the other night.”

Sansa pushed the cart to the next range and pressed the sensors. “Huh?”

“You mother was kind enough to invite me over for supper. You weren’t there.”

Sansa gave him a handful of books and took some herself. “I’m sharing an apartment in the city with a friend.”

“Oh?”

She thought he put a weird emphasis on the word. It sounded almost speculative. “Yeah, I thought
it was time I moved out. I mean, I love my family, but I wanted my own space.”

“That’s only natural; you’re all grown up now.”

Sansa quickly shelved the books and went back down to the aisle.

The next section would have them shelving in the darkness. “This isn’t going to work.”

He held up his phone. “I have a flashlight app.” He seemed inordinately pleased with himself.

“Oh.” Sansa arranged the books into call number order.

“Where is your apartment?”

“In the city,” Sansa said. She had said that already. Why should it matter to him where she was living? “I wish he wouldn’t do this.”

Petyr came up behind her. “Do what?”

“The new Circ student just shoves the books on the carts any which way. Then I have to reorganize them all.”

“I’d be happy to speak to him for you.”

Sansa made a face. He was always offering to do stuff like that for her. It didn’t make any sense. He wasn’t involved with the Circulation department. “Shae knows. She’ll handle it.”

“I hope you know that you can always come to me if you need help, Sansa, sweetling.” He patted her hand.

Every hair on the back of her neck stood up. She realized he was standing inches away from her. “That’s nice of you,” she said very neutrally. “Fortunately, I have a really great supervisor.” Sansa felt him moving still closer to her and again she felt unease wash over her. What Brienne told her about trusting her instincts came back to her.

Sansa accidentally on purpose dropped a circulating copy of the unabridged *Lineages and Histories of the Greater and Lesser Houses of the Seven Kingdoms* on Petyr Baelish’s foot.

* * *

Olenna looked up at Brienne. It was almost always necessary to look up; Brienne was that tall. “Let me get this straight. You want me to help you buy some clothes?”

“Yes.”

Olenna didn’t ask again. She had been trying to get Brienne out of her golf shirts and khakis into something approaching appropriate work wear for ages. Every few weeks she managed to persuade the young woman to purchase something, but it was a long and arduous process. If Brienne voluntarily wanted to go shopping, they would go shopping.

They were walking from the parking lot toward the store when Brienne dropped her first bomb. “It’s for a date.”

Olenna stopped for the briefest of seconds. She regained her composure and resumed walking. “Anyone I know?”
Brienne stood still and looked at Olenna with wild eyes.

“Brienne?”

The story came tumbling out. It was a confusing narrative. There was something about a lunch and then being asked to be Stannis’ escort to Joffrey’s name day party. “Stannis has a reputation as a good man,” Olenna said carefully. “I am not sure, however, that the two of you are suited. Besides as . . . liberal as Melisandre is—”

Brienne corrected her almost immediately. She wasn’t into threesomes or quadrangles and here Olenna’s artfully plucked eyebrows shot to the top of her face. This explained the nature of the alibi Stannis had provided to Campus Security. It did not explain what possessed Melisandre and Asha to take up with Stannis Baratheon. Then Brienne began detailing her adventures with the Lannister brothers at the Emergency Room.

Cars swerved around them, but Olenna knew if she tried to move Brienne back into the Mercedes or to the safety of the store, the girl would shut down. When Brienne got to the part about Tywin, Olenna’s look of concern became fixed as if she’d been turned to stone. She didn’t dare move a muscle for fear of breaking into paroxysms of laughter.

Her carefully concealed amusement died as Brienne detailed her humiliation at lunch.

“Men,” Olenna pronounced, “can be utter jackasses.”

“I know I’m not pretty, but the way they were going on. . . “

Olenna patted Brienne’s arm. “You are perfectly attractive. You just don’t know how to present yourself. Don’t worry. We’ll find you something that will knock Jaime and Tyrion Lannister from off their high horses.”

“I am not going to their stupid party,” Brienne said. “I am going out to dinner with the man from the Emergency Room.”

“The one who was carrying his severed fingers in a Ziploc bag?” Olenna asked in horror.

Brienne was defiant. “You’re always telling me I need a social life.”

“I didn’t mean that you should accept the invitations of total strangers, let alone strangers you encountered at the trauma ward of the hospital in the dead of night!”

“I asked him out.”

“You don’t even know his name.”

“I saw him at the restaurant the day we went to lunch. He has a nice face,” Brienne countered. “Besides I do know his name.” She pulled out her phone and pulled up a message. “It’s Davos Seaworth,” she read it as if she were seeing it for the first time.

“Were they able to reattach his fingers?” Olenna asked faintly.

Brienne thought. “I didn’t think to look.”

Chapter End Notes
The robot dog Jaime remembers from the original *Battlestar Galactica* and refers to is "Muffit." See [this link](#) for a picture. The article is somewhat spoilery for the original *Battlestar Galactica* which if you haven't seen is gloriously cheesy.
Chapter Summary

Stannis, Tyrion, and Jaime find a way to get through the unpleasantness that is Joffrey's name day party. Arya and Margaery teach Sansa the value of seizing opportunities as they happen. Tywin learns a little something about pop culture and Olenna. Brienne goes on a date with Davos.

Chapter Notes

Tiny, tiny, little spoiler for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Stannis was making painfully labored conversation with Dorna Lannister, when he saw Tyrion raise a glass to him and tilt his head toward the family room. He did it long enough for Stannis to realize it was a signal.

Shireen was clustered with Myrcella, Tommen, and two of Kevan’s sons. He thought she would be fine by herself for a bit so he detached himself politely from Dorna, and followed Tyrion into the family room. It was slightly less formal than the rest of the house, which was to say not much.

“We have wine,” Jaime announced, holding up two bottles. “Tyrion said you prefer whiskey, but Father was standing in front of the hard liquor.”

Stannis glanced back at the door Tyrion was shutting.

“Unless you want to endure any more of that?” Tyrion asked.

Stannis sat down on the sectional and took the glass Jaime handed him. He didn’t care much for wine.

“I’m having a hard time imagining you as a science-fiction fan, Stannis.”

“That’s what you’re having a hard time imagining?” Tyrion said in an aside.

“I mean, *Battlestar Galactica*, really?”

Stannis wasn’t sure why Jaime Lannister was so interested in the television shows he watched or why he thought it was relevant right here and now. He assumed it was a joke of some sort.

Tyrion seemed to take it personally. “It’s a very good program. You shouldn’t judge.”

“Spaceships and funny helmets and robotic dogs.” Jaime rolled his eyes.
Stannis furrowed his brow. It was strange that Tywin Lannister should have sired two sons who found the oddest things so humorous.

“He’s thinking of the first show still.” Tyrion poured himself some more wine. “From when we were children.”

“Oh. I never saw it.” He hadn’t watched much television as a boy. The reception at Storm’s End was poor. The programming they could get was limited and even as a child, he preferred non-fiction. “I only watched the first few episodes of the remake. I wouldn’t have bothered, if it hadn’t been for Shireen begging me to allow her to watch it.” He took one small swallow and set his glass down. It was 3:00. Judging by the way these agonizing family parties at Robert’s had gone in the past, they could leave at 4:30 without Cersei taking umbrage. He had already had a whiskey and soda. He would need a full hour to get the alcohol out of his system before he could drive legally. Jaime and Tyrion were looking at him with puzzled expressions. “She wanted to see it so I had to screen it first.”

Jaime was taken aback. “Why? Even Father couldn’t object to a robotic dog. All right, he spoke acidly about the drivel on television, but he didn’t care, and we were much younger than Shireen is now.”

“What robotic dog?”

“Jaime, for the last time, there is no robotic dog in the reboot. It was a total reimagining of the show you’re thinking of. It is a show for adults.”

“Of which you are thinking,” Stannis corrected. “It wasn’t bad,” he admitted. “But she was too young for it. I could tell after the first episode.”

Tyrion considered. “I never really thought about that aspect.”

“Neither of you have children,” Stannis pointed out. Selyse was not a very hands-on mother. If it had been left to her, Shireen would watch anything and everything all day long.

“She must have been very disappointed,” Tyrion commented.

Stannis thought back. “She was at first. The others at work made some suggestions and I found some options Shireen liked.”

Tyrion opened his mouth and shut it. “I cannot begin to guess what programs Asha or Melisandre could suggest that Shireen would willingly watch.”

“I brought it up at the staff meeting. We were waiting for Rossart; the man was always late.” Say what you would about Stark, he started meetings promptly. “Brienne and Olenna thought Buffy the Vampire Slayer might be suitable. Melisandre doesn’t watch television. Asha voted for Star Trek, of course.”

“‘Beam me up, Scotty.’”

“Jaime, have you even turned on a television in the past twenty-five years?” Tyrion rolled his eyes. “Wait.”

Stannis waited.

“Olenna Tyrell has seen Buffy?”
Stannis thought back. “She said she’d watched it and she approved of its positive portrayal of young women. She also said her granddaughter liked the program. Varys thought it was very clever. I had my doubts, but I screened it. I’ve only let Shireen watch the first three seasons, of course.”

Tyrion blinked. “You watched all seven seasons before you let your daughter watch the first three?”

He thought it a ridiculous question. “How else would I know if it was appropriate for her?” They didn’t have children, he reminded himself. “She likes it quite a bit. We’re watching it for the third time. I may let her see the fourth season this year.”

“You watch TV with her?” Jaime asked in a slightly shocked voice.

“She spends half the week with Selyse. I don’t get to see her very often. When I do have her, I want to spend as much time as possible with my daughter.”

Jaime and Tyrion openly gaped at him.

Sansa held up a blue skirt against Arya. When Arya approached her for help buying work clothes, she was flattered. And then Margaery offered her assistance too, and it suddenly became a lot of fun. Everything was always more fun with Margaery.

“I like the red one better,” Margaery said.

“Don’t I get an opinion?” Arya demanded.

“No,” they answered in unison.

Sansa was happier than she’d been in ages. The apartment was great. Margaery was a fantastic roommate and they were even closer friends than they had been before moving in together. Sansa assumed Margaery would start dating again now that Joffrey was out of the picture, but to her surprise, her friend remained single. Boys clustered around Margaery like bees trying to pollinate a rose, but the rose wasn’t interested.

Arya frowned. “I could just keep wearing all black. I don’t have to worry about it matching.”

They pushed her into the dressing room with armfuls of clothes to try on.

“I thought you said your boss told you that you looked like you were a secretary for the Night’s Watch,” Sansa called out.

Arya’s voice floated over the dressing room cubicle door. “He didn’t say I had to wear other colors. He was just being funny. I think. It’s hard to tell sometimes.” She came out in the red-and-cream patterned skirt with a cream top.

“Oh, that’s darling,” Margaery said.

“I don’t want to look darling,” Arya retorted. “It’s not that kind of place. The women there mostly wear dark clothes, just not all black.”

Sansa thought a bit. “Try the blue one, but keep that top.”

Arya made a face but complied.
They made Arya try on dozens of things before settling on four outfits. Sansa added the prices on the calculator in her phone. She had a 20% off coupon they could use. “How much did Mum give you?”

“She didn’t give me any money. I’m paying for these myself.”

Sansa sighed and showed Arya the figure at which she had arrived.

“That’s fine,” Arya said.

“You have that much cash?” Sansa was shocked. “How did you save so much?”

“I told you. They’re paying me now.”

Sansa was about to ask more questions when a woman came up to them.

“Excuse me, but I wanted to tell you how much I love your purse. Where did you get it?”

Sansa looked down. “Oh, thank you. I made it myself. It’s actually a knitting bag.”

The woman’s face lit up. “Really? I knit too.”

They started to chat animatedly. Sansa set her bag down and showed her the interior. She was rewarded by further compliments. Sansa noticed Margaery glancing at her watch. Arya was staring at the woman with concentration.

“I wish I knew how to sew,” the lady told Sansa. “I would make that in a heartbeat.”

“Do you have more of that fabric?” Arya asked. “Enough to make another one?”

Sansa nodded puzzled.

“Arya could sell you one,” Arya volunteered.

“Arya!”

“Oh, I would love to buy one.” The woman scrambled around in her purse for a business card. “How much?”

“Arya, please stop. Look, it’s nice of you to offer, but you don’t have to—”

“She could make you one for . . . $75.”

Margaery stopped fidgeting.

Sansa felt her face flush. “Arya!”

The woman nodded. “Would you be able to put in a pocket for my cell phone? Like this?” She opened up her own bag to demonstrate what she wanted. “And maybe something for a pen?”

“Absolutely” Margaery confirmed before Sansa could say anything. She took out a pen and a small Moleskin notebook from her purse and started taking down the requests. “Of course, for those customizations, it would cost a little more. Shall we say $100?”

By the time Margaery and Arya were finished, they had a $50 cash deposit, the woman’s contact information, and had determined a date by which the bag would be ready.
They didn’t speak about it till they were back in the car.

“What were you thinking?” Sansa demanded. “It only cost me $25 to make it. You shouldn’t have charged so much.”

“Now you’ll have some spending money too. She liked your bag,” Arya said simply. “She was all dressed up. I figured she could afford it.”

“She can,” Margaery concurred as she rounded the corner. “Did you see that diamond on her finger?”

“But it isn’t worth $100!” Sansa felt her sister poking her on the back. She turned around.

“You didn’t factor your time into the cost, I bet. That’s worth something too. Also, we need a profit margin.”

“Profit margin?”

“So we can all get paid,” Arya said simply.

Sansa looked at Margaery. She was idling at a stoplight, but there was a little smile on her lips. “We?” Sansa managed. “I’m the one who paid for the fabric. I’m the one who will be sewing this—for a total stranger.”

“For a customer,” Arya corrected. “You get the most, but Margaery and I did the negotiating so we should get some too.”

“We should have charged her $150,” Margaery said thoughtfully.

“Next time.”

Sansa objected. “We can hardly walk around department store dressing rooms waiting for people to admire my knitting bag.” She saw Margaery glance back at Arya. She looked back to see Arya nodding.

“No,” Arya agreed. “But we can sell them online.”

* * *

Tywin stood on the edges of the room holding a plate with an untouched piece of cake. The party guests were beginning to show signs of weariness. Cersei seemed intent on stretching out the ordeal as long as possible. Dorna had twice made noises about wishing to leave only to be forestalled by Cersei.

He overheard Kevan promising his wife, “Twenty more minutes and then we can go.”

Tywin would have thought Joffrey was too old for this sort of party, although given the way he was behaving during the gift giving, perhaps not. Janei was not yet ten and even she had seemed nonplussed at how her cousin behaved at receiving presents he didn’t like. Tywin blamed Robert and to a large extent Cersei. She thought the sun rose and set with the boy and was far too lax with him.

Joffrey ripped open the paper on another gift. “Who is this from?”

Cersei read from the card. “Uncle Tyrion.”
Joffrey tossed the present aside. Something inside shattered.

Tywin waited for the inevitable sarcastic remark and then realized his son wasn’t even in the room. He looked around. Jaime wasn’t there either. He frowned.

The gift giving continued. He was thanked appropriately for the expensive watch he gave Joffrey. The boy wanted a car, but given what had happened to the last two, Tywin was not about to reward him with a third.

Myrcella weaved unobtrusively over to the buffet table and lifted an entire platter of canapés. He thought at first she had been told to serve them, but she instead made a beeline for the family room. With her spare hand, she nonchalantly picked up a bowl filled with snacks meant for the younger children. She handed her haul to Tommen who took everything very carefully and vanished into the family room.

He saw Robert talking at Renly Baratheon. He was growing louder and more red-faced.

Cersei was pressing Joffrey to proffer thanks to Genna, which he did with a bad grace. He was going to have to take the boy in hand. It was a prospect which gave him no joy. There was something quite thick about Joffrey.

Myrcella reappeared and was now surreptitiously taking a plate of cheese straws. He tried to catch Cersei’s eye but she was busy trying to keep Joffrey from insulting Kevan and Dorna.

Tywin moved toward the family room. The door was open slightly and he was able to hear quite well. Tywin leaned in. His sons, Tommen, Stannis, and Shireen were raptly watching something on the television.

“This is very clichéd,” Jaime complained. “Innocent young girl in her private school uniform gets attacked by a vampire.”

Shireen and Tyrion shushed him.

“I mean, I hate to sound like Father, but this is what you waste your time on?” Jaime sat up suddenly. “Wait! She’s the vampire?”

“Told you,” Tyrion commented in a smug voice.

“Be quiet, Lannister.”

“Why is he giving her that book?”

“They’ll explain it. That’s Giles,” Shireen told him. “He’s a librarian like Daddy.”

“I am a cataloger. He is a school media library specialist,” Stannis corrected her. “He is a terrible librarian.”

Now it was Jaime who shushed them.

“Why do you say that?” Tyrion wanted to know.

Stannis snorted. “He spends school funds on occult books. He doesn’t encourage use of the library. I don’t know what the SLMS were like in your program, but in my day, they were not the stellar lights of library school. He—”

“—is speaking and I can’t hear what he’s saying.” Jaime hit rewind on the remote.
“Melisandre is already over budget on monographs about R'hllor and we’re not even halfway through the fiscal year.”

Stannis frowned. “That’s different. Crownlands has a strong religious studies program.”

“You don’t suppose Melisandre is secretly training a teenage girl to slay grumpkins and snarks?”

“Will you both shut up?” Jaime growled.

Tywin observed his granddaughter collecting several sodas and a plate of cookies. She was so intent on her foraging that she walked straight past him into the family room without noticing him. She came back out and headed for the kitchen. He followed her only to find her removing bottles from the wine cooler. “I trust those aren’t for you.”

She looked up startled. “They’re for Uncle Tyrion and Uncle Jaime.”

“Your uncles are more than capable of getting their own refreshment.”

“I don’t mind doing it. They said if they tried, they’d get noticed.”

“I think if your Mother sees you carrying a bottle of wine, you’ll find that you capture her attention even more quickly than your uncles would.”

Myrcella smiled at him shyly. “She wouldn’t stop you, though. You could come and join us, Grandfather. It would be fun.”

He was about to say something disparaging, when she tilted her head up at him. Joanna used to look at him like that when she was young.

“Please?”

Of his three grandchildren, she was the closest to being what he felt a Lannister should be. He finally nodded.

“Uncle Jaime said red, but not the plonk that Mother was serving. Which of these do you think would be okay?”

He selected a cabernet and a wineglass. Assured by Myrcella that they already had a corkscrew, he followed her into the family room. No one else seemed to realize he was even there.

“Brienne liking this, I understand. But I still cannot believe that Olenna has any familiarity with Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” Tyrion commented.

Tywin sharply turned his attention to the program they were watching.

Stannis snorted. “The actors playing Buffy and Giles were on the cover of Westerosi Libraries. We were all aware of the program, but I never saw it until they suggested it for Shireen.”

“But to actually watch it. It would be like Father revealing he has a secret passion for soap operas.”

“Olenna liked him.”

“Liked who?” Tyrion wanted to know. “Angel or Spike? Not Xander, I hope?”

Stannis pointed to the image of the man in the horn rimmed glasses. “Giles. I remember her saying he was very attractive and that it was a pity the men in our profession didn’t look like that. Ashara
—she did interlibrary loan for us for years—she was infatuated with him too. Olenna was worse. They got Ashara a life-size poster of Giles when she left to take the directorship in Pentos. You should have heard them go on about him as ‘Ripper.’”

Tywin looked dismissively at the man on the screen.

“Is that another program?” Jaime asked.

“No, that’s what Giles turns into sometimes to do the things Buffy can’t do,” Tommen explained.

“No,” Shireen corrected. “It’s who he was when he was young. He’s very sexy then.”

Stannis was instantly appalled. “Shireen!”

“I’m almost sixteen, Daddy.” To Myrcella, she commented “I like Spike better, though.”

“Could you all shut up now? I’d like to watch this,” Jaime complained in irritation.

“Spike is very cute,” Myrcella said settling in next to her grandfather. “But I like Angel. This is fun even if it is an old TV show.”

“Myrcella, sweetling, can we watch the program now?” Jaime said though gritted teeth.

She didn’t pay any attention. “Do you want some of the canapés, Grandfather? They’re very good.”

Jaime and Tyrion nearly spit out their drinks. They turned and saw him.

Tywin didn’t exactly smile although he was somewhat amused.

“How long have you been here?”

He poured himself some wine. “Long enough to reassure you that I do not have a secret passion for soap operas.”

* * *

Olenna had made Brienne promise by the old gods and the new that she would meet her date in a public place and that she would drive herself there. It wasn’t difficult to make her those assurances. These were precautions Brienne would have taken anyhow.

The anger and embarrassment that had fueled her asking out Davos Seaworth had long since died and now all she was left with were nerves.

She looked at her phone for the twelfth time. His name was Davos Seaworth, she repeated to herself. She got out of her car, squared her shoulders, and marched to the restaurant like she was going off to battle. Brienne read his name on her phone yet again.

Davos was sitting at the bar when she walked in. He rose to greet her. “You look beautiful,” he told her.

“Thank you.” Brienne didn’t feel beautiful. This outfit at least was more comfortable than some of the other clothes Olenna typically made her buy. The skirt was okay, she supposed. The blouse was draped in a way to suggest that she had more up top. It at least meant she didn’t need to wear the gods-awful bra she had worn for the party.
“Is this all right?” He asked. “I wasn’t sure how you felt about seafood.”

“I don’t really care what I eat,” Brienne told him with a tight smile. Then she saw his face. That had been the wrong thing to say, she realized. “It seems like a very nice place.”

They were seated and gave the waiter their drink orders.

“Oh, they couldn’t put the fingers back on.”

Davos looked down at his hand. “No, well, these things happen.”

_These things happen?_ she thought incredulously. This was going to be worse than Olenna’s party. “I don’t do this a lot,” she confessed.

“Eat seafood? We can go somewhere else if you like.”

“No, date.”

Davos laughed. “When it comes to that, neither do I. I’m sadly out of practice. You probably have more recent experience than I do.”

“I doubt it,” she said smiling in spite of herself.

“Damn. I was hoping you’d be able to talk me through this. Well, there’s nothing for it. We’ll just have to figure it out as we go.”

Chapter End Notes

Stannis knocks SLMS (school library media specialists or school librarians). This is not my personal opinion. It was a common prejudice in library school and I’m afraid academic librarians are sometimes a little snooty. I do kind of agree with his assessment of Giles as a librarian in BTVS though.

Sarah Michelle Gellar and Anthony Stewart Head did indeed appear on the cover of _American Libraries_. 
The upper management of the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library investigate the mystery of the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3. Sansa takes a stand for fiber artists everywhere, while Cersei discovers Jaime has taken up a new pastime. Arya and Margaery’s entrepreneurial ideas take root.

“The ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3 does not exist,” Varys repeated.

“I need to be informed when I am speaking with the faculty,” Petyr Baelish practically hissed. “Now I’ve got Karstark, Tarly, and Hightower on my back about unnecessary expenditures.”

Ned rubbed his eyes. “Varys just said there’s so no such thing as the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3, Petyr.” He had never been a drinking man, but he was beginning to feel that if he stayed in this job much longer, he ran the risk of becoming a career alcoholic.

“Roose Bolton insists that’s the name of the machine!”

“I have spoken with our vendor personally. Illyrio Mopatis assures me they not only have no equipment called the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3, but also that there is no ScanQuest PageCounterPro 1 or 2. Since there is only one company called ScanQuest, one is inclined to believe him. I handle our purchases. We have bought no equipment save the shredder I told you about. I have spoken with Bronn and with the University IT department. No one knows anything about it.”

Olenna intervened. “Petyr, Roose Bolton would hardly be the first person to get the name of something wrong. Patrons do it all the time. You would know this if you would actually work the shifts you’re assigned instead of fobbing them off on other people.”

Ned saw Baelish’s temples pulsing. He had no idea what was wrong with the man or why this should upset him so much. “Look, I will speak with Roose personally. There is no need for you take any more flak for this.”

“Perhaps this is a silly question,” Olenna spoke. “But why would we even need a machine that counts pages . . .” her voice trailed off.

Varys and she exchanged glances. “Tip-In,” they pronounced at the same time.

“Ros, dear, would you ask Stannis or Asha to join us? Either one of them will do.”

Ned saw enlightenment dawning on Baelish’s face. “What am I missing?”

When Asha came in a few minutes later, he got his explanation. He was first horrified to learn about Roose Bolton’s predilection for vandalizing books, and then amused at the ingenuity of his Technical Services department’s solution. “All right, thank you, Asha.” He waited for her to leave.
Olenna’s lips twitched and Varys was having a hard time keeping a straight face as well.

“This isn’t funny. Do you have any idea how long and hard I have worked to get—” he stopped short.

“Oh, do go on, Petyr,” Varys purred.

Ned thought this was getting out of hand. “What exactly have you told Roose?”

Baelish’s face was sour. “That we were looking into the matter.”

“Let Varys take over,” Olenna suggested. “He can speak with the faculty members who have complained.”

“I am the bibliographer for history and psychology,” Baelish protested.

“And Varys is responsible for purchasing equipment,” Ned countered. “He can smooth things over.” Ned thought he was taking this way too personally. “All right, I think that concludes our business here.” He stood up.

Petyr Baelish grabbed his note pad and his files and strode out of the room angrily.

“It’s not like him to be quite so obvious,” Olenna commented.

Varys didn’t bother to conceal his amusement. “Done in by Asha Greyjoy and the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3. Would that it were all that it took every time.”

* * *

“Where do I park?” Margaery asked Arya.

Sansa scarcely heard Arya’s voice. She had no idea why they were doing this, but Margaery and Arya were utterly determined. Through the car window, she read the sign on the office building. “Arya, this is Casterly Rock Enterprises.”

“Yeah.”

“You work for the Lannisters?”

Margaery reached over and patted Sansa’s hand. “It will be fine.” She drove into a spot in the largely empty lot.

“The Lannisters hate me,” Sansa wailed. “Look, I’ll just wait in the car.”

Arya poked her so that Sansa turned around. “They don’t hate you. Besides you have to come. You’re the talent.”

“I dated Joffrey,” Sansa hissed.

“So did I,” Margaery pointed out. “This is business.”

“Mr. Lannister won’t care,” Arya promised. “He knows you’re coming. I already asked permission.”

Sansa made no move to unbuckle her seatbelt. “I’m not coming. This is stupid. Why do you even need to do this? It’s just for a class project.”
They didn’t pay any attention to her. Margaery leaned over and pressed the release button for her seat belt. Arya got out, opened the door on Sansa’s side, and literally pulled her out of the car.

“We’ll drag you there if we have to.” Arya had a very firm set to her jaw.

Sansa knew that her sister was perfectly capable of carrying out the threat. She made an exaggerated sigh and followed them to the building.

The interior of the building was very modern. There was a lot of steel, glass, and polished wood. There was also a security guard at the front desk.

“Hey, Sandor.” Arya casually walked over to him. “This is my sister, Sansa and her friend, Margaery.” She signed a ledger.

Sandor grunted.

He had scars down the side of this face, Sansa realized. He looked like he could crush the three of them with one hand. She gave him an uncertain smile.

He didn’t smile back. “Are they on the list?”

“I think so. Kevan said he’d take care of it.”

Sandor consulted a piece of paper and then went to the phone. “It’s okay,” Sansa told him. “We’ll wait in the car.”

He ignored her. Apparently this was “Pay No Attention to Sansa Day” and no one had told her. “He’s not picking up. I’m not supposed to let visitors in if they’re not on the list.”

“Maybe he’s with Mr. Lannister,” Arya suggested.

Sandor shrugged and went back to the phone.

He spoke a few words to someone, presumably to Mr. Lannister, whoever that was, and waved them in.

Sansa looked back. He gave her a hesitant half smile.

Once they were in the elevator, Arya pressed the button for the top floor.

“That’s where the chief executives are,” Margaery said suddenly, “Isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Margaery’s smile grew forced. “Arya, who are we meeting?”

“I told you. We’re seeing my boss, Mr. Lannister. Kevan is coming too.”

That was the man whose wife Arya had called about, Sansa remembered, the one whose wife knit. He had wanted gift ideas for her.

“Yes, but which Mr. Lannister? It’s a big family.”

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad. Kevan had sounded nice on the phone. They would help Arya with her project and then she and Margaery would take her out for pizza like they planned. Then she and Margaery would go back to the apartment and hang out.
Arya fussed with the folders she was carrying. The elevator doors opened.

“Which Mr. Lannister?” Margaery persisted.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting nervous too.” Arya made a right and took them down to the end of the hall. “It’s just Tywin Lannister.”

Tywin Lannister, head of the Lannister family, CEO of Casterly Rock Enterprises, one of the most powerful men in the country, and grandfather to her shit ex-boyfriend.

* * *

Cersei climbed out of the bed. As much as she would have liked to stay, she had a list of things she needed to accomplish this afternoon.

“Stay,” Jaime pleaded.

“I can’t. I have to pick up Tommen from soccer and then Robert and I have a function.”

He made a half-hearted protest.

Cersei disappeared into the bathroom ran the shower. She heard the sounds of the television. He had been watching it when she arrived too. Poor thing, his ankle was still bothering him. She would be glad when it was healed and the pain didn’t distract him so much.

When she stepped out of the bathroom, he had propped himself up against the headboard. So immersed in the story was he, that he was startled when she threw the wet towel at him. “Whatever are you watching?”

“Battlestar Galactica.”

“You’re joking.”

He paused it. “When do I see you again?”

Cersei took the remote out of his hand and turned the TV off. “I thought you hated science fiction.”

“I thought I did too, but one of Tyrion’s friends recommended this and it’s quite good, even without the robotic dog.”

She made a face. Jaime had always been far too close to Tyrion.

“You didn’t answer me.” Jaime pulled her back onto the bed. “When?”

“I have a luncheon tomorrow and shopping. Perhaps the day after that.” She twisted out of his embrace. Why did he have to look at her like that? She would give anything to stay with him all the time, but she had her own life to lead, even if it was an empty one.

As she closed the door behind her, she heard the sounds of the television once again.

* * *

They weren’t off to a promising start. Beautiful, confident Margaery, who did exactly as she pleased and who never allowed anyone or anything to stand in her way, turned mute in the presence of Tywin Lannister. Kevan Lannister had a kind face and an encouraging smile. Tywin, or as Arya called him “Mr. Lannister,” did not. He shook her hand and greeted her civilly enough, but
there was nothing warm about him. Sansa hadn’t met either of them before. He didn’t mention Joffrey and it occurred to her suddenly that he might not even know that she had ever dated his grandson. When Arya introduced Margaery, his eyes narrowed, but he was polite. He and his brother then sat down and looked expectantly at them. Sansa felt sorry for Arya, but other than the part her sister had made her rehearse carefully, she really didn’t know what to do or say.

Arya didn’t need her sympathy. She handed the two men folders and spoke first about the guidelines of her project.

It sounded very much like gibberish to Sansa. She had no idea what most of the words meant, but Mr. Lannister and his brother were nodding so it must have made sense to them. She glanced at Margaery, who was starting to relax.

Then Arya asked them to open their folders.

“Knitting?”

Sansa was amazed at the skepticism and derision Tywin Lannister packed into one two syllable word.

Arya hesitated.

“There are over 3 million knitters and crocheters on Ravelry alone,” Sansa found herself saying.

“What is Ravelry?”

Arya shot Sansa a worried look.

She was off script. “It’s a . . .”

“Yes?”

He made Mrs. Baratheon seem like a kind, cuddly kitten.

“Well?” He waited a moment and then turned to Arya. He began telling her all the things she would need to improve if she stood a chance of getting a passing grade. He wasn’t mean precisely, but he implied that knitting was hardly a suitable choice for her project.

Arya’s face fell, but she took notes.

“Ravelry is a social networking site for knitters and crocheters,” Sansa said suddenly. She glanced at her sister and she kept going. She explained how it worked. She didn’t think he would care about the forums and the networking part, but she talked about how designers and companies sold their patterns and yarn directly to the Ravelers.

“Dorna’s on there,” Kevan said quietly. “She showed me the site. It’s actually very impressive.”

“So you wish to create a rival website?”

“No,” Arya shook her head.

“Then you want to sell your product—whatever your product is—on this site?”

Margaery seemed to have found her voice. “Not exactly, although we have some thoughts about marketing.”
“Then why are you wasting my time telling me about this?”

Sansa drew herself up. “Crafters spend a lot of money on their hobbies and there are a lot of us.”

“And?”

“And they spend an equally large amount of money on accessories and tools for these hobbies.”

Arya recovered. She directed them to some documents she had prepared. She gave them numbers and facts and she started speaking Business again. Here and there Margaery interjected with a helpful comment. The two men were nodding and listening thoughtfully. Kevan occasionally made a note or two.

Margaery unwrapped the bags that Sansa had designed and made.

Mr. Lannister’s face cleared. “This is your product?”

Arya answered in the affirmative.

“You need to make it obvious what the product is, and you need to do it much sooner,” he told Arya.

“Okay.”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “You should speak professionally in a situation like this.”

“All right,” Arya corrected herself.

Margaery tapped Sansa on the shoulder.

It was her turn. Sansa swallowed and started in on her segment. She showed them the bags, no, the product, she guessed it was called, and she took them through what it cost her to design and make them.

Tywin glanced at the sheet with their proposed prices. He frowned. “$200?”

Sansa picked up the item in question. “I used Myrish silk on this. It’s a lot harder to work with than cotton or wool. I hand embroidered it. Arya told me to factor in my time as well as the materials.”

“How many knitting bags can one woman need?”

Kevan laughed ruefully. “Dorna has five.”

“Five?” Mr. Lannister was incredulous.

“That I know about. I think there may be more. She got very defensive when I asked her.”

For the sake of his marriage, Sansa hoped he hadn’t questioned his wife about her stash.

“We’ve already sold three,” Margaery murmured.

Arya launched into the story of their dressing room customer. “She told her friends.” She took a breath and began discussing an online presence. Sansa was already selling a few things on Etsy. She glanced at Sansa.

“I am familiar with Etsy.”
They were all surprised. For one crazy moment Sansa wondered if he had a secret hobby like making dollhouse furniture or something.

“There have been articles in the Journal and in the trades about it,” Mr. Lannister said mildly. “Go on.”

Arya hit her stride. She blazed through the rest of her presentation without interruption. Finally she finished.

The two men began to give their feedback. Sansa understood some of it. They talked about wholesale supplies, and web design. They said something about eventual subcontracting. She dimly remembered helping Joffrey study for exams and quizzing him on business terms. The stuff about taxes went right over her head. Looking at Arya, she thought it went over hers too. Margaery seemed to understand their meaning, though. Both Arya and Margaery were taking furious, copious notes.

Sansa relaxed a little. The worst of it was over. Arya would integrate their suggestions into her presentation for class. They would do this one more time for Arya’s professor and it would be done. She would continue to sell a bag or two once in a while on her Etsy shop and she would get some extra money.

“Perhaps you’d like to give this to your wife,” Margaery said smoothly, handing Kevan one of the silk bags.

Sansa blinked. It had been very nice of Mr. Lannister and his brother to help Arya out, but the embroidery had taken her hours.

Margaery handed another one to Tywin.

He gave her an icy stare and she faltered.

Sansa dimly remembered Joffrey saying something about his grandmother dying in childbirth with his uncle. He might have a girlfriend, but she wasn’t about to speculate. He was older than her parents. Maybe he didn’t have anyone. “Perhaps Mrs. Baratheon would like it,” she said quickly.

“I don’t think Cersei knits,” he said, but the hostility dissipated.

“Don’t tell her it’s a knitting bag,” Arya suggested. “I was thinking we could sell these to regular people too. The lady in Marketing, the one with the blonde hair,” she paused. This evidently being an inadequate description, she added, “The one who won’t date anyone named Willem ever again.”

“Cerenna,” Kevan suggested.

“Yeah, her. She always has new purses. She was showing one off to the other blonde woman, the one who rescues cats and only eats raw food.”

Mr. Lannister grimaced, not at Arya, Sansa thought, but at the eccentricities of his employees. “Myrielle.”

“Okay,” Arya agreed. “And she said she paid $400 for it. It didn’t look that much different from Sansa’s. I bet she would buy one.”

Margaery made a note.

“Those are probably designer purses,” Sansa told Arya. She thought they were getting a little
carried away over a school project.

“So are yours,” Arya replied. “You’re a designer too. I don’t see why a Lemon Cakes bag can’t sell for the same price as one of those ugly quilted bags you used to carry.”

“Lemon Cakes?”

Margaery explained the reasoning for the name to Kevan. It was a private joke between Sansa and her, but it was light; it was fun; and she thought it would appeal to their target demographic.

Mr. Lannister spoke cryptically about something called a DBA and agreements. Then there was something about lawyers. Margaery whispered something to Arya whose face immediately cleared. Lastly he and Kevan exchanged glances.

“$2000 to start,” Mr. Lannister said.

Sansa blinked. “What?”

Arya frowned. She started to speak, but he interrupted her.

“One does not negotiate this,” he explained.

Arya looked at Margaery who nodded. “All right, it’s a deal.”

“What? Arya, what’s going on here?”

Margaery patted her hand reassuringly. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

“We’re investing $2000 in your business venture, Ms Stark.” If Tywin Lannister didn’t exactly smile, he seemed somewhat amused.

“But this is just a sch—”

Margaery kicked her.

Kevan shook his head at Arya. “You shouldn’t keep your partner in the dark.”

“But she wouldn’t have agreed if she knew in advance,” Arya objected.

Sansa was going to kill Arya.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Ravelry is a real site. Its also pretty awesome. If you knit or crochet, you need to check it out; and yes, there really are over 3 million people on Ravelry alone.

Like Sansa, I don't speak Business. Although I did try and research much in this story, I suspect I have some errors about what would go into a business plan or a pitch to potential investors. Please forgive any mistakes.
Resurrection

Chapter Summary

When Jaime starts using his Netflix account, Brienne deals with the fallout. Stannis learns more about Olenna’s private life than he cares to. Ned tries to comfort Catelyn after a bad experience.

Chapter Notes

To the OTP shippers out there, just try and stick it out, okay? Sometimes the best way to get from Point A to Point B is a not a straight line.

Some spoilers for Battlestar Galactica - I’m keeping stuff as vague as possible. It just became my way of alluding to some of the issues Jaime has faced.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*I * *

“I don’t understand how the Cylons can just keep coming back,” Jaime said into his phone. He couldn’t really say why he had become so obsessed with this show. As young children, they watched their share of television. The alternative was to sit in a room with Father, a silent judging monolith who could come unpredictably and unpleasantly to life at the slightest provocation. TV was safer. Occasionally Father was in the room with them while they watched television, in which case it was always better to have somewhere else to look when he exploded. But as Jaime grew older, other activities filled its place. There were sports, endless sessions with tutors, and of course, Cersei. His stint in the military didn’t allow for much leisure and by the time he was discharged, he had outgrown the habit.

“I think it’s called resurrection. I think they explain it at some point.”

Jaime sat up. “You don’t know?”

He heard Brienne sigh. “I’m not sure. I watched it when it aired. I’m not normally much for science fiction; I like fantasy better.”

“Oh.” He felt let down. He was excited by this show and he wanted to share it with someone.

“I liked the military parts,” she offered. “I don’t know how accurate they are. Not the space ship stuff, I mean, but the culture. I found that interesting.”

“It’s close to what it’s really like, at times anyhow.” He didn’t want to talk about his military service. It hit a little too close to the bone. The episode he’d just seen had brought back some memories he thought were buried.

They spoke a little about the characters. “Let me guess. You liked Starbuck.”
Brienne scoffed.

“Oh, come on, wench. I know you. You like Starbuck.” He liked Starbuck. How could someone like Brienne not like Starbuck?

“She was a mess.”

Jaime gripped the phone. “Was? She dies? Don’t tell me this stuff. I told you I don’t want to be spoiled.”

“I haven’t watched the show since it finished airing, Jaime. I meant I thought the character was a mess at the time I saw it.”

“Oh.” He felt absurdly relieved.

“I liked Colonel Tigh.”

Jaime groaned. “There is no hope for you. No wonder why you and Father get along.” It still baffled him. Most people were terrified of the formidable Tywin Lannister and Father disliked most people. Yet Brienne faced his father without fear or trepidation and Father seemed to like Brienne.

“Your father is a raging drunk?”

Well, he had the raging part down, Jaime thought. “No, but he’s a hard ass obsessed with discipline.”

“I can’t say anymore without spoiling you, but I don’t think your father is at all like Colonel Tigh. You know, Tyrion could probably tell you about the resurrection part.”

Jaime switched the phone to the other hand. “I can’t talk to him about this, wench. He would never let me hear the end of it.”

“Call me ‘wench’ again and I’ll have to let him know about your new obsession.”

“It’s not an obsession. I am not obsessed.”

“You’re just ringing me at 1:00 AM to ask me about resurrection.”

She had him there again, but he wasn’t going to admit it. Where had the night gone? He sat down after he finished working to watch one episode and here it was past midnight. The takeout containers on his coffee table were evidence of his having eaten, but he could neither remember ordering nor consuming the food.

“You probably like Gaius.”

“Why would you think I would like a character that brought destruction on humanity? I admit, he has a certain easy charm and he’s very sarcastic, but . . . oh.” He grinned into the phone. “No, I don’t like Gaius. If you must know, wench, I like Starbuck and Lee Adama.”

Brienne laughed. “So where are you in the series?”

“I just finished ‘Pegasus’.” When she didn’t say anything, he explained, “It’s the one where they find another Colonial ship led by Admiral Cain.”

“Oh yeah, I remember. Well, hang in there. I think they start to explain the concept in the next few
episodes.”
Jaime looked at the title for the next episode. “Resurrection Ship.” He felt like an idiot. “Oh.”
In the background he heard a male voice call out to Brienne. It sounded like Davos. Apparently, their relationship was moving right along.
“I have to go,” she told him. “Call Asha. I’m sure she’d be thrilled to talk with you about it. Later.”
He heard the phone click on the other end. He felt strangely disappointed.

* * *

Brienne got back in the bed.

“Young friend takes his television viewing very seriously.”

She smiled. “We created a monster. I don’t think he realized what time it was.” Brienne felt awkward as Davos stretched his arm around her. She liked his company when they went out on dates and she enjoyed sex with him. It was this other in between part that felt so weird.

“It takes time, you know.”

“They have episode guides online. I tried sending him links so he wouldn’t keep calling.” Brienne pulled the covers over them. “He insists he doesn’t want to be spoiled.”

Davos laughed. “No, I meant this, for it to feel right.”

“Oh. I thought you hadn’t dated much.”

“I was married,” he reminded her. He kissed one of her shoulders. “It took us months before Marya and I truly got used to each other. Life is not like it is in the movies.” He turned so that he was facing her.

Brienne nodded.

“What is called for,” he told her with a mischievous glint in his eye, “is practice.”

* * *

Stannis cleared his throat. “I would like to speak with you,” he said to Olenna stiffly.

She covered the receiver with her hand. “Can it wait five minutes? I’m in the middle of something.”

He nodded and stepped back into the hall. He glanced at his watch so he would know when five minutes had elapsed. He positioned himself a few feet down the corridor against the wall.

“I’m telling you that you must have misinterpreted the situation.”

Stannis moved farther down the hall. Olenna’s private phone calls were none of his business.

Unfortunately, Olenna’s voice rose. “I am not in the habit of discussing my sex life with my grandchildren.”

Stannis made an exasperated sigh and went to the very end of the hallway. He was a private man.
Since the unraveling of his marriage, there had been an unfortunate bleed between his personal and his work lives that he caused him a great deal of angst. He would come to the library, determined on focusing solely on his job. Then Melisandre would waft into his office and his good intentions melted away in the heat of her embrace. He supposed he should be grateful that Asha always waited until they were done with their workday before approaching him.

“I assure you that my granddaughter knows I do not knit. Did it occur to you that she probably just forgot that your wife was dead? It’s not as if she ever met the woman.”

He was at a dead end. If he went back the other way, he might put more distance between him and Olenna’s carrying voice, but she would see him as he passed her office and might take more offense than if he stood here quietly until she was done.

“I know this will come as a shock to you, but most people don’t spend their every waking moment thinking about your personal life.”

Stannis focused all of his attention on counting the acoustic tiles.

“Well, you wouldn’t be put into these situations if we didn’t have to sneak around. We’re both adults. I’m not married; you’re not married. I fail to see why we can’t be open about our relationship.”

There was more water damage up here. He would mention it to Varys. Stark was distracted by competing demands on his time. He wasn’t paying enough attention to the infrastructure. There were grants for which they should be applying and donors they should be courting. Failing those, there was Robert. Stannis knew it was pointless for him to complain, but Robert thought the sun rose and set with Stark. It was another missed opportunity.

“Don’t you dare! You’re the one who called me at my job. You’re busy? Oh, spare me. You called me in the middle of my day without the slightest consideration for how busy I might be. Don’t give me that! You’ve never shown the slightest interest in anything I’m working on.”

Stannis winced.

“Fine. Be that way.” She slammed the phone down.

Stannis noticed a water stain bubbling beneath the paint. There was a crack too.

“How long have you been standing there?”

He turned around. The head of reference stood in the hallway glaring at him. “There are fourteen stained ceiling tiles.”

She started.

Stannis pointed them out to her.

“I’ll let Varys know.” She seemed to intuit that his eavesdropping had been entirely unintentional. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

As much as he wished to correct her question, even he could sense that this was no time for grammar. “May we discuss it in your office?”

“By all means.”
He shut the door once she had sat down. “It concerns the reference desk.”

“Stannis, I cannot take you off the desk. We are shorthanded. We need everyone picking up hours.”

He shook his head. “You misunderstand me. I want to continue my hours on the desk.”

“Oh?”

“It has been very illuminating. I did not appreciate fully how uninformed the patrons were in the use of the catalog or our bibliographic databases.”

Olenna relaxed. “That’s partly why I thought it would be useful for everyone to take a turn at reference.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Do you want more hours?” she asked hopefully.

“I would like to do instruction.”

Her eyes widened. “You want to . . . you want to teach?”

Stannis understood her surprise. He had opposed desk duty for years. For him to come and volunteer to take on instruction duties was hardly something she could have anticipated. He opened the file folder he had brought and began outlining some of his ideas.

Olenna listened in silence.

“This flipped-classroom concept that Stark is so keen on,” Stannis frowned. “I am not certain that is something I could handle right away, but it is interesting.”

“Indeed.”

What Stannis was mostly interested in was instructing the patrons about the proper use of subject headings. He saw gross ignorance at the desk. He allowed that a lack of standardization across platforms was partly responsible, but with the right kind of education, he thought this could be overcome.

“Forgive me, Stannis, but when was the last time you taught?”

“I have never taught.”

“Ah.”

“Baelish had never done reference duty,” Stannis pointed out. It was arguable as to whether Baelish did it now. The man squirmed out of every shift he could. Stannis was unclear as to what the acquisitions librarian actually did with his time. As far as he could tell, Baelish spent his days chatting up undergraduate girls and cozying up to faculty. By all rights, the man should report to him, as should Lannister. Instead because of some deranged organizational idea of Jon Arryn, they reported directly to Eddard Stark.

“Yes, but that is different.”

“How?”
Olenna opened her mouth and shut it. “I want to give this proper consideration.”

Stannis nodded. He liked this quality in Olenna. She gave everything calm, measured thought. This was as it should be. He gathered his notes, rose, and thanked her. He thought his case was a good one.

He was slightly uncomfortable about not revealing his other motive for wishing to teach. In another year, Shireen would be applying to universities and his dissertation would be finished. It would be beneficial for him to have experience in as many areas of the field as possible. If he could not be library director here at Crownlands, he meant to be one elsewhere.

* * *

Ned came into an eerily silent house. Both Cat and Lysa’s cars were in the garage so he switched on lights and called out for his wife. After a few minutes looking in the obvious places, he found her stretched out on the sofa with a hand over her face in the room she used for an office.

“I’m sorry I’m late. My meeting with the Provost took longer than I thought it would. It has been one hell of a day. One of the problem patrons made the mistake of harassing the wrong student.” Ned rubbed his temples.

His wife took her hand from her eyes.

He froze. “Cat? What’s wrong?”

“Lysa committed herself today.”

“Shit. Cat, I’m sorry. You should have called. I would have—”

She forced herself up to a sitting position. Her eyes were red. “It’s all right. I don’t want you to feel guilty. There wasn’t time. I came home early and found her on the back stoop sobbing and ranting about Robin’s enemies. She thinks he’s the Lord of the Vale. She thinks the Lannisters murdered Jon and that they’re going to kill Robin next.”

“Seven hells.” Ned didn’t know else what to say.

“I persuaded her she needed to go to the hospital to protect him. There wasn’t time to call you or anyone else.”

He came over and put his arm around her.

“The doctor I spoke to—it’s going to be at least a month.”

“Where’s Robin?”

“Upstairs with Bran and Rickon. I think we may want to find someone for him to see. He’s not . . .” She wanted to finish the sentence, but she couldn’t.

Ned squeezed her shoulder. “I think it’s a good idea. He’s lost his father and her illness has to be taking a toll on him.” He knew Cat thought there might be something wrong with Robin too. It was entirely possible, he supposed, but maybe with some stability and some counseling, the boy would come out of it all right. “Do the kids know what happened? Does he know?”

“I told him she was ill and she was going to be away for a bit. He remembered the last time she went to the hospital so he wasn’t terribly surprised. Arya is at Sansa’s working on a project she
said; she volunteered to come home, but I persuaded her to spend the night there. I told the boys first. Bran promised me they’ll keep him distracted. I was going to have him sleep in Rickon’s room, but—"

“Bran,” Ned said firmly. Rickon seemed to have grown past his arsonist phase, at least Ned hoped he had—they were still paying the next-door neighbor for the greenhouse Rickon burnt down—but it was probably better to put Robin in with Bran. Bran was steady. He was moderately responsible. He could be trusted to look out for Robin.

“We need to move his things from the garage apartment. Lysa . . . they won’t let us see her for a few days . . . but I’m going to bring some of her clothes to the hospital. We’ll have to get power-of-attorney. I’m going to have to figure out something about my classes. I can have Jeffory Mallister take tomorrow’s and the day after that.” She put her head in her hands.

Ned rubbed her shoulders and then gathered her up in his arms. She broke down and sobbed.

Finally she pulled away and dried her eyes. “Tell me about your day.”

“Forget about my day.”

“No, I want to hear. I could use the distraction.”

Ned didn’t answer immediately. He wasn’t going to bore her with the disaster of his meeting with the Provost, or worry her with the rage Robert had flown into on the phone, or any of the half dozen mind-numbing occurrences, but one particular event might provide her with the diversion she needed. “Do you remember Walder Frey?”

“How could I forget? Remember how he danced with me at our wedding? I think by the end of that ordeal, he’d touched more of me than you had.”

“He’s one of our regulars. The staff calls him ‘The Troll under the Stairs’ because he sits near the staircase and looks up women’s skirts. We’ve been trying to get him banned. Campus Security is dragging their heels for some reason.”

“Can Robert do anything about them? You were nearly killed that evening.”

He didn’t want to talk about Robert, and Cat didn’t need to deal with another headache just now. “Let me finish. A stressed-out nurse had come in to look for psychology journals. I think Varys said she’s studying to be a nurse practitioner. Frey told her that he could tell what kind of body she had on under her scrubs.”

“Do I want to know what he said?”

“The phrase I was quoted was ‘firm tits and a tight fit’.”

Cat’s jaw dropped. “He’s gotten worse as he’s gotten older.”

“It gets better,” Ned told her. “According to Varys, who was at the desk at the time, she then kneed Frey in the balls and dealt him a haymaker to the jaw. Every female patron present and probably half of my staff cheered.” There, she was smiling. “When Campus Security tried to take her away for beating up a supposedly harmless old man, we practically had a riot on our hands. Theon’s sister—she’s one of our catalogers—wanted to finish him off. I swear she was the one who rammed a book cart into his backside, but no one else will admit to witnessing it and I can’t say I blame her.”
She started laughing. “Every time I think I’ve heard it all, you come home with one of these stories. No one believes me when I share any of them.”

“Cat, I couldn’t make this stuff up if I tried.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I need to give credit to a sketch in *Portlandia*. This was my inspiration for Jaime's mainlining multiple episodes of *Battlestar Galactica*.

I should also probably explain about academic library instruction because after seeing some confusion about it in a comment and in going through the rest of my story, I don't think I ever really address it.

Usually library instruction involves professors requesting librarians come to their class to teach their students how to find books or articles. It's typically a one-time thing, although there can be other types of instruction. It's not easy to do. You have 50 minutes to make finding articles and using the catalog interesting and understandable. I am willing to be convinced otherwise, but I think Stannis would really really suck at this.
Patron Driven Acquisition

Chapter Summary

In which Ned tries to talk sense into Crownlands President Robert Baratheon; Tyrion has a largely civil conversation with his father (which in almost any other fandom would not be noteworthy); Sansa gets some help from Arya’s friends and deals with the unholy alliance that is Arya and Margaery; and I try to pack yet more library concepts into a chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Ned sat uneasily in the family room of the President’s House making awkward conversation with Myrcella and Tommen. He was there to see Robert, but from the sounds of the shouting and the periodic crashing of objects in the background, his best friend and his wife were very much occupied. He’d tried to leave, but Myrcella insisted he wait. Father, she said, had mentioned he was expected. He would want to see him.

Tommen lay on his stomach kicking his legs in the air as he worked on some homework. He switched his attention from the television back and forth to his assignments. He was a chubby boy. Ned knew he played soccer, although from what Tommen told him, it sounded like he spent most of his time warming the bench.

Myrcella asked after Sansa.

“She’s doing well. She’s sharing an apartment with Margaery Tyrell.” Ned was about to say more when Myrcella suddenly excused herself.

“She’s going to tell Father you’re here,” Tommen explained. His eyes were focused on the television.

Ned realized the yelling had finally stopped.

“Sweetlings, Mother has to go out—” Cersei broke off on seeing Ned. “Tommen, go and tell your father, Dr. Stark is here.”

“Myrcella already went,” Tommen complained.

Ned stood. “It’s good to see you, Cersei.” He awkwardly kissed the cheek she proffered to him.

“I’m afraid I have an appointment. Robert will be down in a moment, I’m sure. He would never want to miss a chance to discuss the glorious old days with his best friend.”

He winced at the sweet venom she laced her words with. Cat thought Cersei Lannister was probably one of the unhappiest women she’d ever met. Ned knew being married to Robert couldn’t be an easy life, but Cersei struck him as being mean to the core. As he looked at her, though, he noticed one cheek was redder than the other; it didn’t appear to be from a misapplication of
makeup. He nodded and bade her good night. He wondered where she was going at 9:00 PM, but he suddenly couldn’t blame her for leaving. When he got home, he’d talk to Cat about it.

Myrcella came in and led him to Robert’s study.

“Ned!” his old friend roared.

Ned watched as the girl smiled politely and disappeared, presumably to go watch the rest of *Psych* with her brother. How often did they stay huddled in the family room trying to ignore the fighting?

Robert poured him a large whiskey and soda and a still larger one for himself.

“I’m sorry about the other day,” Robert said gruffly.

“So am I.”

They drank.

“Gods, I miss the old days when it was just about writing and teaching. Now all I do is deal with headache after headache. I envy you, Ned.”

Ned wondered what it was Robert thought he did all day.

Robert drained his drink. “I’m getting pressure from all sides. You need to move faster. I know you were left with a mess, but—”

“I told you when you asked me to take this on I didn’t know anything about running a library. The staffing problems alone,” Ned shuddered.

“If you’re going to whine to me again about having to take on Tyrion Lannister—” He poured another drink for himself.

“Lysa is in the hospital again. She’ll be on medical leave for a month. It may be longer.”

Robert looked abashed. “The same trouble?”

“Yes.”

They drank silently.

“Can I do anything? Her son, is he all right?”

“He’s a strange lad, but I think we have it in hand. Thank you, though.” Ned set his glass on the desk. “I’m not fond of Tyrion, but he seems to work hard enough.”

“Is Stannis giving you trouble?” Robert poured three fingers into his glass and another two for Ned.

Ned replied in the negative. Stannis worked harder than anyone there. He could be a pain in the arse, but Ned couldn’t complain about his job performance. Ned took a sip and cradled the glass in his hand. “We’ve identified the principal problems and we’re attempting to work on each, but we’re focusing on user satisfaction—” he broke off.

Robert was shaking his head. “Someone is riling up the faculty. His nibs won’t shut up about it. If I don’t hear about it from the Board, I hear about it from his wretched daughter. Gods, that woman can nag. And she wonders why I don’t like to come home.”
“I don’t know how this rumor got started, but no one on staff has that kind of pull with the teaching faculty.”

Robert shook his head again. “I need you to find out who the rotten apple is. It’s why I put you in the directorship in the first place.”

“The place is falling apart, Robert. There are greater problems than Tywin Lannister’s paranoid delusions.”

“As much as I would like to tell my father-in-law to piss off, I can’t. This is bigger than you needing another librarian or some more money for a few journals; we need his millions. Solve this problem and we might be able to increase your budget.”

Money would solve a lot of the Library’s problems, but he couldn’t identify a non-existent culprit. Ned did have a few staff members who were politically savvy, Olenna and Varys understood how the university truly functioned, but they were also heavily invested in the status quo. Melisandre’s sole motivation for living was R'hllor. If it didn’t have to do with her god, she wasn’t interested. Stannis was aboveboard in everything he did; Stannis did not skulk. There was Baelish, but from what Ned had heard, he was not as well thought of by the faculty as the man supposed. Rickard Karstark called him a “Southron pain in the arse.” The professional staff seemed unlikely suspects too.

“Could it be one of your junior faculty?” Robert wondered. “They don’t always know not to get involved.”

“I have three tenure-track librarians: Tyrion Lannister, Brienne Tarth, and Asha Greyjoy. Tyrion is obviously out. Brienne—”

“No, it can’t be her.”

“You know her?” Ned was surprised.

Robert snorted. “No, but she is one of the few things in your library of whom the mighty Tywin Lannister approves. He made a point of telling me she was someone to watch.”

“Brienne Tarth?” Ned thought Brienne was a very competent librarian and a hard worker, but he was hard pressed to see her as a person who would rise up the administrative ranks at least not to a level of which someone like Tywin Lannister would be aware.

“That’s the name.” Robert took another drink. “Is this Asha Greyjoy any relation to Balon Greyjoy?”

Ned nodded. “His daughter.”

“He’s an untrustworthy son of a bitch.”

He was, but Balon Greyjoy was so far from caring about academia in any form that Ned dismissed the idea out of hand. “I’m not sure Asha even knows who you are. The Vice Provost for Academic Affairs came in to the Library to use the men’s room. He took a call on his cellphone and she kicked him out for being too noisy.”

Robert groaned. “Ned, your people are going to be the death of me.”

“It’s been handled,” Ned assured him. His apology had not been enough. Unbeknownst to him, Ros called Varys who called Olenna. As Ned was walking the man to the door trying to placate him in
vain, Olenna had met the Vice Provost with Melisandre in tow. While Olenna begged forgiveness and trusted the official would surely understand how they needed to place the students above all else, Melisandre smiled enigmatically at the Vice Provost and leaned forward a lot. For once, she kept her mouth shut about R’hllor. The Vice Provost kept his eyes on her cleavage, decided to accept Ned’s apology, and agreed with Olenna how the students came first.

Ned really didn’t want to know what Olenna had promised Melisandre in exchange for her cooperation.

“I miss this, Ned,” Robert was saying. “I thought when you came to Crownlands we would see each other more.”

“When are you free again?”

“Not for a while. I’m booked solid for the next few weeks and then I’m off to Sothoryos to visit our satellite campus and to attend a conference.” Robert took a slug of his drink. “Use the time to find me your troublemaker. Forget about user satisfaction. Satisfy me. We can look at fiscal solutions if you can identify him or her.”

* * *

Tyrion took a seat across from his father’s desk and waited. As per usual, his father was examining files and writing notes. Tyrion hated this. The secretary would call, intimate that if Tyrion didn’t drop everything and come at once, that it would be very bad for Tyrion. Not that Ms Westerling ever said so. She just hesitated and said she was quoting his father. Invariably, Tyrion answered the summons, only to find his father immersed in other work. In his more lucid, calmer moments, Tyrion wondered if refusing to engage in this passive-aggressive game might not be the smarter course of action.

“Well?” his father demanded, not bothering to look up from the folder he was reading.

Tyrion waited.

“You’ve been at that library for months.”

“I have,” Tyrion agreed.

“I want a report.”

Not this again. “No one is engaged in any kind of nefarious scheme to unseat Robert and no one mentions you or the Board of Trustees.”

“No?”

“Father, I don’t know what you think goes on there, but it’s all very conventional.”

His father gazed at him over his reading glasses.

“All right, aside from what some of them do after hours; and the fact that the furniture is sentient and is trying to kill us.” He decided the rumors of the lunchtime activities of Stannis and his lady friends were not relevant.

“Your jokes are not appreciated.”

Tyrion would not give him the satisfaction of getting angry. “From what I’ve seen, most of the
interactions with the faculty are pretty benign. There is a group that does Tai Chi together. I think Varys belongs to it. No. Don’t get any ideas. Do I seem like the type of person who does Tai Chi? I will not be joining them; I have limits.”

“What about Eddard Stark?”

“He doesn’t do Tai Chi either.”

That earned him an icy stare.

Tyrion rolled his eyes. “He seems to work very hard. The worst I can say for him is that the reference department isn’t in love with him.”

Father removed his glasses. “Explain.”

“He had some idea for instruction that they didn’t like. He wants them to experiment with the flipped classroom model. Don’t ask me what it is. I don’t know.”

“I was under the impression you were required to answer reference questions.”

He wondered how his father knew that, but then he remembered the job posting. Perhaps Father had read it before forcing Robert to have him hired. “We all have to work reference. I don’t have to teach.”

“Go on.”

“Don’t you have a corporation to run?”

His father waited.

“Fine. Well, Dr. Stark wants them to start experimenting with this flipped classroom model, but I gather it requires a lot of preparation and since they are in the middle the semester, the timing is horrendous. They all made their case as to why they don’t want to adopt it just now. He said he wanted it done.”

“So they fell in line.”

Tyrion snorted. “I doubt it. Olenna Tyrell smiled very sweetly. Then I think they went away and went on doing whatever it was they were doing already.”

His father was nonplussed. “And Stark tolerates this?”

“I don’t know. I have my own work to worry about. I’m writing a collection development policy. For some unknown reason, my predecessor could never be bothered to write one. I’m working on a patron driven acquisition pilot project with the acquisitions librarian. He’s fighting me on it—and no, I do not need your assistance.”

“That is fortunate because I wasn’t offering you any.” He sipped his coffee. “What is ‘patron driven acquisition’?”

“The last time I explained a library concept to you, you went off and invested in Elsevier.” That still rankled. One mention of the crisis in scholarly publishing and his father not only bought stock in the publishing giant, he mentioned it to Uncle Kevan and Aunt Genna, who all bought some as well. He supposed he should be grateful that Casterly Rock Enterprises had not done a hostile takeover. If it had, every library in the world would under his father’s foot. “All right, fine, it
means that when a user requests a book that we don’t own, rather than borrowing it through interlibrary loan, we’ll buy it if it’s under a certain price, and if it fits in within our collection development parameters, which is why I’m writing the policy.”

“So you would undercut the expertise of your colleagues and allow the rabble to purchase whatever puerile nonsense they choose. No wonder you are facing opposition.”

Tyrion glared at his father. “In the first place, there is no undercutting anyone. The bibliographers still select material. We’re already spending far too much on interlibrary loan charges for items the users want. In most cases, they’re monographs—books, that is—that we should have. Other academic libraries have done this with great success. This is just a pilot project to see if it will work for us. It might not, but we won’t know till we try it.”

“Is he the only one opposing you?”

“No one is opposing me. The catalogers are fine with it as long as ‘the rabble’ can’t select subject headings. The reference librarians are cautiously in favor. Stark is writing a paper on it for his class in library school so he’s willing to try it. I doubt Varys cares. No, the only one standing in the way is the acquisitions librarian. He claims to be all for it, but he keeps turning up road blocks. I don’t know why he keeps stalling.”

His father set down his coffee mug. “This project, it is your idea?”

Tyrion nodded.

“And do your colleagues and Stark know it is your idea?”

“Yes. Why would it matter?”

His father looked at him expectantly.

Tyrion answered himself slowly, “He’s dragging his heels because it was my idea, and he doesn’t want me to get the credit for it if it’s a success.”

His father gave him a near smile.

Tyrion was so unused to parental approval that on the rare occasions it came, he found it unnerving.

“This reference duty? You said all of you had to do it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Tyrion got up and helped himself to a cup of coffee. He would have killed for a glass of wine. “Because Olenna Tyrell has spoken,” he said flippantly.

His father waited.

“The students want the library open longer hours. That means we have more reference shifts to cover. There are not enough reference librarians.” He saw the question on his father’s face. “There are four of them technically, but one is having some medical issues.”

“Even with three, surely that should be sufficient.”
Tyrion shook his head. “No one does forty hours of straight reference. You’d lose your mind. Besides there’s too many other things they have to do that can’t be done while being out at the desk. The reference librarians also teach. We’re all faculty. A number of us are tenure track. We have committee work. It’s just not feasible.”

His father nodded, listening intently.

This was beyond strange, Tyrion thought. He and his father simply did not have civilized conversations. “When my position was posted—the one you bought for and forced upon me,” he began, ignoring the glare, “they wrote reference into the job description, but there are other librarians on staff who do other things.” He explained how Olenna had gotten Dr. Stark to change job descriptions so that all librarians would have to do some reference. “Most everyone is fine with doing it.”

“Do you like doing it?”

Tyrion stared at his father. “Yes.” Father never thought personal preference was important. If one had a duty, one did it. ‘Like’ never came into the picture, not according to the rules Tywin Lannister lived by.

“Why?”

The other shoe would drop soon. “I like the challenge of reference,” Tyrion said. “I can sit out there and at any moment, a user might come in and ask me a question about anything. The challenge lies in being able to find the answer even when I know nothing about the subject. There are other advantages too. I learn what the users want in the collection. It gives me a chance to spot gaps. It helps to know how they find information.”

“Hmmm.”

Tyrion sipped his coffee.

“Is your brother seeing anyone?”

There it was—the other shoe. He should have known this non-combativeness wouldn’t last. “I think you should ask Jaime.”

“I’m asking you.”

Tyrion wondered how his father could be so blind. How was it possible that his father did not know about Jaime and Cersei? “Why don’t you talk to Cersei?”

His father glared at him. “I’m asking you,” he repeated.

“As far as I know, Jaime is not dating anyone.” It wasn’t a lie. What Cersei and Jaime did together in no way constituted dating.

“What about Ms Tarth?”

“Brienne is dating the fingerless Mr. Seaworth.”

His father rose and rummaged in the cabinet by the coffee maker. He pulled out a bottle of brandy and poured a shot into each of their mugs. Then he put the liquor bottle back in the cabinet. “And who is Mr. Seaworth?”
This was possibly the longest civil conversation his father and he had ever enjoyed. “He was in the Emergency Room with us that night. He was the man with the bleeding hand. He lost four of his fingers in an accident with a saw, I think.”

His father knit his brow in concentration.

His father didn’t remember. Of course, he didn’t. Tywin Lannister didn’t bother himself with people he considered unimportant. “I haven’t actually formally met him. Brienne hasn’t been happy with me.”

“Why?”

There it was: that familiar note of accusation. It was almost a relief to hear it. “I don’t exactly know. I made her a blanket apology, but she’s been distant with me.” So had most of the women in the library, he suddenly realized. He had asked Melisandre to switch shifts and she told him that he should look to his sins.

“Does Jaime like her?”

“I think they talk,” Tyrion said carefully. “About what, I do not know. You’d have to ask him.”

His father was thoughtful.

“If you’re worried that she’s going to trap Jaime somehow, don’t. Brienne is too honest. I don’t know how serious she is about the Seaworth man, but she strikes me as being monogamous to a fault. She’s not about to chase after Jaime.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Tyrion choked on his coffee. “What? You want him to date Brienne?”

“What I want is for him to marry and have children.”

“With Brienne?”

“Why not?” Father narrowed his eyes. “Unless—do you know something about that girl of which I should be made aware?”

Tyrion shook his head. “What you see with Brienne is what you get.”

“Good.”

“What I don’t understand is why you want Jaime to get together with Brienne. I would have thought you wanted him with some heiress.”

“He has ample acquaintance with any number of suitable young women. As far as I can tell, he has never pursued any of them. He needs to marry and settle down. The Tarth girl is the first one he’s looked at twice, at least from what I’ve seen. Her family is of good stock. It’s not as if Jaime would be marrying some bit of trash from Flea Bottom.”

Grandchildren, Tyrion realized. He wants grandchildren. Cersei’s didn’t count. Even if he knew the truth, his father wanted heirs—legitimate Lannister heirs he could acknowledge as such—to carry on the name.

“Does she like Jaime?”
“I told you she’s dating someone else.”

“Yes, yes, the man with the fingers in the Ziploc bag. I doubt that will last. Is she interested in Jaime?”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask her.”

“Very well, I will.”

Tyrion didn’t know if he should feel sorry for Brienne or for his father. He was leaving the building before he remembered that he hadn’t said anything about the Ziploc bag.

* * *

When Arya had promised to bring by some friends over to the apartment to help Sansa with Lemon Cakes, Sansa had not been expecting to see two guys. From their expressions, it appeared that they were equally surprised.

“I thought your sister needed help moving furniture or painting or something,” Gendry Waters hissed indignantly at Arya. “We need to talk.” He dragged her into the dining room.

Sansa stood awkwardly with Margaery and Podrick Payne while Gendry and Arya argued.

“Are they dating?” Margaery wanted to know. “He’s very handsome and he has great hair.”

Sansa thought Gendry’s looks were irrelevant. Margaery was constantly pointing out things like this: the dry cleaning clerk’s bedroom eyes; Dr. Bolton’s sexy voice; their psychology professor’s cute arse. It never ended. She said things about Sansa too. Sansa’s hair was gorgeous and she had fantastic legs. She had once said very intensely that Sansa had really kissable lips. Sansa figured it was just the way Margaery was.

“I don’t know,” Podrick admitted. “So what did you need us to do?”

“You’re still willing to help?”

“Sure.” He took off his jacket.

Sansa really needed assistance with the sewing and embroidery, but she would take what she could get. Even if they could help cut and pin, it would be something. “That would be great, Podrick. Uh, all the stuff is in the dining room.”

“Call me Pod.” He squared his shoulders and crossed over to Gendry and Arya. “Come on. We were just going to drink beer and watch Ghost Hunters.”

“We have beer,” Margaery offered brightly. “And we have cable.”

“That’s not the point,” Gendry protested, but he too was taking off his jacket.

When Sansa learned Pod could operate a sewing machine, she could have kissed him. He couldn’t do detail work, he warned her, but he was able to help her with some of the basic seaming. It turned out he was a theatre major who was interested in the behind the scenes stuff.

Gendry’s reluctance gradually melted into interest. He even made some suggestions to help with streamlining the assembly process. He and Pod started asking questions about how they’d structured the business.
They sat around the TV watching Grant and Jason poking around a supposedly haunted bowling alley. It turned out most of the difficulty came from the men’s room defective plumbing. They were doing EVP readings, but Sansa found her attention grabbed by the pictures of the armor and weaponry that Pod and Gendry evidently made for fun. In spite of the terrible quality of the pictures on Pod’s phone, she could see how impressive their work was. “You guys made all this stuff?”

“Yeah.” Gendry took a swig out of his beer bottle. “Do you have a business plan?”

“We do.” Margaery smoothly outlined how they had the business set up. Arya added contributions periodically.

“It sounds complicated.” Pod reached for another two pieces of fabric and started pinning them.

“It’s not really.” Margaery assured him. “With Lemon Cakes, Sansa focuses on production, while Arya and I help with the business end of things. It makes it much easier for everyone. Have you thought of taking your own business to the next level?” She leaned forward and gave Gendry and Pod one of her brilliant smiles as well as a view of a substantial amount of her cleavage.

Sansa suddenly eyed the beer bottles. They never had beer. Margaery liked wine and fancy cocktails. Why did they even have beer in the apartment? They were all talking earnestly now, the program totally forgotten. Arya just happened to have her notebook. Margaery just happened to have some of the forms they’d used to set up Lemon Cakes. Gendry and Pod were more than welcome to take them and look them over. Arya suggested she could email Mr. Lannister and Kevan to see if they’d be willing to hear another pitch. Even if they wouldn’t invest, they just might be willing to advise them.

When the boys left, Sansa glared at her roommate and her sister. “Do not do that to me again.”

“Do what?” Margaery asked innocently.

“Leave me in the dark. You two planned this whole thing!”

Arya was making a list. “We would have talked to you, but we didn’t think you would want to be a partner.”

“ARYA!”

Margaery put her arm around Sansa’s shoulder and led her to the sofa. “What’s the problem? We thought about talking to them directly, but you saw how Gendry reacted when he got here. Sometimes it pays to take the indirect approach with men.”

“He was upset because Arya blindsided him! I’m upset because the two of you blindsided me! Both of you need to promise me you won’t keep me in the dark again!” Arya did stuff like this all the time, but Sansa had expected more of Margaery.

Her friend had the grace to look ashamed. “It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“We didn’t mean to leave you out of the loop,” Arya said. “It just happened today. I saw Margaery over at the Business School and we went to lunch. I told her about Gendry and Pod’s stuff. We figured it all out then. It all worked out.”

“How do you ‘just happen’ to plan something like that in an hour?”

“I was thinking about it for a while,” Arya confessed. “We should have told you, I guess. Next
time, we’ll keep you in the loop the whole time, okay?” She made a notation. “It’s going to be good, Sansa. They have cool things they don’t know how to sell. There are people who would love to buy their products. We know how to sell their products to those people.” She capped her pen. “It all works out.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I have no real knowledge of what a library director and an university president would discuss. I suspect in real life, this conversation would never happen. The director would probably talk to a provost, but I doubt even then it would never be at this level of detail. I took a lot of liberties there. I’m using the excuse that Ned and Robert are friends and therefore they might talk about this kind of thing.

Elsevier is a huge academic publishing company that specializes in science, technical and medical [STM] books and journals. They are not beloved in libraries because over the past ten-to-fifteen years, they’ve bought up most of the STM publishing companies and jacked up their prices by huge percentages. This is not a plot point, I just wanted to explain it.
Chapter Summary

Sansa endures a Saturday at the Circulation Desk with more of her favorite people. Cersei meets Jaime's friends and discovers she doesn't know as much as she thought she did. Tywin is concerned with his legacy.

Chapter Notes

ILL (pronounced as if you are spelling it out: I-L-L) stands for interlibrary loan. Most academic libraries have an online system through which the patron can request titles that the library doesn't own. The library then goes out and borrows the book from another library so that the patron can get access to the title. These days the trend is to encourage use of ebooks because libraries don't have to worry about mailing or replacement costs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Sansa eyed the clock. Every freaky problem patron in the greater Crownlands area apparently decided today would be a grand day to come into the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library.

Five more minutes and then she could go home. Not that she could relax. She had a paper to write, an exam to study for, two Lemon Cakes bags to make, and now the Helmets & Halberds project to work on. But at least she wouldn’t be surrounded by crazy and difficult people—or creepy middle-aged men. It was Saturday so Petyr Baelish was at the reference desk. He had spent most of the time coming up to chat with her about this and that. Now at least he was actually being forced to do his job. She could see him working with two students at the desk. Good. She’d be done and out of there before he could come back and bother her again.

“Good afternoon, Sansa.”

She jumped. Great, she thought with bitterness, the cherry on her sundaes: Tip-In. “Hello, Dr. Bolton.”

“I believe a book should be here for me from interlibrary loan.”

Sansa nodded. “Sure. I’ll go get it.” He was doing ILL a lot these days; he’d found a way to game the system. Sansa knew the Interlibrary Loan department was working with Stannis and Asha to close this loophole, but in the meantime, someone evidently believed they needed to keep filling his requests. Well, it wasn’t her problem. She walked back to the holds shelf and after a moment, she frowned.

“Is there anything wrong?” he called out in his pleasant, melodic voice.
Sansa was really starting to hate this man. “Dr. Bolton, do you have the notification with you?” She walked back to the desk.

“Yes.” He reached into his sport coat pocket and handed it to her.

Sansa read it. He borrowed the weirdest stuff. She double checked the location to be sure. Sometimes the ILL department sent materials to the medical or the science library by mistake. Everything looked fine. She went back to the holds shelf and examined the titles. *Medicinal Leech Therapy* was not on the shelf.

“Isn’t it there?”

“No, it’s not.” Sansa was puzzled.

“Perhaps if you checked the computer?”

Sansa hated it when the patrons had helpful suggestions. Like she wouldn’t have done that already if she could? “I don’t have access to the interlibrary loan system.” This was beyond her pay grade. “I’m going to go ask someone about this, okay?” Sansa didn’t wait for his assent. She didn’t particularly relish the thought of speaking to Petyr again, but he was the only librarian in the building at the moment. She walked over to the reference desk.

“Sansa.” He was clearly pleased to see her.

“It’s Tip-In,” she told him in a low voice.

“Dr. Bolton,” Petyr corrected. “Roose Bolton is a library champion; he deserves our respect.”

He was a freak, Sansa thought, but she shrugged. “Sure.” She handed him the notification. “He requested this and it’s not there. Everything looks fine, but the book isn’t on the holds shelf and he’s kind of irritated.”

“I don’t understand.”

Sansa resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I don’t understand either. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Petyr didn’t seem to know what to do.

“Maybe there’s someone at ILL on weekends?” she suggested. The ILL office worked out of the medical library.

“I’ll call.”

“Fine. And then can you come over and deal with Tip—with Dr. Bolton?” She waited for him to nod and then she returned reluctantly to Circulation. As she did so, she passed three of the public patrons. They quickly hit alt tab to hide the porn on their monitors. At least they did that much. There was one nasty guy who liked to leave it on as she walked by. She’d brought it up to some of the librarians in the staff lunchroom once. They gave her some stupid argument about intellectual freedom. One of them even suggested maybe they should set aside a few computers out of the way so the patrons weren’t bothering anyone. Sansa muttered something about the stickiness of Study Room 6 which was well out of the way too and let the subject drop. It was one more thing about this job that just sucked.

She reached the desk. “The reference librarian is calling someone.” Sansa glanced at her watch. Mya was late. She should be here by now. “It will just be a few minutes, Dr. Bolton.”
He gave her a searching look, but evidently decided she was being truthful, because he assured her he didn’t mind waiting, and asked how her studies were going.

She acted like she was happy to chat with him. Where was Mya? She leaned forward nonchalantly; Petyr seemed to be arguing with someone. He was taking notes now. Finally he came over to the Circulation desk.

“Well?” Tip-In demanded, cutting off Petyr’s greeting.

“The book was sent to you electronically,” Petyr explained. “Sansa, would you show Dr. Bolton how he can access it?”

Sansa wished Shae was there. Circ students weren’t supposed to do reference for the patrons. It was Petyr’s job to show Dr. Bolton how to use the ILL system, not hers. She wondered suddenly if Petyr didn’t know how.

“I don’t want an ebook,” Tip-In stated bluntly.

Petyr tried to placate him. “According to the staff member, you have your preferences set for ebooks. Sansa will be happy to show you how to change them—”

Sansa would be happy for the floor to swallow up both Petyr and Tip-In so she never had to see either of them again.

Dr. Bolton interrupted. “How do you think I ordered the book in the first place? I know what my preferences are set to.”

That was it, she realized. Asha or the ILL librarian must have changed Tip-In’s preferences to ebooks over print. Naturally, they never thought to tell anyone, least of all her.

“I can look into this for you. Unfortunately it is the weekend and . . .” Petyr let his voice drift off.

Mya finally came in and Sansa quickly stepped away. She explained the situation and she made a beeline for the time clock. Finally she could go home and be free of having to deal with freaks for the rest of her weekend. As she walked past Tip-In and Petyr, she was glad that Dr. Bolton’s pale dead eyes weren’t fixed on her for once.

Cersei waited impatiently for Jaime to answer his door. Her day had been abysmal. The maid quit. She’d endured an awkward phone call from Ned Stark who was under the erroneous impression she required his help with her marriage. Tommen was being mulish. Myrcella had been insolent—sweet, agreeable Myrcella had actually mouthed off to her. Joffrey was in trouble again. It was something Robert didn’t think he could be gotten out of. Robert hadn’t lost his temper; that was the frightening thing. He was just resigned. When she’d called Father, he’d been equally silent. She didn’t know if he lacked the influence or if he just wanted to teach her a lesson. They had an appointment on Monday to see him to discuss the incident with the lawyer, but she knew it would be an ordeal.

A young woman with dishwater blonde hair greeted her. “Oh. We thought you were the delivery guy.”

For a moment, Cersei wondered if she had somehow distractedly knocked on the wrong door, but then she heard Jaime’s laugh. “Is Jaime here?”
The woman stepped aside. “I think he’s in the kitchen.”

Cersei brushed past her into some sort of gathering.

“Lannister, your sister is here!”

She recognized the voice: Stannis. Her eyes focused. He was sitting on a sofa. Why was Stannis in Jaime’s apartment? Who were all these people? Some of them glanced her way. Most of them continued chatting and drinking. Was he having a party?

“I’m Asha,” the dishwater blonde woman told her.

“Of course, you are.”

Asha gave her a sharp look.

Cersei spotted Jaime talking earnestly to a very blonde, very tall, squarish ox of a woman. At least, Cersei thought it was a woman. She looked around. Some of the guests seemed vaguely familiar to her. The blonde ox, she thought she had seen her somewhere before. That dark-haired man with the beard and the broken nose, surely she knew him from somewhere too. Stannis, of course, she knew. Stannis hated Jaime. Jaime hated Stannis. Why then would Stannis be here?


Seconds later, the man with the broken nose thrust a jelly glass full of red wine into her hands.

“I ran out of the proper ones,” Jaime explained. “Cersei, this is Bronn. Let’s see, you met Asha. You know Stannis. Brienne, meet Cersei.”

The blonde ox smiled.

A woman with dyed red hair and a diaphanous dress stepped out of the kitchen.

“This is Melisandre.” Jaime frowned. “Where are Davos and Salladhor?”

“Beer run,” Bronn said laconically.

Cersei stared at them all. The redhead was familiar too.

“These are my friends,” Jaime said under his breath.

Gods, he was drunk. He had to be. “So good to meet you all,” Cersei lied. “Jaime, may I speak with you privately?”

She took his hand and dragged him into the bedroom. “Get rid of them,” she hissed.

Jaime stared at her. “Are you all right? What happened?”

“Nothing happened. I just had a terrible day. I need you.”

Jaime furrowed his brow. “I’m having a party. I can’t just toss my guests out because you had a bad day.”

“Who are these people?”
“I met some of them through Tyrion. Most of them work at the library.”

“Well, that explains it. Freaks gravitate toward freaks. Where is the little imp? Make him take them to his place.”

“Don’t call him that.”

“Really, Jaime, Stannis? That singularly unattractive blonde ox of a woman? Get rid of them.”

“These are my friends,” he repeated.

Cersei couldn’t believe him. “I need you.”

Jaime ran a hand through his hair. “And I’m right here, Cersei. If you had called, I wouldn’t have made plans. You don’t call, though. You just show up and expect me to be here. When I need you, I have to wait. It’s not fair.”

Fair? He dared to use that word to her? What was fair about her life?

“You’re welcome to stay,” he said. “But if you’ll excuse me, I’m going back to my guests.” He walked out.

She sat on the bed stunned. Her hands latched onto the jelly glass; it must have been meant for children; it was emblazoned with an image of Scooby-Doo. She waited. Surely Jaime would come to his senses. Her patience was rewarded by laughter and the sounds of the television set.

Someone knocked softly on the door and then opened it. It was the girl in the tight t-shirt and ripped jeans. Asha, Jaime had called her. “Food’s here.”

“Thank you. I am fine right here.” Cersei didn’t move.

Asha shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She went back to the party and closed the door behind her.

After twenty minutes, Cersei could stand it no longer. She smoothed her hair and joined them. No one even so much as looked her way. There was a core group clustered around the TV. It consisted of Asha, Stannis, the harlot in red, and Jaime. The redhead’s eyes were focused entirely on Stannis. In the back of the living room, a handsome black man was talking to Broken Nose. He gave Cersei an appreciative glance.

“This is Jaime’s sister.” Broken Nose told the other man. “Er, I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Cersei.” The gall. This man knew damn well who she was. She remembered him now. He had stood there smirking the first time she had come in to argue with them about Joffrey’s fines. “And I’ve forgotten yours.”

“Bronn.”

“Salladhor,” the other man introduced himself. He offered her his hand.

She took it. “Do you work at the library too?”

“Ha!” He laughed long and hard at the notion. “No, Davos introduced me to Brienne and her friends.”

Bronn topped up her jelly glass with more wine.
“Who is Davos?”

“I am.” A man with salt and pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard stepped up. He was of an age with Stannis. He wasn’t handsome, but he had an interesting face. “Davos Seaworth.”

She shook his hand too.

“And I don’t work at the library either,” Davos told her.

Bronn’s attention was suddenly drawn by the TV. “Well, now. Maybe I will go and join them.”

Cersei looked at the screen. A scantily-clad woman with hair so fair she could be a Targaryen was crawling all over a dark-haired man. “What are they watching?”

“Battlestar Galactica” the Blonde Ox said softly. She had come from the kitchen and was clutching a tumbler of something clear. “Jaime is obsessed.”

“I am not obsessed,” Jaime protested. “It’s just a very good show.”

Davos chuckled. “He calls Brienne day and night with questions.”

Cersei focused suddenly on the Blonde Ox. Brienne. Where had she heard that name before?

“He calls me too,” Asha offered. “I was knee deep in work the other day and he called me to tell me he thought he had spotted another Cylon.”

“Do you mind?” Stannis bellowed. “We’re trying to watch this.”

Salladhor rolled his eyes, but then his attention was also captured by the blonde on the screen. “She is not bad this one.”

“That’s Caprica Six,” Asha explained.

Stannis glared at her. “Woman, what part of ‘we’re trying to watch this,’ did you not understand?”

The girl reached over and smacked him.

To Cersei’s surprise, Stannis didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he smiled at Asha. Stannis smiled almost as rarely as her father.

Jaime reached for the remote. “Why don’t we take a break? I’m sure everyone could use some more food.”

“Lannister, that’s the third time.” But he started to rise.

“Stannis has become as intrigued by this silly program with its false gods as Jaime,” the redhead slut told Cersei as she disentangled herself from Stannis.

Cersei stared. Were they involved then? It was odd for Stannis to be so physically demonstrative with anyone. Even when he’d been married, he and Selyse usually stood at least three feet apart at all times.

The guests milled around, refilling drinks and plates. Cersei watched as Jaime and Brienne talked quietly in the corner. Periodically they glanced at her.

Stannis came up to her. “Is Robert minding the children?”
Robert was probably drunk and passed out in his study. “The children don’t need anyone to mind them these days. They’re nearly grown.” It made her sad to say it.

He reached for a bottle of whiskey and poured a little into his glass. “Shireen is with Selyse.”

She gave him a vague smile. She didn’t particularly care what he had done with his plain, weird, little daughter.

“Are you all right?”

Cersei was taken aback. At the best of times, Stannis and she enjoyed a strained civility. The best of times did not occur often. She thought she detected a glimmer of concern although she couldn’t be certain. Stannis did not have the most expressive of faces. “I am perfectly fine, thank you.”

A cell phone went off and her attention was diverted.

“It’s Tyrion,” Bronn announced looking at the display. “Can I tell him he can come over?”

“May I,” Stannis corrected automatically.

Jaime looked at Brienne. “It’s up to you.”

“I don’t think he knows why you’re mad with him, Brienne,” Bronn said. He took the call.

Brienne shrugged. “I’m over it; it’s fine.”

Oh, goody, Cersei thought. Just what they needed, another freak for this circus and her day would be complete. She drained her glass.

“It’s not fine with me,” Asha announced. She went over to Stannis and Melisandre.

“They’re still mad at you,” Bronn said into the phone. “You’ll have to ask them why. They won’t tell me.”

Salladhor refilled Cersei’s glass. “I would have come to one of these parties sooner if I had known such a beautiful woman would be there.”

He probably thought that was a wonderful pickup line. Her grimace was replaced by horrified fascination as she watched Stannis and Asha settle on the sofa. Asha placed her hand on Stannis’ upper thigh. He didn’t move it.

Cersei’s head started to swim. She saw Davos go over to Brienne and lead her into the living room. The others began to cluster around the TV as well. She went into the kitchen. She ran the water and splashed it on her face.

“Are you all right?”

This was the third time someone had asked her that in less than an hour. It was the redhead. “I’m just wondering why my life is such a mess,” Cersei said bitterly. “This isn’t where I thought I would be. This isn’t what I wanted out of life.”

“Then change your life.”

* * *

Tywin let the lawyer, Barristan Selmy, do most of the talking. He watched his grandson squirm in
his chair as the man went point by point through the case against him. Cersei was being remarkably defensive even for her.

“There is no real evidence. The girl wants our money. It’s very simple, Mr. Selmy. If we pay her, she’ll go away.”

Tywin ground his teeth. It was with difficulty he kept himself pointing out that there was no “we” when it came to the money. It was his. This was not the time, however, for that particular conversation.

Without a word, the attorney inserted a DVD containing CCTV footage into the drive of his laptop. He angled it so that they could all watch.

As it played out, Tywin rose and went to the window. He’d already seen it.

By the end of the DVD, Cersei was shattered; Robert was disgusted; and Joffrey looked scared.

“Even if it could be suppressed, and our chances of achieving this are slim, there is more. The evidence is extensive.” He took them through everything the prosecutors had against Joffrey.

“District Attorney Luwin is willing to make a deal and I think it may be in Joffrey’s interest to take it.”

Tywin turned and sat down again. He listened as the lawyer gave them the details.

“The Wall!?” Joffrey said incredulously.

Cersei bit her lip.

“Five years in the Night’s Watch or risk ten in prison.”

Robert caught Tywin’s eye.

Tywin understood that look. He nodded. He knew what Robert wanted to do and for once, he agreed with his son-in-law on the appropriate course of action.

Robert rose. “Right, he’ll take the deal.”

It wasn’t as simple as that, of course. Joffrey protested. Cersei protested. Robert yelled. Cersei yelled. But in the end, Joffrey agreed to the deal. Perhaps it would be of some benefit in shaping Joffrey into some semblance of a human being.

Tywin was severely disappointed in Cersei. She had allowed this to happen. She had ruined the boy.

He hoped Olenna was right about the proper course to take with Jaime. She had counseled him that any interference from him would scotch Jaime’s relationship with Brienne Tarth entirely. He would stay out of it for now. If the time came, he would need to take steps though. He needed grandchildren—Lannister grandchildren.

* * *

Chapter End Notes
Great illustration from the amazing deisegal. Originally posted on Tumblr here.
Investment Planning

Chapter Summary

Brienne returns from a trip home to a full answering machine. In returning her calls she receives an offer of an opportunity and an apology. Ned and Catelyn find some time to parent Arya and realize just how distracted they’ve been.

Chapter Notes

There is a BSG reference, but no spoilers. Jaime sees cylons everywhere :)

* * *

Brienne unlocked the apartment door and set her overnight case down. As was her usual practice, she called her father to assure him she’d made it back from Tarth in one piece. After she unpacked, she played back the messages on her answering machine. Along with the usual mix of automated telemarketing calls, there was a message from Jaime, one from his father, two from Davos, and one from Tyrion.

Jaime thought he had spotted another Cylon. “The assistant is one, right? No, don’t tell me. Why didn’t you tell me about Leoben? Look, just call, okay?”

She really wished she had never told him about the show. She liked it just fine, but it wasn’t an abiding passion. No matter how many times she explained this, he still wanted to talk about it.

Tywin Lannister’s message was brief and businesslike. He provided a number. He asked her to call back at her convenience.

Davos’ first message was amiable. “I thought we might try that Myrish place we saw the other night. I’ll pick you up at 7:00. Call me to confirm.”

The second was odd. His voice was strained. Something work related had come up and he would have to reschedule.

Brienne still had no idea what her boyfriend did for a living. It had something to do with imports and exports, he said. He was vague on the details. Whatever it was it meant that Davos was often out of town and that it was sometimes hard to plan things with him.

There was an ex, with whom he had an amicable relationship. He had children. Brienne hadn’t met them and she wasn’t sure she wanted to. She liked his friend Salladhor, but was left with the sense that he was not someone to depend upon. She liked Davos and they were having fun together, but there wasn’t any heart to the relationship. Maybe it was because he was older than she. Or maybe, if she was honest with herself, it was because she really wasn’t cut out for a casual fling.

Olenna had insisted on meeting him. “Well, I suppose he’s all right for a stopgap, but I wouldn’t
get too attached,” was her only comment.

She replayed Tyrion’s message. It was like the other three he’d left on her cell phone. “Why weren’t you at work? I need you to call me. Brienne, this is important. Do not, I repeat, do not talk to my father before talking to me. CALL ME FIRST!”

Brienne rolled her eyes, picked up the phone, and called Tywin Lannister. To her surprise it was his home number. A servant answered. Brienne had never really known anyone who had “staff” beyond the occasional cleaning woman. She wondered what having servants must be like. She didn’t think she would care for it. While she waited, she flipped through her mail.

“Ms Tarth.”

They exchanged greetings.

“I recall you mentioning that you fence.”

She wasn’t sure “mentioning” was the right description. She had told him about it in the middle of a rant while they’d been in the ER with Jaime. “It’s been a while, but I was on a team when I was an undergraduate.”

“Do you happen to have any expertise in other types of sword fighting? Or do you perhaps know anyone who does?”

Brienne was taken aback. “I’m still in contact with one of my coaches; he’s an expert on a couple of different types of swords. I also have some experience with long swords.”

“Is this coach in King’s Landing?”

Brienne couldn’t begin to fathom why Tywin Lannister would possibly have an interest in sword fighting. “Yes, but I don’t think he takes private pupils anymore. He’s semi-retired.”

“A young associate of mine is involved with a business venture. She and her partners are selling armor and—”

“—Armor?”

“And weaponry,” he finished. “Apparently there is a market for this through something called the SCA as well as other less official groups.”

“Society for Creative Anachronism?” Brienne sat down. She knew a little about Tywin Lannister’s business interests, but only because of things Jaime said or what she read in the paper. This didn’t sound at all like it fit into his normal sphere of activities.

“Yes, I believe that is the correct meaning of the acronym. They also think there may be able to sell their products through ‘Ren Fairs’ and something called ‘cosplay.’ I’m not sure how familiar you are with these . . . activities.” His tone suggested they were new to him and that he found them both highly dubious.

“I’ve gone to a few renaissance fairs and I know what cosplay is, although it’s not something I’ve done myself.”

“I am relieved to hear it. My associate and her partners wish to stage some photographs and film a video so that they can showcase their products. They are interested in hiring an advisor to assist them and possibly someone to appear in the video and photographs. She would be willing to pay
for this expertise. The amount she has budgeted is small, but I would be happy to augment it. I would consider this a personal favor if you could help her.”

She thought a bit.

“Ms Tarth?”

“I’m here. I’m just a little surprised. Forgive me, but aren’t you usually involved in corporate finance and hostile takeovers?”

“This isn’t one of my corporation’s business ventures, no. She works for me. She’s exceptionally bright and she has several entrepreneurial projects underway. She came to me for advice.”

“I’ll be happy to do what I can, but I’m not a medievalist. I can ask Syrio. He was my coach.”

“Good.” He named a sum.

“You don’t have to pay me. I can suggest the amount to him and see if he’s interested. I should warn you, he’s pretty eccentric.”

Tywin Lannister sighed. “He should get along quite well with her then. The young woman’s name is Arya Stark.”

“That’s Sansa’s sister, right? Dr. Stark’s daughter?”

“Do you know her?”

“No, Sansa has talked about her a couple of times, though. I thought she was younger than Sansa.”

“She is.”

Brienne frowned into the phone. Sansa was about twenty or twenty-one, she thought. That would make her sister eighteen or nineteen.

He seemed to know what she was thinking. “I wouldn’t waste my time or your time if I didn’t feel there was some potential here.” He gave her Arya’s phone number and thanked her again.

Brienne hung up the phone and called Arya Stark. Arya was excited to hear from her. She explained the project and wanted to set up a meeting right away. Arya sounded nothing like her sister. Whereas Sansa was quiet and thoughtful, Arya was intense and exuberant.

“Would you be willing to be filmed? We have armor and everything.”

“I’m not a standard size,” Brienne managed. “I could show your actors how to pose and help with lessons. Syrio might better for your video. He’s forgotten more about sword fighting than most people learn in a lifetime, but I’m not sure about his medieval knowledge though.”

They set up a time to meet. Arya thanked her profusely several times before they ended the call.

She was just hanging up when the phone rang again. “Hello.”

“Thank the gods. Where were you?”

“Hello, Tyrion.”

“Why haven’t you called me back? I’ve been leaving you messages for days.”
“I was on the phone with your father.”

Tyrion audibly gulped. “I left you half a dozen messages telling you not to talk to him before contacting me.”

Brienne had forgiven Tyrion for humiliating her at the restaurant, but she was getting tired of the constant feeling of drama that engulfed him. She understood that he had a very difficult relationship with his father, but the man had been nothing but courteous to her. She saw no reason why she shouldn’t be civil in return. If Tyrion and Jaime wanted to cower every time their father came near them that was their business. She wasn’t about to live her life in fear and she refused to be drawn into their histrionics.

“I’m sorry. I told him not to ask you.”

The genuine regret and embarrassment in his voice baffled her. “I don’t mind.”

“You don’t?”

“Why should I? It sounds like it might be fun.”

“Fun?”

“Well, I want to learn more about it first and I don’t know how much time it will entail, but why not?”

“You’re serious.”

“He even offered to pay me.”

“Seven bloody hells.”

Brienne thought he was being ridiculous. “I told him that wasn’t necessary. Look, it’s kind of you to be concerned, but I’m an adult and I don’t need anyone looking out for me.” She glanced at her watch. “I have some things to do. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.” She hung up the phone.

* * *

Ned found his youngest daughter at the kitchen table with a calculator and piles of papers. “We haven’t seen much of you lately.”

Arya looked up and smiled at him.

“You’re never home anymore.”

“Well, I have classes, my job, and my projects. You and Mum aren’t around here when I am.”

Ned sat down at the table. His directorship and his courses were taking up most of his time. Cat had taken on yet another course for a colleague who was on sabbatical. Then there was Lysa and the challenge of taking care of Robin. There had been no time. He was aware that Arya was the one getting short shrift. “Are you working on something now?” He saw Catelyn coming down the backstairs and gestured her to come and join them.

“My finances,” she said.

He took that in. “For one of your courses?”
“No, my own finances. My earnings and stuff.”

“Your mother and I have been noticing you seem to be spending a lot of money lately. First you paid for your car repairs all by yourself. Then you bought all those clothes. We’ve been a little concerned about it.”

Arya nodded. “I got carried away.”

He was relieved at her admission. “You don’t have a credit card, do you?”

She shook her head. “No, Kevan said I should stay away from credit cards till I’m older.

Cat sat down. “Well, Kevan is absolutely right. You’re too young for a credit card. Is he someone from school?”

“No, from work.”

“How much do you need? We can lend you a little something until your next paycheck.”

Arya looked up. “I don’t need anything.”

Ned furrowed his brow. “What do you owe?”

“I don’t owe anyone anything. I just was spending too much of what I had. Kevan said that was a bad habit to get into. He said if and when your income decreases, it can be very hard to,” she paused. “Is ‘retrench’ the right word?”

Catelyn smiled. “Yes, that’s the right word. Kevan seems to know what he’s doing. Is he doing an internship or does he work a part-time job too?”

“No, he works there full-time. He’s an adult.”

“I just want to be clear. Are you in debt?”

Arya erased something on the paper. “No, Dad.”

“You don’t owe anyone any money.”

“I don’t owe anyone any money,” Arya confirmed. “I’m just trying to work out a budget.” She handed him a paper. “See that’s supposed to be what I aim for and that is supposed to be a record of what I actually spend.”

“You have a 401K?” Ned was flummoxed.

She nodded. “I won’t be fully vested for six years, but anything I put in I’ll be able to roll over into an IRA when I leave my job, plus my contributions won’t be taxable.”

Cat’s concern was evident. “Arya, this is just a part-time job, right? How much can you possibly be earning that you need to worry about taxes?”

“It’s not just about taxes. It’s about investing for my future when I retire.”

Arya was scarcely nineteen and she was worrying about her retirement. Ned sat back in his chair.

“Don’t you and Mum have something like that? Is Crownlands a non-profit?” Arya looked anxiously at them. “Or do you have pensions? Do you have IRAs?”
Catelyn looked at Ned. “We have retirement plans, yes.”

Arya was visibly relieved.

“It’s just you’re not even done with university, sweetling. It’s unusual to be so concerned with retirement at your age.”

Arya nodded. “I never thought about it before, but they told me that it was never too soon to plan for the future.”

Ned thought this recent enthusiasm for personal finance was odd, especially for Arya. “Who are ‘they?’”

“Kevan and his brother.”

“His brother works there too?”

“Yes. His brother is my boss, but I do stuff for Kevan too.” She pointed to a figure on the paper. “This is what I make each week after taxes and this is my share from Lemon Cakes. That’s not weekly though. I don’t know how to figure that part out. I’ll ask him tomorrow. He’ll explain it. I’m supposed to put in the maximum amount into the 401K, and I’m supposed to establish an emergency savings fund.”

“An emergency savings fund?” Catelyn said faintly.

“Don’t you have one?”

Ned nodded, “We do.” There wasn’t much in it at the moment, but he saw no reason to mention this fact to his daughter. He was about to ask what Lemon Cakes was, when Arya queried him.

“So why shouldn’t I?”

“Because if something happens, you’re our daughter and we’ll take care of you.”

“Ned, it’s not a bad idea for her to start saving.”

“Arya, are you worried we won’t have enough money if something happens?”

She shook her head. “I’m planning for my future. That’s why I need a budget. The savings fund will be for if my car needs repairs and later for when I graduate. It might take me awhile to become established.”

“We could have her to talk to the financial planner,” Catelyn suggested. “It might not be a bad idea for Sansa to do the same.”

“Cat, they’re children.”

“She has a 401k, Ned. She should have advice on what funds to pick for it.”

“I did have advice,” Arya said puzzled. She fished around in the pile of papers. “See, here’s my statement. They helped me figure out what funds to pick. I’m already making money.”

Ned looked at it. “She is.” She was doing better than they were percentagewise. Of course, she had less invested than they did.

“If I leave my job, I get everything I put in back. I just need to roll it into an IRA.”
Catelyn smiled at her. “We know how it works, Arya.”

“Oh.”

She went on. “We would still feel more comfortable if you talked to our financial planner. I think it’s wonderful that you’re thinking about your future.

Ned started to say something, but Cat made a face. He correctly interpreted that as a signal to shut up. They left Arya at the table with her calculator. When they were clear of the kitchen, Ned turned to Cat. “Don’t you think this is a little odd?” Of all their children, Arya was probably the least reflective, the least cautious.

“I don’t know who Kevan is, but everything she said he told her is sound advice.”

* * *
Florian & Jonquil!: The Musical

Chapter Summary

It's a typical Saturday in King's Landing. Catelyn discovers just what her daughters have been up to lately. Tyrion comes in to the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library to get some work done and learns a few things about his colleagues and what one of those colleagues thinks of him. Arya and her partners face a personnel crisis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Catelyn was not about to worry her husband, but she did find the shift in Arya’s behavior and attitudes unnerving. Arya wasn’t her only child giving her cause to feel uneasy. She found the change in Sansa alarming too. Sansa begged off dinner after dinner. On the rare occasions Cat was able to get ahold of her on the phone, Sansa always sounded harried.

So when Sansa phoned asking her mother for help, Catelyn agreed with alacrity. When she reached their apartment, Sansa and Margaery packed up her car with garment bags.

“What are all these things?”

“It’s for the project,” Sansa said vaguely. “Can you follow us there? Margaery’s car is full too.”

Catelyn agreed, vowing to find out more about this project once the delivery was completed. Sansa had not explained where “there” was, but it was a Saturday morning, and Margaery drove slowly enough so that there was no difficulty in following.

At first, she wondered if they were going to Margaery’s grandmother’s house when they headed into the part of King’s Landing favored by its elite. But the homes here were immense and fronted the Bay. Catelyn had a dim memory of Olenna Tyrell saying something at a function about having downsized. Margaery’s parents lived in the Reach. Margaery turned her car up the private drive of the largest mansion they’d passed yet. Catelyn saw the girl speak into an intercom and watched as the massive gates opened. She drove through as well. As she looked through the rear view mirror, the gates closed behind her.

They drove around to the back.

Arya came running up, holding a clipboard in one hand. “Mum! Can you stay and help?” Arya wanted to know. “I thought I had everything under control, but there are so many details!”

“What is going on?”

“It’s one of my business ventures,” Arya said not paying her mother much attention. She directed Sansa and Margaery to an outbuilding. “There’s a summerhouse in the gardens we can use as a dressing room. We just have to keep to the paths, okay? He doesn’t want the lawn trampled. Wait till you see the stone walls. They’re perfect for the background! Mum, can you help them carry the wardrobe stuff? I have to see how Syrio and Gendry are getting on.”
Before Catelyn could say anything, Arya hurried off. “What the—”

Sansa piled her mother’s arms with garment bags.

Catelyn followed her daughter and Margaery as directed. The gardens were grand. There was no other word for them. Catelyn’s family was wealthy, but her childhood home was nothing like this. The summerhouse was huge. Someone had already hung up sheets across the width of it.

“Those go on the left, Mum.” Sansa pointed. “They’re for the guys.” She headed to the other side.

They made several trips. Catelyn asked questions and got vague answers. It wasn’t that they were evading her, she thought. It was rather that everyone was so focused on their tasks that they had no time to explain their purpose.

Divested of the last load, Catelyn stepped outside of the summerhouse and headed toward the noise. She was startled to see lighting equipment and several people practicing with swords and foils.

Arya cast a smile her way but hurried off in the opposite direction with her clipboard.

“She’s something, that little girl,” a man commented from behind Catelyn.

Catelyn turned around. A pleasant looking man with grey hair and kind green eyes was watching the proceedings with amusement.

“You must be Arya and Sansa’s mother. I’m Kevan.”

“I’m Catelyn Tully. It’s so good to meet you. Arya has spoken of you a great deal.” She stood next to him so she could better see what was going on. “Is all this something for her job?”

Kevan laughed and shook his head. “No. This is entirely her own little business venture. Well, hers and her partners’. Arya is quite the entrepreneur. I doubt this will be as successful as their other project, but it’s certainly interesting.”

“Their other project?” Catelyn repeated weakly.

“She didn’t tell you anything about this, did she?”

“No, she did not.”

He took pity on her. “Do you want some coffee?”

“I think I need some,” Catelyn said, watching as an unprepossessing boy marched glumly out of the summerhouse clad in hose and doublet. “Who is that?”

“That’s Podrick. He’s Gendry’s roommate.”

“Gendry?”

Kevan pointed to a well-built, handsome young man, who was crossing swords with a slight man with curly black hair. They were both in costume. “Gendry Waters. Both of them are partners with Arya and Margaery on Helmets & Halberds.” He led Catelyn back to the summerhouse and showed her to a small table set out with boxes of coffee and doughnuts.

Armed with coffee, they walked over to a bench, where he assured her they would have a good view. “We’ll be out of the way here.”
“What are they doing exactly? And what is this other project you mentioned?”

“It may be easier to explain the latter to you.” Cradling his coffee, he told her about Lemon Cakes.

Catelyn listened intently. She was starting to relax when he got to the part about him and his brother actually investing money in this business venture. “$2000? She just turned nineteen,” Catelyn said faintly. “If this fails—”

Kevan smiled. He and his brother weren’t overly concerned about losing their investment. They thought highly of Arya. It wasn’t a great deal of money to him and his brother.

“This is your home,” Catelyn concluded. That explained his nonchalance. $2000 would be a drop in the bucket to them.

“It’s my brother’s.” He went on. The Tyrell girl would be pursuing a MBA and had some of the knowledge Arya lacked. Sansa kept her two partners grounded and the items she was designing and making had a market. He thought it a useful exercise for the three girls and one that would probably make them more than a little money.

Catelyn began to breathe again.

“Now this is something else.”

They watched Arya directing people here and there.

“Gendry and his roommate make weapons and leather armor respectively. Arya and Margaery provide the business acumen.”

“People buy swords and shields in this day and age?”

Kevan sipped his coffee. “Not nearly as many who buy knitting bags, but yes, apparently there is a niche market for this sort of thing.”

“But what are they actually doing?”

“They are shooting a video for their website,” he explained. “Somewhere around here, there’s a still photographer as well. They’ve taken photos of their swords and gauntlets and what all, but they wanted to capture the products in action.”

“Did you invest money in this too?” She was relieved when he answered in the negative.

Kevan drank more coffee. “We’re here in an advisory capacity. I must say, though, it’s been fascinating to watch all of this.” He waved his free hand to the spectacle in front of them and continued with his explanations. Sansa was not a partner in this, but she was helping out. She was assisting with the costumes. She had found a classmate who was a semi-professional photographer who willing to accept a nominal sum as a fee. Podrick was a theatre major and had provided them with a connection to the costumes. Margaery had pressed her brother and cousins into service. They, along with, Gendry, and Podrick would be players in the video.

Ned would be all right with this, she thought. Sansa and Arya were clearly getting along. That was a first. She was nervous about the money, but Kevan seemed to think they might actually turn a small profit.

“My brother arranged the introduction to Brienne. I understand she works for your husband.” He pointed to a tall young woman who appeared to be giving guidance to a skinny young man. “That’s
my son with her there. Brienne persuaded her coach to give them all instruction. He’s the man with the mop of curly black hair. And of course, Tywin is letting them film here. Although, I don’t think he had any idea how extensive this was going to be when he agreed to it.” Kevin chuckled.

Catelyn froze. She watched agape as Arya came up to consult a very tall, very grim looking man, standing on the edges of the activity. She was showing him something on her clipboard. It was Tywin Lannister.

* * *

The library was quiet for a Saturday. Groups of students had their heads buried in textbooks, but Tyrion recognized them as being a largely self-sufficient contingent. They were studying for exams, not writing papers. Tyrion peeked in at the reference floor on the way to his office. He spotted Petyr Baelish looking utterly miserable at the desk.

He thought about going over and greeting his colleague, but he knew there was an excellent chance that somehow Baelish would persuade him into taking his shift for him. He didn’t understand why Baelish was so phobic about reference duty. It couldn’t have to do with disliking people. Every time he saw him around campus, Baelish was talking to someone or another. The man was loath to let him speak with the faculty about collections. Baelish claimed he had a rapport with the faculty. He strongly preferred to relay Tyrion’s messages to them rather than allowing Tyrion to speak with them.

Tyrion didn’t care what Baelish preferred. Working with Varys and Olenna, he had begun approaching a few departments directly.

All the more reason to go straight to his windowless room and work on the bibliographers’ selection requests, he thought. Much of it was pro forma. He had learned pretty quickly who knew what they were doing and who didn’t. Olenna, Baelish, Varys, and surprisingly, Lysa, belonged in the former category. He wondered if that was because her late husband had done collection development or if it was just a natural talent on her part. Brienne, Stannis, and Asha weren’t bad.

Melisandre was horrible. He had no idea what kind of a reference librarian she was, but this made him wonder. If she had her way, she would spend his entire monograph budget on books about the Lord of Light, or as Asha was wont to call the deity, “LoL.” It was on these that he focused. He looked through the previous purchases she had recommended and pulled up circulation stats. It wasn’t encouraging. He knew that patrons sometimes used materials without checking them out. Tyrion supposed it was dimly possible that Crownlands students were consulting the numerous books on R'hllor: used for: Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. He would need to do his due diligence before he told her no.

Tyrion printed off call numbers from the catalog. He would go downstairs and inspect the books for signs of use.

“I thought I saw you here.”

He looked up to see Shae in his doorway. “Hi, I didn’t think you worked Saturdays.”

She shrugged. “Sansa needed the day off. I said I would switch.”

“So that’s why Baelish agreed to Saturdays.”

She made a face. “The man is a pig,” she told him in her native tongue.

“When is your shift over?” he asked.
“5:00.”

“Do you want to . . . we could do something.” After such a promising start, their relationship had stalled.

Shae’s expression was contemptuous. “I don’t think so.”

“Can you just tell me what it is that I did? Does it have anything to do with why every woman in this library is treating me like I have the plague?”

She gave a short little laugh. “That was because you insulted Brienne. No, that’s not why I don’t want to go out with you.”

“When did I insult Brienne?”

“Maybe you should ask her.”

“Look, forget about Brienne. Why won’t you see me?”

“Because you are a coward,” she said simply. She turned on her heel and walked out.

* * *

“What’s wrong with who we have now?” Arya wanted to know.

Margaery cast a critical eye on their talent. “The girls are fine. The men aren’t right. They’re too . . . reedy or too . . . nerdy.” She looked pointedly at Pod.

“His leatherwork is good,” Gendry protested. “And he is one of the few who actually knows how to use a sword.”

“Oh, no question, but he’s not quite right for our target demographic. Look at Loras. He’s my brother and I love him dearly, but he’s too skinny.”

Arya watched the people practicing with Syrio. She didn’t see what the problem was.

“What exactly does target demographic mean?” Gendry wanted to know.

“The customers to whom you are trying to market your product,” Mr. Lannister explained. He had been quiet since they set up that morning.

Gendry frowned. “Have you ever been to a Ren Fair, Margaery? Who do you think buys these things? Guys who look like Viggo Mortensen?”

That was when Arya finally understood what Margaery was talking about. “They want to pretend that they are knights and lords. They don’t want to see people who look like themselves. So we should have guys who look the part,” she concluded.

Margaery nodded. “Exactly.”

If Dad wasn’t working at the Library, Arya could have called him. She’d tried asking him to help this morning, but before she could even get the words out, he had kissed her on the forehead and headed out to his car. Arya looked hopefully at Mr. Lannister.

“No.”
“But you would look great,” she tried. He was old, but she thought that he would be impressive in armor and holding a sword.

“No. Don’t even think about asking Kevan either. He is just soft hearted enough to take you up on it and I do not care to have to explain to our investors why our CFO is appearing in costume on YouTube.”

Arya thought he was blowing it out of proportion, but she recognized his no as being very final.

“Jaime might be suitable, though.”

Arya had met Jaime Lannister a couple of times. She had no idea what he did at Casterly Rock Enterprises; he was one of the few people there whose name she remembered. He seemed to come and go as he pleased, but she thought he would make a good knight. “Is he still using the crutches?”

Gendry threw up his hands. “Crutches?”

“He has recovered from his injuries.”

“We just need him to pose,” Margaery said thoughtfully. “And maybe Syrio can give him very simple moves to do.”

Mr. Lannister took out his phone and called his son. He didn’t explain why he needed him. He simply ordered him to come over immediately. “That’s one.” He gestured to Brienne who was taking a break. She joined them and he explained the situation. “Perhaps the man you are seeing? Or your friends?”

She shook her head. “Davos refuses to be photographed. He would never consent. Maybe I could get some of the people from the library?”

Judging from the faces that both Margaery and Mr. Lannister were making, they were not in favor of this idea.

Gendry wasn’t so dismissive. “What about that guy with the beard?”

“Petyr Baelish? I don’t know him well enough to ask him to give up a Saturday.”

Arya made a face. “He’s reedy and nerdy. He’s just older.” He was always at their house and she thought he was creepy the way he sidled up to Sansa and her mom all the time.

“I don’t know his name. I’ve seen him around where you have the computers. He fixes them, I think.”

Brienne’s face cleared. “That’s Bronn. I could try him.”

“The grumpy librarian! He came in to my class and yelled at us about controlled something.”

“Controlled vocabularies? Stannis? Gods, I can’t even imagine him in a classroom. Olenna must have lost her mind.”

Mr. Lannister’s jaw grew tighter. but he made no comment.

Arya thought they were getting off topic. They were on a timeline and if they were bringing in anyone new, they needed to do it now. As it was, their reinforcements would probably be only able to do a couple of really basic things. There would be no time for Syrio to give them lessons the
way he had the others.

“I could call Stannis, but he might have his daughter. Is it all right if she comes too?”

“Sure,” Arya allowed. “She can even be in the video if she wants.”

“Are these men handsome?” Margaery wanted to know.

“Bronn’s not bad,” Brienne pronounced. “Stannis . . . he’s not my type, but he has his . . . admirers. He does pretty well as far as women are concerned.”

Mr. Lannister seemed taken aback.

Arya hadn’t met either of the men they were talking about. She went to the library every once in a while, but unless the people came to their house, they were just names her father mentioned on occasion.

“These are older men, though. Is that what you want?”

“If we put those guys in armor and gave them swords, they should look okay,” Gendry opined.

Margaery nodded. “We don’t have a lot of time or a lot of choice it seems. We’ll have to risk it.”

They went back to their separate tasks: Brienne to make phone calls; Gendry to continue rehearsing; and Margaery to the summerhouse to assist Sansa with the costumes. Arya looked down at her clipboard.

“This is a lot more complicated than I thought it would be,” she told him. She had wanted to be in the video, but Mr. Lannister strongly counseled her to focus her energies on coordinating the shoot.

“Managing individuals always is. They don’t always perform in the manner you require.”

Arya was surprised. Everyone always seemed to do whatever he told them to do.

“You appear to have everything under control, however. This might be a good time for you to speak with your mother.” He inclined his head to the bench where her mother and Kevan were sitting.

Arya noticed her mother seemed agitated.

“You didn’t tell her about all this, did you?”

Arya shook her head. She hadn’t meant to keep her parents in the dark. It was just that they were always so busy and they always seemed to be dealing with her other siblings. Besides when she did tell them what was going on, they overreacted. She had spent two hours she could have been spending on Lemon Cakes or with Gendry meeting their stupid financial planner. He had gone over everything and then just told her parents that she had her head screwed on right.

Mr. Lannister frowned. “One does not deceive one’s partners or one’s parents.”

“You told your son to come here and you didn’t say anything about what he’s going to have to do,” Arya pointed out.

His lips twitched momentarily before settling back into their habitual stern expression. “That is different.”
“How?”

“How?”

“Arya headed up the slope. She was halfway to her mother when it occurred to her to wonder just why Mr. Lannister thought having his son dress up as a knight and pose with a sword was best for him.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

So I had Margaery lump Loras in the "weedy" guy category. Here's my reasoning: there's a scene in the first season of the show where Loras tells Renly the reason he's so good is that he practices every day. We're in modern times. He would not be out there with a sword and shield like ever. I've made him a postdoc. Still very good looking, but weedy. He probably never sees the sun...
Chapter Summary

Saturday afternoon in King's Landing provides educational opportunities for everyone! At the Helmets & Halberds shoot, Stannis and Jaime prove that you can't judge a book by its cover. Meanwhile, Tyrion discovers that the sharing and pursuit of knowledge can be deadly--figuratively and literally speaking. Jaime discovers that he doesn't know his father nearly as well as he thinks he does. Sansa learns sometimes it's good to be impulsive. Brienne and Jaime share a few truths with each other.

Chapter Notes

The chapter is a little longer than usual. Also I did a few things that probably weren't expected, but if you're still reading, you really shouldn't be surprised . . .

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Arya watched Stannis Baratheon sourly. Bronn, the one Gendry had picked out first, was working out great. He signed the release without a murmur. He even told them he would waive the $25 fee. While they were talking to Bronn, Stannis took out his ballpoint pen and revised his release. Arya accepted the document before she realized what he’d done. Now they couldn’t use his face at all. It was true he agreed to forego his fee as well, but it was irritating. When consulted, Mr. Lannister told her not to worry about it. Stannis Baratheon was hardly anyone’s idea of knightly perfection or masculinity. They could use him in the background.

Arya left him, Kevan, and Mum to their discussion and trooped back down the hill to find that for once Mr. Lannister was wrong.

“He’s pretty good,” Gendry said with satisfaction.

Margaery nodded. “He’s kind of hot actually.”

Arya didn’t know about hot, but Stannis and Bronn were paying close attention to what Syrio was telling them, and they were both looking a lot more like medieval knights than either Loras or Lancel. “We won’t be able to use half his stuff.”

“Leave it to me.” Margaery flounced over to Stannis and attempted to use her considerable charms.

Gendry muttered something about Margaery relying far too much on her tits and he went back to sparring with Lancel.

It soon appeared that Gendry was right. Stannis proved immune to the power of Margaery’s cleavage and remained obdurate about changing the release.
Arya was about to charge in there when Sansa stopped her. “Edric says he can edit his stuff and it will look fine. Stannis is really stubborn. The more you push, the less he’ll bend.”

“He won’t even let his daughter be in the shoot.” They had plenty of girls to be the noble ladies, but Arya felt badly for Shireen. She was putting a brave face on it, but the teenager was clearly disappointed she wasn’t going to get to be in costume. “And he looks really good,” she said with disgust. “Like he’s a warrior.”

Sansa watched for a moment. “Yeah, he does. Maybe that’s why Melisandre—” She gave herself a little shake. “I can probably do something for Shireen.” Sansa went over to Edric, talked to him for a few moments, and then approached Stannis.

Stannis glanced over at his daughter who was trying to smile. He nodded to Sansa.

She came back. “He won’t change his mind about the release, but he said Shireen can get dressed up. Edric said he’ll make sure she’s not taped from the front.” Sansa went over to Shireen.

Arya felt a little better, but it still was annoying. She consulted her clipboard. They had a lot more to do before they could wrap. She was checking off something her list when Shireen ran up and hugged her.

“Thank you! Sansa says she has a dress that will fit me and there’s one of those tall pointy hats too!” Shireen raced down to her father and enveloped him in a hug as well.

According to Sansa, the hats were not period, but no one was going to care. Arya was more worried about their knights. She wished Brienne would do more than coach. She would love to have women fighters in this. But Brienne was very reluctant and Arya was hesitant to push any more than she already had. Next time, Arya thought.

“Arya?” Her mother came up to her. “Your Mr. Lannister has invited me to lunch.”

“Oh, okay.”

“When do you think you’ll be done?”

Arya looked at her notes. “I thought 5:30, but probably not till 7:00 or 7:30. Why?”

“Because when you get home tonight, we need to have a talk,” Mum told her.

** * **

Tyrion grabbed the meal he’d picked up on his way to the library and took the back way to the staff lunchroom.

Shae was already there. She ate Dornish food from a takeout container.

“So,” he began as he took a chair opposite her, “why exactly am I a coward?”

She didn’t reply.

“All right then, explain to me exactly when and how I insulted Brienne. I like Brienne. I respect her.” He thought Brienne was a little crazy getting mixed up with his father’s schemes, but he meant it. He did like her. “I would never—”

“You said she wasn’t pretty or good enough to date you or your brother.”
Tyrion was taken aback. “When did I say—”

“You wanted her to go to some party for Little Lord Shithead.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” He tried to remember exactly what he had said. “Well, that explains why they’ve been freezing me out.” He would have to apologize to Brienne.

Shae put the lid on the container and stood up.

“Now that we’ve established that I am a clueless jackass, perhaps you could explain why you think I’m a coward.”

“You are afraid of your father.”

“Everyone is afraid of my father,” he retorted.

“You don’t want to take me anywhere. You don’t want me to meet your friends or your family.”

Tyrion knew Shae had a point. He had been reluctant to take her out on proper dates, at least not to places that didn’t have a drive-thru or bench seats repaired with duct tape. “You’ve met Cersei and Little Lord Shit—well, Joffrey. Father is worse. He wouldn’t approve.”

“Of me?”

“Well . . . you’re not—it’s like with Brienne.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted him.

Shae walked out of the lunchroom.

Jaime pulled his car around the back of his father’s house. He was startled to see a large variety of unfamiliar cars parked there. His phone buzzed. It was Cersei demanding to see him. The text message didn’t read “could you come by?” or “come out, please” but “COME BY NOW.” After her performance at his party, he was hardly in the mood, and now he had an excuse. He texted her back, “At Father’s sorry.”

He was ushered into the dining room where Father and Uncle Kevan were just sitting down to lunch with Eddard Stark’s wife.

“Ah, Jaime, there you are, finally. Do you know Dr. Tully?”

Jaime exchanged greetings with her and with his uncle. He was at a loss to imagine just why Ned Stark’s wife would be lunching with Father and Uncle Kevan. Catelyn Tully seemed distinctly unnerved, although not by him, he thought. He knew her very slightly and only because she and her husband had been at Cersei and Robert’s once or twice.

“I would ask you to join us, but you are needed out back. I believe they are ordering pizza when they break for lunch.”

“Out back? Needed for what? Who are ‘they?’”

“Go out to the summerhouse,” Uncle Kevan told him trying and failing to swallow a grin. “They’ll tell you what to do.”

Father looked at him expectantly.
When Father wore an expression like that, there was nothing for it. Jaime went.

By the time he reached the summerhouse, he felt like his jaw would never shut again.

Margaery Tyrell was garbed in a flowing blue medieval style gown with rather dramatic décolletage. She also had on a conical headdress. “There you are,” she greeted him impatiently.

He wondered if this was some scheme of his father’s to get him married off, but if it was the lady was plainly not interested.

“You’re late. Arya, he’s here!”

Jaime was startled to see the young woman who worked for his uncle at Casterly Rock Enterprises bearing down on him with a clipboard. He had never really paid much attention to her there except to question why Father would allow such a young girl to work for them.

“Oh, good. You don’t have the crutches anymore. We were afraid we’d have to Photoshop them out.”

Jaime blinked. “I don’t suppose anyone would like to tell me what’s going on.”

Arya handed him a slip of paper. “You need to sign this, please.”

It appeared to be some sort of release. “I don’t think so,” he told her with a smile.

She sighed. “Mr. Lannister said you might be difficult. Margaery, could you go get him, please?”

Jaime was incredulous. “You’re going to tell on me to my father?”

They were irritated with him, but were otherwise totally unconcerned.

“It’s just going to waste time if we have to get Mr. Lannister,” Arya told him. She was a young, pretty girl, but she gave him an utterly ruthless stare.

He knew then his father would actually come down and intimidate him into cooperating. “At least, tell me what I’m signing away here.” He took her pen and her clipboard and wrote his signature on the form.

“I find it’s best to just go along with it,” someone said in his ear.

He turned around. Joffrey’s ex-girlfriend, the one who had always looked like a scared mouse, took him by the elbow. “We have to get you out of those clothes.”

“I’ll have a copy of this for you before you leave along with your $25,” Arya said brightly as she grabbed the release out of his hands. “Sansa will tell you what to do.” She bustled away.

Sansa led him into the summerhouse. She looked at him critically and then pulled out a shirt and breeches off of a garment rack. “You can get changed on that side. There are a bunch of boots too. Don’t worry about how they look. Just find a pair that fits. They can shoot you from the waist or the knees up if they have to. Pod will be up with the armor in a minute.”

“Armor?” he asked weakly, but she was gone.

* * *

Tyrion now understood why the library’s basement was universally loathed. Rather than
brightening the space, the fluorescent lights made it seem like the lab of a hospital where forgotten researchers toiled on solving mysteries man was not meant to know. The lights were on a timer, and if the sensors detected no activity in a section, they would shut off. He was in the Bs and there were evidently issues with the sensors here, because even when he was moving around, he found himself in darkness several times.

The third time it happened, he decided to grab a book cart and examine the titles in question in his office—his windowless office that was beginning to seem like a paradise compared to the stacks.

He was filling the cart when the lights went off again. Feeling like a first class fool he waved his hands above his head. The lights did not come back on.

“Oh, this is just great,” he muttered to himself. “Could my day get any worse?”

It was at that moment that the telltale beeps indicating that someone had depressed the buttons to open the shelves, sounded directly behind him.

“Hey, I’m in here,” he called. “If you can wait a minute, I’ll get out so you can get your books."

No one answered, although the lights flickered on again.

Tyrion was midway down the aisle with a book cart blocking the closest means of egress. The shelving started to compress. With his foot, he tapped the red and white striped line at the base of the shelves. This was supposed to stop their progress—supposed to being the operative word. “I’m in the aisle!” he yelled louder. “Hit the red button. The one shaped like a stop sign.”

As a child he had loved *Star Wars*. As he tried to get to the other end of the aisle, it flashed through his mind that he was living out the scene in the trash compactor.

The book cart was metal. It was beginning to buckle. He began to head down the other way only to see that someone had placed a second book cart there as well.

The lights turned off.

“I’M BETWEEN THE SHELVES! HIT THE STOP BUTTON!”

“THE BUTTONS AREN’T WORKING! WHOMEVER IS DOWN THERE, GET THE HELL OUT NOW! RUN TOWARD MY VOICE!”

Tyrion didn’t need to be told twice. He ran.

* * *

Sansa and Margaery collapsed side by side onto the sofa at the same time.

“I didn’t think it was possible to be this tired,” Margaery commented after a few minutes.

Sansa was in complete agreement with her. “It was good, though, right? We got everything done we were supposed to.” She thought the video would look amazing.

“We did.”

“Even Arya seemed happy at the end.”

Margaery laughed. “She’s a slave driver, your sister. Did you see Lancel Lannister’s face when she told him he wasn’t trying hard enough?”
“He improved though.”

“Some men like being told what to do.” Margaery grew speculative. “I bet he asks her out.”

Sansa sat up. “She fancies Gendry. Ow.”

“What?”

“Just my back.” Sansa tried to reach her shoulder. It had been so much work. She wasn’t even supposed to be involved with Helmets & Halberds, but she’d gotten sucked into it. Arya just wore her down till she said yes and Sansa always had a hard time saying no to Margaery.

“Let me.” Margaery sat up on her knees and rubbed Sansa’s back. “How’s that?”

Sansa moaned. “Don’t stop. Can you imagine how the guys must be feeling? At least we didn’t have to go out there and fight for seven hours.”

“No, we’ve just been working on this for over a month.”

“Are you really going to make any money off of this? The stuff, er the products,” she corrected herself, “cost so much. How many people are going to buy bracers and dirks?”

Margaery kneaded Sansa’s muscles. “Enough. I think if we try marketing some of Pod’s items to other outlets, we’ll make decent money.”

“Smaller, less expensive things,” Sansa suggested. “Maybe we can do what we did with Lemon Cakes and give a few pieces out to create buzz. Gods, right there. That feels amazing.”

“I can’t see Cersei Baratheon wearing one of Pod’s leather bracers, although the Mother knows, she wears some weird things.”

“I wasn’t thinking of rich, middle-aged women,” Sansa said, pulling away and turning to face her friend. “I was thinking of girls like us, well, not us but in our age group. Maybe some edgier girls. He could make bracelets or something. We could think about iron jewelry maybe.”

Margaery’s beautiful blue eyes widened. “That’s absolutely brilliant! I never thought of that. We’ll get Arya to work on Gendry. If we suggested it, he’d say no. She can persuade him and then he can persuade Pod. You’re a genius, Sansa!”

Sansa leaned over and kissed Margaery full on the mouth. It was an impulse and she pulled away almost instantly.

Margaery wrapped her arms around Sansa and kissed her right back. “I’ve wanted to do that for such a long time.”

* * *

“Well, there is only one explanation,” Jaime pronounced as he lay flat on his back on the floor of the summerhouse, “my father has lost his mind.”

Brienne laughed and took a swig from a water bottle. She was sitting against the wall. Everyone else was gone. Arya had been the last one to leave. The young woman was meticulous in making sure everything had been returned to its original state. Then she waited while Tywin Lannister inspected his property. After he pronounced his satisfaction, they both left.

“I mean, college boys playing with swords? Girls dressed as medieval ladies? Stannis and Bronn in
“They looked quite handsome actually.” For a moment, Brienne had understood why Asha and Melisandre were into Stannis. It was something about his expression as he raised the sword at Jaime’s cousin. It was the look of a man who would take no prisoners, a man who would never stop until he achieved victory. She wasn’t about to admit it aloud, however. In any case, the moment passed and he went back to being just Stannis.

Jaime snorted. “Brienne, you’re missing the point. This is my father we’re talking about. The man smiles so infrequently my uncles can count the occurrences on one hand. He has no tolerance for anything comic, none. Our childhood name day parties were about as cheerful as having root canals without anesthesia. Father permits no disruption to his home or his routine. And it was chaos here, all cheerfully being directed by that martinet of a little girl, with his blessing. He must have gone insane.”

“He seems to like Arya. He spoke quite highly of her on the phone.” Brienne liked Arya too. She was young, but she was organized and she was direct. You knew where you were with those kinds of people.

“Well, she certainly is as ruthless as he is. Did you see how she lit into me?”

Brienne tried not to laugh. After the shock had worn off, Jaime had grown cocky. She thought it might have to do with how splendid he looked in full kit. Every woman and a few of the men stared at him with their jaws slightly slackened. And then he joined the filming.

Syrio gave them some very basic moves. There wasn’t time to teach them anything elaborate. Stannis and Bronn were careful. Jaime was not. With one thrust of a long sword, he took out an extra tripod, one of the carts with the extra armor, and Elinor Tyrell’s grande non-fat caffe latte. Brienne still couldn’t work out how he had managed to fall flat on his arse. Arya had not held back her displeasure.

“You should have listened to Syrio.”

Jaime took umbrage. “I was trying to lend a little style to the production. At least Father wasn’t there to see it. That’s another thing, why was he having lunch with Ned Stark’s wife? It’s very weird.”

“I think they asked her to help bring the costumes.”

“My father had Catelyn Tully Stark carting headdresses and doublets to his back garden? It’s madness, Brienne. Utter madness. Hey, can I have some of that water?”

“I thought you said you were going to remain in that position for the rest of your life.” But she threw it to him. “Sansa and Arya probably asked her, not your father. She’s their mother after all.”

Jaime let the bottle fall to the ground. “The little tyrant with the clipboard is Eddard Stark’s daughter?”

She rolled her eyes. Fortunately, he couldn’t see her expression from his supine position. “Yes.”

“Father has Ned Stark’s daughter working for us in the administrative suite and he let her turn his back garden into a low budget production of ‘Florian and Jonquil!: The Musical’?”

“I think you’re exaggerating the lunacy of today’s events and your father is the sanest man I have ever met.”
“Brienne, she’s Ned Stark’s daughter. Father loathes the man.” Jaime reached out. “I would suggest to Cersei and Tyrion that we declare him non compos mentis if I didn’t think he’d kill us in the process.” Jaime propped himself up on his elbows. He drank, gave the water bottle back to her, and dropped back down so that he was staring at the ceiling again. “Why didn’t you tell me you had signed up for this circus? I could have gone into training.”

“Don’t be such a drama queen. You’ll be sore for a day or two and then you can go back to living on your sofa.” She capped the water bottle and set it next to her. “I tried telling Tyrion and he practically stopped speaking to me. I didn’t think you’d be interested or I would have.”

“I do not live on my sofa—what was that about Tyrion?”

“I don’t know what happened. He left me a bunch of messages about how I wasn’t to speak to your father. I really didn’t see why not and when I told Tyrion about Arya’s project, he started to avoid me.”


Brienne rolled her eyes. “Tell him what?”

“He thought Father had asked you to—” Jaime laughed harder. “Wait, did Father offer to pay you for helping in this—” he waved a hand in the air.

“Yes.” Brienne didn’t understand why it was so funny. “He said Arya could pay me a nominal sum, but that he would be happy to give me more if I needed it. I told him no. I don’t regret it if that’s what you mean.”

Jaime laughed so hard she thought he might be having a fit. Finally he pushed himself back up into a sitting position.

“What is so funny?”

“Father told Tyrion that he thought you would be a suitable wife for me and he asked Tyrion if you were interested in me. Tyrion told him you were dating Davos and that if he wanted to know what you thought about me, Father should ask you. And Father—because he has absolutely no respect for our personal privacy—said he would. Tyrion was calling to warn you.”

Brienne was confused. “What?”

“I think you and Tyrion were talking at cross purposes. You thought he was warning you about this craziness and he thought he was warning you about Father’s matchmaking. Then he called to warn me because he said you were—”

“He thought I was planning on seducing you,” Brienne said slowly. “That’s why he has been giving me those weird, disappointed looks.”

Jaime went into another paroxysm of laughter.

Brienne flung the water bottle at him, hard.

“Hey! What’s the idea?”

“You’re an arse, you know that.” She stood up.

“Wait. I didn’t mean to—” He stopped laughing. “Brienne, look, my father has been pressuring me
to get married for almost twenty years. It’s a compliment that he likes you. He doesn’t like a lot of
people. He certainly doesn’t like any of us.”

Brienne brushed off the back of her jeans. “It’s not your father I have a problem with. He’s always
treated me with courtesy. If he laughs at me, he’s never done it to my face. That’s more than I can
say for you or Tyrion.”

“Father doesn’t smile let alone laugh, I told you. And I’m not laughing at you.”

She glared at him.

“Brienne, this isn’t about you. It’s about the situation.”

She couldn’t stop herself. “You’re not exactly a prize, you know. Yes, I know you’re rich or are
you? I’ve never been sure if you’re sponging off your father or what. You do nothing all day long.
At least Tyrion has a job.”

“I have a job,” he said indignantly.

“When do you go to it? All you seem to do is lie on your sofa watching television and feeling sorry
for yourself. You cower in fear of your father—”

“Everyone is afraid of my father.”

“—and you make a joke out of everything and everyone around you. What were you going to do
today? Watch more Battlestar Galactica?”

“It happens to be a very good show.”

“—Stannis and Bronn came out here uncomplainingly and gave up a Saturday to help out and all
you could do was whine and be snide.”

Jaime got to his feet. “Excuse me? Bronn spent most of the time leering at Margaery and her
cleavage. Stannis revised the release so much I doubt they’ll be able to use his elbow in their stupid
little video—”

“—Stannis gave back the $25 fee, as did Bronn.”

That shut him up.

“And neither he nor Bronn spent the entire time making cracks. They also didn’t trip over thin air
and fall down the way you did.” She found her bag on the stone bench. “I have to go. I have a
date.”

“With the man who won’t consent to be photographed or filmed?”

Brienne froze. She hadn’t thought anything about it at the time until Salladhor had refused as well.
Oh, they’d been nice about it, but they had been emphatic. No photographs. No videos.

“I wonder why that is. What exactly do he and Salladhor do for a living? I do, as a matter of fact,
have a job. I telecommute. Father hates it, but he consented when I told him it was the only way I
would ever work for him. What is your boyfriend’s job?”

“It’s none of your business what Davos does. Leave my boyfriend out of this!”

“Why in the seven hells should I? You’re busy critiquing my life!”
She was practically yelling now. “Why exactly do you get the right to walk all over me? Because I’m not pretty? Because I’m not rich? Do you just sit around thinking up ways to make fun of me? It’s not hard you know. People have been doing it my whole life!”

“This was not about you!”

It felt like it was about her. “I’m going.”

“What do I need to do, drop to my knees, and swear on my honor that I wasn’t making fun of you? Tyrion wasn’t either. He was afraid you were going to get caught up in one of Father’s schemes. He was concerned for you.”

“Until he thought I was a gold digger.”

“He thought you were offering to marry me for free.”

Brienne resisted the strong urge to kick him.

“Have I been avoiding you? Have I treated you like I thought you were trying to drag me to the altar?” Jaime ran his hands through his hair. “Brienne, what’s the problem here? Is this like when Tyrion wanted you to go to the party with Stannis? No, that can’t be it. Look, Tyrion is an idiot, which is ironic, because everyone, even Father, thinks he’s the smart one. I thought he had been drinking when he called to warn me. And do not bring up your looks. You’re very attractive and you know it—all right, not now with that murderous gleam you have in your eyes—but ordinarily, you are. I couldn’t believe it because I know you. You’re a profoundly honest, decent person. You’re also one of the few people in my life right now who isn’t barking mad.”

“Oh.”

“That’s your response, wench? ‘Oh?’”

“I thought . . .” She wasn’t sure what to say. “Tyrion . . .”

“He got panicky around Father. We all do. Even Cersei, even though she denies it,” Jaime explained. “We turn into tongue-tied five-year-olds.” He sat on the floor and then stretched out again. “Can you sit down, please? You’re looming.”

“I should go. I do have a date with Davos.” But she sat.

He turned his head toward her. “I meant it earlier. What’s his job?”

“It’s something with imports and exports,” as she said it she knew how fishy it sounded. He didn’t want his picture taken. He was always down at the docks. He had a lot of ready cash. He went away for extended periods of time. The fingers . . . She groaned. “Seven hells, I am so stupid!” Brienne lay on her back too. “Do you think it’s drugs? Or guns?” Her imagination started going wild.

“Do you really want to know?”

“No,” she admitted. Brienne pulled out her phone and sent a text to Davos. “There. I said couldn’t make it.” She shut the phone off. “Gods, I hate lying.”

“Do you love him?”

“It’s not like that.” She was an idiot. The one time in her life she did something impulsive and she
chose to date a drug runner. “I like him, liked him, I mean. It was nice to have someone to go out to dinner with, to take me to the movies.”

Jaime turned on his side to face her. “To do things to?”

She felt herself blushing and was grateful for the growing darkness. “I’m not in love with him; let’s just leave it at that.”

“Good,” he said in a quiet voice.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

As far as I know compact shelving has never killed or injured anyone, but since the electronic systems have safety features built into them, I assume the potential is there.

Setting is my weak point, so if you want to get a better sense of how compact shelving works, you can take a look at this video. I watched a bunch of these, but this comes closest to what I envisioned.

I have not yet worked in a library with compact shelving, but it has been my distinct displeasure to work in several which had lights on a timer. There is nothing quite like sitting quietly working when the lights go out on you, and then having to practically do calisthenics to get them to come on (shut up, Stannis. I'll split my infinitives whenever I like).
Cersei has an unwelcome visitor. Ned and the senior management of the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library deal with the fall out of the failure of the compact shelving. Brienne faces an ordeal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Cersei turned the sedan up into the driveway. When she saw the girl standing at the side of the house, she swore silently and slammed on the breaks. “Go in through the front door. I’ll be in shortly.”

“But I need help with my math homework,” Tommen whined.

Cersei whipped her head around. “IN THE HOUSE NOW.”

“It’s okay; I’ll help you,” Myrcella told him.

Cersei recovered her temper. She smiled at her daughter. “Thank you, sweetling. I’ll be in to check it over in a little bit, Tommen. Mother is sorry she snapped at you.”

Her children obeyed and she waited till they were safely inside. She drove the car into the garage and stepped out.

The girl watched her.

“Go to the patio, out back.”

“I want to see him. You can’t keep me from him.”

Cersei gritted her teeth. “You have two choices. You can go out to the patio or you can leave with the police.”

The girl chose the first option.

Cersei followed her. She gestured to the girl to have a seat. They had already taken the cushions in. Autumn was in full force and it was too cold to sit out here anymore. Cersei sat on a wrought iron chair and looked at Robert’s latest whore. This one was blonde and leggy. The last had been brunette and busty. He didn’t really have a type.

“You can’t keep me from him,” she repeated.

Cersei pulled out a pack of cigarettes from her bag. She proffered them to the girl who shook her head. “He’s not here.” She found a lighter; fished out a cigarette; and lit it. She carefully hung her
Mryish silk purse on the arm of the chair. It was a present from her father and it wouldn’t do to let the damp from the ground damage it.

The girl started to speak, but stopped when Cersei held up a hand.

“My children are inside so I’ll thank you to keep your voice down.”

“I need to see him.”

“He’s not at home,” Cersei repeated. “But that’s not why you’re here, isn’t it? You want to see me. Oh, this will be fun.”

The girl tucked a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear. “You don’t understand—”

“—Oh, but I do. In fact I already know what you’re going to say.” She took a drag from the cigarette and exhaled. “All right, you go to Crownlands. You met my husband at some reception because you’re gifted and talented or you got some honor or you went to interview him for that wretched rag of a college newspaper? Something like that?”

“I won an award,” the girl said slowly.

“How clever you must be.” Cersei smiled bitterly. “You didn’t set out to sleep with my husband because he was old and fat and bloated, but he charmed you and in spite of yourself . . .” She stopped. Her arrow wasn’t hitting its mark. “No, let me guess, you’re one of the girls who likes older men. The ones your own age seem so callow and dull.”

The girl flushed.

“I thought so. Did he tell you he loved you or was he just fucking you? No, you wouldn’t be here if he was just fucking you.”

“He loves me—he said he—”

Robert was nothing if not predictable. “So you had an affair and it was everything you ever dreamed of. He told you he could never leave me because of the children or perhaps he told you what a vicious bitch I am, but you didn’t care because you were with him.”

The girl opened her mouth and shut it.

“But then he stopped taking your calls. He canceled your trysts.” She took another drag of the cigarette. “How far along are you?”

The girl paled. “How did you—ten weeks.”

Gods, she was so tired of this. “My husband has three children with me and sixteen bastards with a host of stupid little sluts like you. I thought at first he wanted enough to sire enough brats for a soccer team, but now it appears he’s trying to fill a league.” She rummaged in her bag and produced a checkbook and a gold pen. “He won’t leave me for you and I think you’ll find your little affair is over. He’s already onto the next coed who can’t keep her legs closed. That’s why he’s not taking your calls.”

She remembered the first time she had been forced to have this conversation. Their baby was dead. Robert would go off every day and leave her, even though she’d begged him not to. It had been all she could do to get out of bed and get dressed. And then one morning someone had rung the doorbell.
By the time she’d finished speaking with that first young woman, who was her age and had her coloring, Cersei’s marriage was dead too. It was a devastating realization to discover that she was merely one in a long chain of gullible girls. She wasn’t even the first.

“Robert doesn’t know about the baby yet. If he knew, he wouldn’t—”

“If you tell him, it will make no difference. Oh, if you have the baby, he’ll give you some money. He might even visit once or twice, but then he’ll get bored with your child. He’s already bored of you. Or you can take steps and move on with your life.” Cersei waited.

“Can I have one of those?” The girl pointed to the cigarettes.

Cersei pushed the pack and the lighter toward her.

“Sixteen?”

“Sixteen,” Cersei confirmed.

The girl and she smoked in silence for a few moments.

“I’ll give you enough for your trouble and your silence.” Cersei smiled at her sweetly, “But if you ever come here again, I’ll rip out your throat.”

“I don’t want your money,” the girl said. She threw the cigarette on the patio and ground it out with her shoe.

That made a change. Usually they cried. Most of them took the money. A few were stupid enough to try and come back, but a call to Father always did the trick there.

“You’ve had this conversation sixteen times before?”

“More,” Cersei took another drag of her cigarette. “They’re not always pregnant.”

“Fuck him. Nobody treats me this way. He’s not good enough for me.”

Cersei stood up.

“I’m sorry for—I didn’t mean to—”

She stubbed out her own cigarette. “I don’t want your apologies.”

The girl hesitated. “You know something? He’s not good enough for you either.” The girl zipped up her jacket and walked away.

Cersei stared after her long after she disappeared from view.

* * *

The EMTs had come and gone. The police had come and gone. Even Lieutenant Janos Slynt of Crownlands Campus Security had come and gone.

Varys stood by the conference room windows and watched the man lumber into his car. “Such an incurious man,” he commented. “One wonders how he ever decided to pursue a career as a police investigator.”
“I heard someone down there,” Tyrion insisted. “I heard the beeps.”

Ned believed him. He’d come in to work on some reports. Just as he was about to pack up, Petyr Baelish, who had been staffing the reference desk, came by to chat. It had mercifully been a short talk. Petyr had casually mentioned that they’d just acquired the biography of Baelor the Blessed Ned had suggested they add to the collection.

It had been so long since he just read a book. He reached a good stopping place and then looked up the book in the catalog. Armed with the call number, he’d gone to the basement. He was heading down to the DAs when he heard Tyrion shouting.

“The echoes are bad in the basement,” Baelish said with a sad little smile. “Your ears may have been playing tricks on you.”

“I heard it too.” He’d told Slynt and he’d told the other officers, who had been polite. His leg was throbbing. Ned had cut it on a jagged piece of the now broken metal book cart trying to move it out of the way so Tyrion could get through. The EMTs bandaged it, but it hurt like hell.

“You should have gone to the hospital,” Olenna said. “Freak accident, my arse. We need to go over that idiot’s head. He’s worse than useless.”

“The sensors have never worked right.” Baelish stroked his goatee.

Ned looked at Varys, who shook his head.

“After Jon Arryn’s death, I had the electricians go over everything with a fine-toothed comb. Everything was properly realigned.”

“Why wasn’t it done in the first place?” Ned asked sharply.

“It was,” Varys insisted.

Tyrion thrust his fist deeper into the ice. They’d found a plastic bowl left over from a library function and filled it with ice from the soda machine in the cafeteria. He muttered something the dangers of cutting corners to save money.

Ned thought he had a point and said so.

“The money for the compact shelving was paid for by a donation from the Joanna Lannister Foundation,” Varys pointed out. “We chose a state-of-the art product. No expense was spared.”

“Oh.”

“Did campus electricians install it?” Olenna inquired. “It would explain a great deal if they did. It seems the only requirements for the job are a tool belt and an ability to spit in the most disgusting way possible.”

“The vendor did the installation initially and double checked it after Jon Arryn’s death.”

Olenna drew herself up. “We need to get a proper investigator in here.”

“For what?” Petyr interjected. “To tell us that the sensors are out of alignment? Of course, the vendor swears everything is fine. It’s in the company’s best interest to attest to its equipment being in working order.”

She rolled her eyes. “Once is a freak accident. This is the fourth incident. It's the fifth if we count
“Would someone like to tell me about incidents one, two, and three?” Tyrion asked.

“Someone dropped all five volumes of the Library of Westeros Subject Headings from the top balcony and nearly killed Ned,” Olenna snapped.

“Stannis—” Baelish began.

Ned knew he needed to regain control. “Stannis had an ironclad alibi, Petyr.” The nature of the alibi boggled Ned’s mind, but it was a legitimate one.

“He wants to be library director,” Baelish insisted.

“So it’s not a freak accident? One finds this very confusing, dear Petyr.”

“Why would Stannis want to kill me?” Tyrion asked.

Ned thought that was a reasonable question.

“Perhaps you weren’t the intended target,” Petyr suggested in a silky voice.

“And I was? Stannis may want to be a library director. But he’s not a murderer and he’s hardly the type to creeping about the basement to off me. How would he know when I was going into the stacks? How would he know what section to compress? Look, I know we’re all upset, but I think Olenna is right—”

“I usually am,” she murmured.

“Tyrion, I think you should go to the emergency room to get that hand checked out. I’ll see what can be done about getting someone more thorough than Slynt to look into all of this. We’ll have to figure out what to do about the stacks for tomorrow. We cannot let the patrons down there.”

Baelish wasn’t done. “Stannis knew you wanted that book on Baelor the Blessed. He cataloged it himself and he made a point of telling me to tell you it was in. He could have—”

What in the name of the old gods and the new did Cat and Lysa see in this twerp? Ned interrupted, “I wasn’t anywhere near the BLs.”

“What?”

“The biography’s call number was in the DAs. They’re on the other side.”

Petyr blinked.

“Is this the one by Dontos Hollard?” Tyrion asked.

Ned nodded.

“I read that. It focuses on the political side of Baelor’s reign. Stannis must have decided it belonged with the other Targaryen histories.”

“So that would seem to let Stannis out.” Ned looked at Tyrion. “I’m serious about going to the emergency room.” All he needed was Tywin Lannister on his back. “Petyr, thanks for coming in. Would you be willing to drive Tyrion to the hospital?” He looked at them pointedly.
Tyrion didn’t need to be told twice. Baelish did.

“But if you’re still—”

“Olenna, Varys, and I need to figure out how we’re going to handle monograph retrieval.”

They waited until they heard the door to the administrative suite shut.

“Stannis isn’t the only one with ambitions to be a library director,” Varys murmured.

Not this again. “You’re ignoring the fact that it was Tyrion who was nearly killed, not me.”

Olenna tapped her nails on the table. “Tyrion wasn’t anywhere near the building when someone tried to drop fifty pounds of thesauri on your head.”

“One does wonder why Stannis isn’t here.”

“I called him,” Ned said. “Shireen answered. She said something about him being in armor and not being able to come to the phone.” He winced again.

“I am not sure,” Olenna said faintly. “That we want to know where Stannis was or what he was doing. Varys and I can work out what to do for the stacks tomorrow. You need to go to the hospital too. I think Shae is still here. She can drive you.”

Ned stood with difficulty. He knew she was right. Blood was already starting to seep through the bandages.

As he hobbled out of the building following Shae to her car, it occurred to him suddenly that Olenna and Varys had pushed him out of the meeting just as he had pushed Baelish.

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Brienne folded and refolded the paper from the straw for her orange juice. This would be a first for her. Her few boyfriends had always broken up with her. She had never been the one to do the breaking up.

Davos gave his order to the waitress.

He was personable and affable as always. She had fun with him. It wasn’t anything deep, but it had been enjoyable. She had needed fun in her life.

“Brienne?” he prompted. “What would you like?”

“Uh, two scrambled eggs dry, wheat toast.” When did you break up with someone? After the coffee came? During the meal? After the meal? Before the check? Hyle dumped her via text. That had hurt like hell. She couldn’t do that to Davos, not even if was a drug smuggler.

“Something is wrong,” he hazarded. “Is this about me not helping your friend out the other day? I’m sorry about that, but—”

“It’s not about you not helping. Dressing up and playing with swords is not everyone’s cup of tea. It’s why you wouldn’t help.”

Davos poured some cream into his coffee. “I know I’m not an educated man, Brienne, but it seems
to me you just contradicted yourself.”

She began methodically rolling the straw wrapper.

He put his hand on hers. “What’s going on?”

“I put some things together,” she said softly. With her free hand she touched the stubs of his severed fingers.

He leaned back. “Well, I won’t lie to you.”

She gave him a wild-eyed look.

“Would it help if I told you it’s not drugs?”

Brienne felt some of the tension release from her body. “Guns?”

“Not those either. No one gets hurt. I have some standards. It’s mostly food stuffs: raw milk cheeses, dry-cured hams; Tyroshi brandy.”

“But the fingers . . .”

Davos shrugged. “Occupational hazard, I’m afraid. The raw milk cheese cartel can be . . . unpleasant.”

There was a raw milk cheese cartel? No, she thought, she did not need to know. He wasn’t running guns or drugs or Lyseni sex slaves. That was the important thing.

“I started out with nothing, Brienne. I didn’t have your advantages.”

“I don’t expect you to apologize; it’s just I can’t . . . if I loved you it would be different.” There it was out.

He took pity on her. “Well, no one can say we didn’t have fun. Friends?”

The waitress deposited their breakfasts in front of them.

To her surprise, he started to tuck in. “Go on, this sort of food tastes worse when it’s cold.”

Startled, she obeyed. “Does that really work? Being friends, I mean?” She genuinely wanted to know. Hyle had offered friendship after and she’d known it was meaningless.

“Why not? We weren’t in it too deep to get hurt. I like you. You like me. You do still like me, right?”

Brienne nodded.

“I learned a long time ago to keep my work separate from my personal life. You won’t be implicated in anything. I don’t see why we shouldn’t hang out on occasion if we want to.”

She felt relief washing over her. It was going to be all right.

“I always knew it was a thing of the moment. Your heart is elsewhere.”

Brienne froze in the act of spreading butter over her toast. “What?”

“Lannister’s in love with you. He just doesn’t know it yet.”
I need to give props to Lady_in_Red for her idea (taken as she states in a comment on the last chapter, from one of the Thursday Next novels of Jasper Fforde) of Davos smuggling raw milk cheeses.

There are many classification systems in the world. American readers are probably most familiar with the Dewey Decimal System, but typically American academic libraries use the Library of Congress Classification System. I’ve taken the liberty of appropriating it for my universe. DA would be the right classification for European history. Since Westeros seems to be modeled on Europe, I decided Ned's book on Baelor the Blessed would fit well there. BL is the classification for religion so books on R'hllor would go there.
Chapter Summary

It's just not anyone's day in King's Landing. Tywin loses an employee. Stannis discovers the downside of prophecy. Cersei learns she has fewer options than she thought. Roose Bolton continues to be Sansa's least favorite problem patron and Arya plans for her future.

Chapter Notes

The events here are taking place 2-3 days after Tyrion and Ned's adventures in the basement stacks and the Helmets and Halberds video shoot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Tywin gazed out the window while Arya worked on his computer.

“I think it should be okay now,” Arya said. She punched a few keys. “There. It worked.”

“Good.”

As usual, the girl made him sit down and she took him through the steps so that he would be able to do it by himself should the need arise.

“Thank you.”

“Is there anything else tonight?”

Something in her tone was amiss. She hadn’t been her usual indefatigable self at all today. She hadn’t been cheeky to him once. As much as he chided her for it, he rather enjoyed Arya's spiritedness. He shook his head. “Off with you. No doubt you have assignments to work on.”

“I have to quit,” she blurted out.

He looked at her sharply.

“My dad doesn’t want me working for you anymore. I’m sorry. I like it here so much. I really like you and I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, but he said I have to quit,” she stared at her feet.

“I see.” He had expected something to happen when they’d learned that Arya had neglected to inform her mother about her activities, but it was days past the video shoot. He assumed it was no longer an issue.

Arya rummaged through her backpack. She pulled out a white envelope. “Here, he said I needed to
give you this.”

Tywin opened it. Inside was a personal check made out to him for $2000. He inhaled.

“I told him it should be more, but he wouldn’t—” she broke off dejectedly.

He was going to kill Ned Stark. Tywin put the check back in the envelope.

“I’ll figure out a way to get you the rest of the money,” she promised.

“Never mind about that,” he told her. He thought for a moment.

Still staring at the floor, she said, “But you said it was important to honor your obligations.”

He had. “The money is unimportant. It is customary, however, to provide notice when one is leaving a place of employment. Two weeks is the typical amount of time.”

Arya looked up at him.

“One presents one’s employer with a written letter of resignation and one gives them the notice so that the employer has the time to find a replacement. It is a standard business courtesy.”

“Oh.” It was evident from her expression that she had never heard of such a thing.

If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn the child had been raised by wolves. The gaps in her knowledge astonished him. One afternoon while she had installed a browser on his computer, she had explained to him in astonishing detail the battle of Harrenhal and its subsequent long-term military ramifications on medieval Westeros. And yet he had been obliged to teach her the most basic of business practices.

“I’ll bring in a letter tomorrow then.”

Tersely, he said, “Good.” There was nothing else to be done.

“Is your son okay?”

“Jaime? Despite the stir he created this weekend, I expect his bruises have healed.”

Arya frowned. “No, your other son, the one who works at the library with my father,” she clarified. “Dad said he had to go to the Emergency Room after the accident. Dad got hurt too; he’s been on really strong pain killers for the past two days.”

Tywin froze. “What?”

“Oh, I thought you knew. Well, it can’t be too bad or your son would have told you.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know exactly. Something went wrong with those funny shelves they have in the basement, the ones that killed Uncle Jon.”

* * *

Stannis reread the email from Melisandre. It was addressed to all the librarians who staffed the reference desk. It was not uncommon for them to ask the others to swap shifts periodically. Other commitments caused conflicts all the time. Melisandre’s requests were out of the ordinary. The list
of shifts for which she would require coverage was extensive.

“Did you see Mel’s email?” Asha stood in his doorway. “Oh, I see you did. What’s going on with her?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Is it something to do with her stupid LoL? Like some fucking fast or celebration?”

Stannis was accustomed to Asha’s language, but he wished she would curtail the use of profanity while they were working. “I don’t know,” he repeated.

“She’s asking for two weeks’ worth of shifts, Stannis. I know she’s flakey, but she should tell us when she’s going to be away.”

Stannis agreed with this statement, but gaining Melisandre’s compliance in anything was never an easy matter.

“Phone her,” Asha said suddenly.

“Why?”

“So we can find out what Mel’s doing. She blew us off last night and the night before. She didn’t even call. I don’t like this.”

He didn’t move.

Asha rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll do it.” She went to her workstation.

Stannis could hear her voice but he couldn’t make out the words.

Ten minutes later Melisandre wafted in with her calendar. “If you can take my Wednesday nights, I can take your shifts when I get back for the next two weeks after.”

Asha joined them and shut the door behind her. “Get back from where?”

Melisandre ignored her. She kept her gaze pinned on Stannis.

He saw the sour look in Asha’s eyes and the blithe unconcern in Melisandre’s. “Where are you going?”

“North. Can you take the Wednesday nights or no?”

“Where in the North?” Asha demanded.

“If you cannot take Wednesdays, could you take the Mondays?”

Stannis was used to the intensity Melisandre usually exuded around him. Now it was entirely absent. He might as well have been a stranger.

Asha crossed her arms. “Where exactly are you going and why?”

“I have seen something new in the flames.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sakes.”

“If you must know, I am traveling to Castle Black for a job interview. Can you take either the
Wednesdays or the Mondays?”

Stannis stared at Melisandre.

Asha blocked the door. “No, you don’t get out of here so easily. When the fuck were you going to tell us?”

Melisandre made an elaborate shrug. “It appears I was mistaken. R’hllor sent me a new vision. Stannis is not Azor Ahai after all. I need to go North. I have seen a battle in the snow.”

“Oh my fucking god. Out. Get out.”

He did not trust himself to speak. He focused his attention on his monitor. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Asha move away from the door and Melisandre leave. “She might not get it,” he said finally.

“That’s not the point. No, what the fuck are you doing? You are not taking her shifts.”

“I don’t have Shireen on Wednesdays.”

“She just fucked you over and now she wants you to take two six-hour shifts in exchange for two of your two-hour shifts. You don’t owe her anything.” Asha reached over and deleted the email before he could send it. “Well, at least we won’t have to hear her go on about fucking R’hllor anymore.”

It was not much consolation to Stannis.

* * *

Cersei directed Myrcella and Tommen to the chairs in the waiting room to her father’s office and tapped her foot impatiently while his secretary went in to see if he was available.

A few minutes later, the secretary glided out and took her seat.

Father came out immediately after. He glanced at her children in surprise and then looked sharply at her. There was something in his expression that gave her pause. He was not in a good mood. She could tell so instantly. “This isn’t a good time.”

She hesitated. “May I speak with you? It’s important.”

“Very well.” He allowed her to precede him into his office. “I presume this has to do with Joffrey. They will let him contact you when he has finished the training. The rules were explained to you.”

“I want to leave Robert.”

“I see.” Tywin sat down and gestured for her to do the same. “I was under the impression that Robert was at a conference in Sothoryos.”

“He is with his latest little slut. The conference is just an excuse.”

“Have you communicated this decision with him or with anyone else?”

“Not yet.”

“Good. Now go home and calm down.”
Cersei shook her head. “I’m done with him.”

“You have a position to maintain. You have your children to consider.”

Cersei bit her lip. “He got another girl pregnant.”

He relaxed. “Is that what this is about? I’ll deal with her.” He pulled a notepad toward him and picked up a pen. “Name?”

“She won’t make trouble. It’s not her. It’s the whole situation. Father, I can’t stand it another minute. I can’t. I have to leave him and I can’t stay at the house. It belongs to Crownlands.”

He stared at her. “You want me to allow you and your children to stay with me,” he deduced.

She swallowed. “Yes.”

He set down the pen, steepled his fingers, and looked at her.

Cersei knew that expression. It meant he was not going to help her. “Father—”

“I told you what he was when you allowed him to impregnate you. You had a clear way out then. You refused. You dropped out of university. I brought pressure to bear on him so that he would marry you. Since then, I have put considerable time, effort, and money into helping your husband rise to his present position so that you could enjoy a certain level of comfort and privilege.”

“I know and I’m grateful, but—”

“I suggest that you take your children home and consider how you are going to support them should you persist on this course of action.”

Cersei felt her jaw drop. That he would actively withdraw financial support from them was not an outcome she had anticipated.

“If you like, I will attempt to make him understand that he needs to be more discreet,” he offered.

“He won’t listen.”

Her father shrugged.

“That isn’t the point. He’s—”

“Robert is a drunken lecher. Again, I seem to recall telling you this exact same fact twenty-three years ago. You refused to see reason then. Well, you will see it now.”

“You don’t know what it’s been like,” Cersei protested. She knew full well this wasn’t just about her. Father wielded a great deal of influence through Robert. If she divorced him, that path would be closed to him. Somehow, though, she couldn’t articulate this.

“No, I don’t. I chose my spouse with a great deal more care and attention than you did yours. Perhaps he might not be so blatant if you had made the slightest effort at your marriage.”

This wasn’t true. From what Uncle Kevan and Aunt Genna said, Mother had decided that Father was for her and that had been that. Mother had done the choosing. But once again she couldn’t seem to make her mouth form the right words. “That’s not fair.”

“Not fair, is it?” He leaned forward. “Osmund Kettleblack, that Merryweather woman, Aurane
Waters, am I missing anyone? Oh, yes, Lancel.” He looked at her with disgust.

She closed her eyes briefly. How had he known? She had been so careful. Gods, did he know about Jaime? She felt the blood drain out of her face.

“I suggest you go home, collect yourself, and on your husband’s return, make an attempt at reconciling with him.”

“And if I don’t?”

He gave her a quizzical look. “I will not help you with a divorce lawyer. When Robert goes into arrears with his child support, you’ll get no assistance from me in making him pay. I will not augment any monies you do get from him. In short, you may expect no more money from me, for anything.”

This wasn’t like him. “You would let your grandchildren starve?”

“I’m sure you’ll receive something from Robert. You might get a job as well to supplement whatever your lawyer wrings from him, although, I’m hard pressed to imagine what sort of work you’ll be qualified for without a degree.”

“That’s not fair! You know why I had to drop out.”

“You could have gone back after you miscarried or after Joffrey was born. I offered to pay for your tuition both times as I recall.”

“And left Joffrey alone?”

Her father’s expression grew harder. “You took my money for a nanny. As it is, he might have been better off in her exclusive care. Perhaps he might not be in the mess he is today had you been a better mother.”

She could feel tears starting to form. She was strong. She was a Lannister. Lannisters didn’t cry.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“Will you tell Robert about . . . ?”

“Your affairs? No.”

She twisted her hands. She would not cry. She would not.

He got up and poured her a glass of water. He set it in front of her. “You are being overly emotional. How long before he returns?”

“Four more days.” She sipped at the water.

“Then you have time to collect yourself. You’ll be more rational in the morning.”

There was nothing to do but to leave. She needed to think. Jaime would know what she should do. He probably would want her to talk to Tyrion, but even that might be helpful. She set the glass on his desk. She took her bag and headed for the door.

She was halfway there when he called out after her. “Involve Jaime in this mess and it won’t be Robert I tell about your dalliances.”
Cersei wasn’t quite sure how she made it to the car.

* * *

Sansa really hoped they fixed the compact shelving soon. It had been a few days and she was still running up and down to the basement to get the books for the students. That was bad enough, but now she had Tip-In to contend with too.

“Why can’t I get my own books?”

“I really don’t know, Dr. Bolton. I’m just doing what I’m told.”

“The way you do with the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3.” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Sansa knew she should have gone along with Margaery’s idea. She could have skipped her classes and called in sick to work. They could have spent the whole day together. “Dr. Bolton, I’m just a student employee. If you’d like, I can get one of the librarians to answer your questions.”

A shadow of something very nasty flashed over his face. “Yes. I think that would serve,” he said finally.

“Okay, I’ll call—”

“I know where the director’s office is.” He strode off toward the administrative suite.

Sansa called over to Ros to warn her and then headed to the stacks. As a precaution she took the flashlight in case the lights were out again, but when she got down there, it was clear she needn’t have bothered. Varys was there with two beefy electricians. They let her get the books and then she took the back stairs that were nearest to Technical Services.

“It’s Tip-In,” Sansa said to Asha, who took the books and looked them up in WorldCat.

“He can borrow these,” Asha said. “Not this one. The only other copy is in Qarth and we’ll never get the replacement pages.”

“What do I tell him?”

“Tell him you couldn’t find it in the stacks.”

“He’s furious already.”

Asha gave her an even look. “Fuck him. He’s mad at us? The man costs us a fortune in time and money because he’s got some stupid compulsion to damage books. He can go on eBay and try and buy his own copy of,” she looked at the spine and read aloud, “The Sexual Benefits of Leeching if he wants to rip out pages.”

Sansa took the remaining books and headed down the back stairs and then up the stairs she had originally taken. When she got back to the desk, Olenna was speaking with Tip-In. He handed her his library card and Sansa started checking out the books.

“. . . for the safety of the patrons, we felt that this was necessary. I do hope you will forgive the inconvenience, Dr. Bolton.”

Mollified, he nodded. “Do you know when the repairs will be completed? I really prefer to browse. I find so much more that way.”
Sansa overrode the flags on his account. She eyed his satchel. She wondered suddenly if he was ripping out the Tattle-Tape and stealing books. She’d mention it to Shae after he was gone.

“I believe the electricians are down there right now. We need to be absolutely sure that the problem is fixed before we can allow anyone in the basement.”

He turned his attention to Sansa who was stamping the due dates in the back of the books. “I’m sorry for my reaction earlier. Is your father all right now?”

“My father?” She looked at Olenna. Sansa hadn’t seen her dad in the past few days, but she’d been working nights until today.

“Mrs. Tyrell told me about the accident in the basement. She said his . . .” he broke off and his eyes went dead.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Sansa, he’s fine. He hurt his leg.” To Tip-In, Olenna explained, “Sansa doesn’t live at home anymore. Dear, I’m sure your parents didn’t want to worry you.”

Tip-In’s eyes became normal again. “I didn’t know. I’m afraid, I assumed—I’m sure Mrs. Tyrell is right. Ned is very strong. I doubt there’s anything that could keep him down for long.”

Sansa swallowed. She desensitized his books and handed back the slip for the one on leeches. “I couldn’t find this one. I’m sorry.”

He didn’t like that.

“We will put on a trace on it,” Olenna offered brightly, taking the slip of paper out of his hand. “Thank you for being so understanding, Dr. Bolton.”

Tip-In recovered his normal seemingly pleasant expression and finally left.

Olenna glanced at the title on the call slip for the leech book. “I shudder to think what that man does in his spare time,” she commented after he had walked out the door. “Your father is fine. He had a nasty cut, but they gave him a tetanus shot and stitched him up. He’s just going to work from home for a few days.”

“Why didn’t they tell me?”

Olenna patted her on the shoulder. “As I said before, they probably didn’t want to worry you or perhaps it just slipped their minds. Do you tell them everything you do?”

Sansa grew still.

“Margaery and I are very close, you know.”

Shit, Sansa thought. She knows. Had Margaery just gone and told her?

“Now, why don’t you go and call your father and set your mind at ease?”

“Are you going to tell them?” Sansa wasn’t ashamed about what she and Margaery were doing, but there was no telling how her parents would react. She thought they would be fine if she came out. They weren’t homophobes. But Mum didn’t like Margaery. And while Dad was fine with her living off campus with a roommate, she thought he wouldn’t like her living with a significant other.
“Tell them what?” Olenna gave her a pleasant, unassuming look. “You’re a bright, sensible girl. You won’t do anything foolish.”

* * *

Arya slammed the back door as she came into the house.

“Hi Arya, hey, how do you spell ‘dissension?’” Bran asked not looking up from the homework he was doing at the kitchen table.

“Like she would know. She only got into Crownlands because of Uncle Robert.”

“Hey!” Mum objected. “That is not a nice thing to say to your sister.”

“It’s true, though,” Rickon insisted. “I heard Dad and Uncle Robert talking. He said she wasn’t smart like Sansa.”

“Rickon! Apologize at once.”

Arya reached out and swiped all of Rickon’s homework onto the kitchen floor.

“Arya!”

Without a word, Arya bolted up the back stairs.

Her father was leaning on a cane in the upstairs hallway. “Did you tell them?”

She glared at him and moved past him.

“Arya, I’m talking to you.”

She stopped but didn’t turn around.

“Honey, I know you’re upset, but I’m doing this because it’s in your best interests. Tywin Lannister is not a good man or a nice man. I don’t want you around him.”

Arya began moving again.

“It’s just a part-time job. You can always work for me at the library and get some spending money that way. When you calm down, you’ll understand why I’m making you do this.”

Arya stomped off to her room and slammed the bedroom door so hard the pictures on the wall shook. She locked the door and slumped to the floor. It wasn’t fair. Robb and Theon had gotten into mess and after mess and all that had happened was a lot of yelling. They’d let them room together and everything. Sansa dated a series of loser boyfriends who treated her like shit and she got praised and rewarded all the time. Rickon set things on fire and they didn’t even ground him.

Why can’t you be more like your sister?

Why can’t you apply yourself?

Arya just isn’t book smart.

She hugged her knees to her chest. They were being so mean to her. Dad was being mean to her. He was knocking on her door. “Arya, let me in. Let’s talk about this.”
She ignored his voice and unzipped her backpack. She found a notebook and a pen and she started to make a list.

“Arya, open this door.”

“Ned, leave her. She needs some time.”

She would call Margaery and Sansa. If they wouldn’t pool their money with her to pay back Mr. Lannister and Kevan for their profits, then she could take it from her emergency savings. As soon as she could, she’d have to pay back her parents too. They were not going to get a say in Lemon Cakes. Arya refused to give it up. Margaery would help make Sansa see that it wasn’t an option.

She would need to figure out how to roll over her 401k stuff into an IRA. She would need to find another part-time job. She was going to need a real advisor. That stupid idiot at Crownlands who had thought she could do computer science was a joke. Maybe there was someone in the business department she could talk to. Arya made another note.

Arya thought about Mr. Lannister. He had been unhappy, she thought, but he hadn’t yelled at her.

“Honey, please. Let’s talk this out.”

“Ned, let her be. I mean it.”

She heard her father limp back to his room.

“Arya? Are you all right?”

She thought a moment before replying. Dad was the one making her do this, not her mother. “I need to be alone, Mum,” she said, “please.” She heard her voice crack on the last word.

“Okay, sweetling.” Her mother went away too.

The letter, she thought. Mr. Lannister said she needed to give him one. Arya would write it out longhand and then she would type it.

Arya looked at her project book. He said she was smart. He said she could do anything she set her mind to. She was not going to let anyone stop her.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

So the Tywin/Cersei conversation. He’s a cold piece-of-work in this scene and I suspect it may not quite mesh with the Tywin I’ve been writing. I tried writing this from his POV and it simply did not work. Since it’s from Cersei’s, he became a lot colder. Tyrion and to a lesser extent, Jaime, always seem to try and chip away at his godlike persona. Cersei doesn’t have their sense of the ridiculous and it changes the way she interacts with him. Also, he kind of needs to be a SOB here for the rest of the story to work. Just trust me, okay?

There’s some more angst coming up in successive chapters, but I really think this chapter is as dark as it gets. I have two pieces I’m working on for Stannis Fanfic and
Fanart Week (this week! All Stannis All the Time!) and and I just found out about a project I’m being stuck with IRL at my library (where the men are significantly less good looking and things are a lot less zany than they are at the ATML) so look for the usual update on Wednesday.
An Art Not a Science

Chapter Summary

Cersei seeks enlightenment. Tywin pays Tyrion a visit. Jaime and Brienne learn some things about each other.

Chapter Notes

Spoilers for Battlestar Galactica – episodes “The Pegasus” and “Resurrection Ship”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

“Mother?”

Cersei blinked. “What is it, sweetling?”

“Is everything okay?”

She turned around and looked at Myrcella, whose pretty face was scrunched up in concern. Cersei glanced back at Tommen who was gnawing at his lip.

“We’ve been sitting here for over an hour.”

Cersei looked around. They were in the parking lot of an abandoned K-Mart. It had grown dark and because the store was empty, there were no lights.

“Is this something to do with that girl?”

She whipped her head around at her daughter. “What?”

“Father’s uh . . . the girl who was in the driveway last week.”

“Have you seen her before?” Cersei asked sharply. She looked at Tommen. “Either of you?” If Robert had brought her to the house, she would kill him.

Myrcella shook her head. “It’s just . . . we’ve heard you and Father . . . arguing before.”

“Lots of times,” Tommen concurred.

Sweet Mother, they knew.

She couldn’t go to Jaime. Father would tell him about her affairs and that would be it. Jaime would never forgive her. He had tolerated Robert, but he wouldn’t forgive her the others.

Tyrion . . . would he take her in? He might for the sake of the children. If nothing else, he loved Myrcella and Tommen.
Tyrion would make jokes. She couldn’t take jokes.

“This isn’t where I thought I would be. This isn’t what I wanted out of life.”

“They then change your life.”

* * *

Tyrion let his father into the apartment.

“What happened?”

“How nice to see you too, Father? I’ve been well, thank you, and you?”

“Tyrion.”

It was the tone of voice that did it. It was really quite an all-purpose tone. It could be and had been employed multiple times with all of them over the years in a variety of ways. It was what Tyrion liked to call “Tywin Lannister’s ‘do not fuck with me’ voice.”

“Well?”

It didn’t even need to be employed in a whole sentence or even in a multisyllabic word.

Tyrion shut the door. He was courting disaster and seven different kinds of hell by not answering, but Shae’s accusations still rankled. He was not a coward; he wasn’t.

His father fixed him with the ‘do not fuck with me’ look that so often went with the matching voice. “How did you come to be injured?”

“That is a subject much in debate by library management, although not I am sad to say, by Campus Security.” Tyrion stepped into the living room. He poured out a whiskey for his father. “The short answer is that the sensors for the compact shelving ceased working and I narrowly escaped being flattened like a panini.”

“What?”

“One of those sandwiches they press—” Tyrion started to explain as he handed him the drink.

“—I know what a panini is.” His father set the whiskey down untouched. “If you know what is good for you, you will stop this facetiousness and tell me exactly what happened.”

He’d tempted fate four times. That had to mean he wasn’t a coward. Tyrion took a deep breath and recounted his adventures in the stacks and the aftermath as well.

“Could Stark have been the one to try and trap you?”

Tyrion shook his head. “I know he doesn’t like me, but—”

“He would hardly be the first man to attempt to get at me by using my family against me.”

Trust Father to turn this into something about him, Tyrion thought. “In the first place, we were in different parts of the basement and more importantly, in the second place, he risked his life saving me. His leg was a mess.”

His father tapped his fingers against the arm of the chair.
“Also, it’s impossible to drop five volumes of the *Library of Westeros Subject Headings* from the top floor of the balcony onto oneself.”

“Tyrion.”

He sighed and recounted that little story as well.

“Books are hardly a lethal weapon,” his father objected.

“They’re huge. I think they weigh fifty pounds. Dropped from a height . . .” he shuddered. There were other ‘accidents’ too. Olenna Tyrell let it slip that this last was the fourth or fifth.”

“Did she?” his father said sharply.

Tyrion reached for his own drink. “I’ve asked around, but the few people who are straight with me don’t seem to know anything.”

“Ms Tarth?”

“Knows nothing. Asha and Stannis know nothing. Melisandre just said ‘the night is dark and full of terrors,’ which means she neither knows nor cares. “

“Olenna Tyrell?”

“Knows something, but she’s not telling me. Obviously Jon Arryn was one of the accidents. He was crushed—”

“—to death between the compact shelving that nearly killed you,” his father finished. “Two of the previous directors had ‘accidents’ as well. The one was found naked, strapped to a library table in the reading room with two whores screaming and crying. Supposedly he had a heart attack.”

“Supposedly?”

His father looked at him. “It was hushed up, of course. The one before Arryn had a card catalog fall on him. His injuries were fatal.”

Tyrion shuddered. Card catalogs were unbelievably heavy. There were several scattered throughout the staff area.

“Could one be rigged to collapse?”

“I have no idea.”

Somehow the way Father looked at him made it clear that he felt his not knowing the answer to the question was yet one more inadequacy on Tyrion’s part.

“It’s not something they ever covered in library school. I suppose it’s possible. Why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

“Because like those on your staff, I assumed they were accidents. If you’d stayed at Casterly Rock Enterprises like you should have—”

“—we would both be miserable and you know it. It’s better this way, Father.”

His father sipped his drink. “This Slynt sounds like an incompetent fool.”
“That did seem to be the consensus among the library’s management team. Petyr Baelish, he’s the acquisitions librarian I told you about—”

“—the one opposing your patron driven acquisition program?”

Tyrion was surprised his father had remembered that detail. “Yes. He apparently thinks Stannis is possessed of a deadly desire to be library director. He believes he was behind it, but—”

“No. He was in sight of dozen or more people for the entirety of the afternoon.”

Tyrion startled. “Were you at the same function or something?”

“It’s of no matter. Stannis has an alibi.”

“It’s not his style anyhow. He’s very direct. You know where you are with Stannis. Besides, if Dr. Stark was the intended target, I would have been fine.”

“Explain.”

“I was in the BLs looking at the entirely too many books we have on R’hllor. Stark was in the DAs looking for a biography on Baelor the Blessed. Stannis did the cataloging. If he had been trying to attack Dr. Stark, he would have messed with the sensors near the Targaryen history books. The cataloging-in-publication data in the front of the book did classify it with the BLs—for religion. I asked Stannis about it today. I got a thirty minute lecture on cataloging and how the CIP data was fatally flawed. Stannis believes that it is ‘the original cataloger’s duty to fight senseless anarchy.’”

This was clearly entirely too much library talk for his father, who downed most of his whiskey. “You should have called me.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Tyrion said, surprised. This from the man who hadn’t visited once when he’d been hospitalized for pneumonia? “I wouldn’t have gone at all if Olenna and Dr. Stark hadn’t insisted. I didn’t even need stitches. They x-rayed it. No fractures, they said.”

“Nevertheless, if it something like this happens again, I want to be informed immediately.” He stood.

“Why?”

“Because you are my son.”

* * *

Cersei knocked on her brother-in-law’s door. Myrcella and Tommen were standing behind her. They hadn’t said anything in hours, but she knew they were scared. She was scared.

The dishwater blonde from Jaime’s party answered it. “Is Melisandre here?”

“No.” She packed a lot of irritation into the word.

“Oh.” Cersei tried to remember what her name was. Osha or Yara or something like that? “Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“Stannis!”
“I’m just trying to get in touch with Melisandre. I don’t really need to talk to Stannis.”

The woman seemed to see Myrcella and Tommen for the first time. “Oh, hi.” To Cersei, she said, “you’d better come in. STANNIS!”

Stannis entered just as her children were uneasily sitting down. “Woman, there is no need to shout. How many times must I tell you?” He blinked when he saw Cersei. “Hello,” he said in a puzzled voice to the children.

“She wants to see Mel,” the young woman explained.

“Melisandre doesn’t live here,” Stannis said carefully.

“I know.” Actually, Cersei didn’t know. All she knew was that this Melisandre had seemed to sense something about her. She couldn’t go back. She just couldn’t. If she couldn’t go back that meant she couldn’t go to Jaime. Her life had always included Jaime. “I just need to talk to her. When I called Tyrion, he thought I should try here.”

Stannis cast an eye on her children and then on her. “Are you all right?”

“Do you have a number for Melisandre?”

“She’s in the North,” the dishwater blonde told her.

“Where in the North?” She could drive there if she needed to. Robert wouldn’t be home for a week.

Stannis and his girlfriend exchanged glances.

“I need to talk to her. I need . . .” She could feel her knees starting to buckle.

“You need to sit down,” the woman told her. “You’re white as a sheet.”

Before she could protest, Stannis was guiding her onto a chair. “Asha, get her something to drink. Juice, I think. When was the last time you ate?”

“Something’s wrong with Mother,” Myrcella said suddenly. “Something’s been wrong with her for days.”

***

Brienne stared down into his eyes. “Is there some reason why you always end up lying flat on your back like that?”

“Because it’s least painful,” Jaime groaned. He had told Brienne he wanted to get back into shape. She volunteered to help him and foolishly, he accepted her offer. “How can you not be in agony?”

“I normally do double the distance,” she informed him. “Did you stretch before you collapsed onto the floor?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She took some weights out of her closet and started to work out. “How did you ever survive basic training?”

“That was a long time ago,” he pointed out. “And I was in decent shape when I went in.”
“It’s all the television you’re watching,” she said seriously. “Asha says you’re watching *Deep Space Nine* now?”

Jaime reached out with his hand. “Would you pass me my phone?”

She set down the hand weights and obliged. “If you want anything else, you’ll get it yourself,” Brienne warned before going back to her exercising.

He listened to his messages and then tried calling Cersei. It went straight to voicemail.

“She hasn’t called you back?”

Jaime shook his head. “It’s been days. Tyrion hasn’t heard from her either, although that’s not surprising.”

“Call your father,” she suggested.

“Rule #1 of being Tywin Lannister’s child: do not narc out your siblings.”

“It’s not like you’re calling him to tell on her for sneaking out of the house. You’re worried about her.”

He made a face. He’d finally gotten her to understand why he couldn’t call Robert. Cersei would be furious if she knew how much he’d told Brienne, but he knew she wouldn’t betray his confidence. “She’s never gone this long without speaking to me, well, not since I went into the army.”

Brienne set the weights down and started to do sit ups. “Hy—someone I used to know, was in the military, and he could make calls and write. Why not you?”

“Oh, I could communicate. She just wouldn’t talk to me, neither would Father for that matter. I didn’t hear from either of them for more than half a year.” He saw the questions in her face. “She thought I was abandoning her and he thought I was throwing away my golden future.”

She frowned. “Because you did a couple of years in the military?”

“Father started planning my life for me when I was still in the crib. No, I take that back. I suspect he started charting it out before I was even conceived. There was never any question about the schools I would attend; what extracurricular activities I would do; the friends I was to cultivate. Every single aspect of my life was planned.”

“What about your sister and Tyrion?”

“Can you stop working out?”

Brienne nodded. She stopped her sit ups and scooted over closer to him and propped herself up against her sofa.

“He was grooming me to eventually become CEO of the business. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t interested or that my talents didn’t lie in that direction, I was to be molded to fit that role.” Jaime kept his eyes on the ceiling. It was easier that way. “He had plans for Cersei too. After university, she would work at the company. A few years after that, she would marry someone suitable, stop working, and have children. I would marry someone suitable too and produce little Lannisters.”

Brienne listened to him intently.
“Cersei was fine with all of it up until the part about being married off and turned into a brood mare.”

From the look on Brienne’s face, she was in total sympathy with his sister. “And Tyrion?”

Jaime sighed. “Any grand schemes Father had for him died the moment he was born.”

“Because he’s a dwarf?”

“Because our mother died having him.” He glanced up at her. “Father and Cersei have never forgiven him for her death. That he was born a dwarf didn’t help either.”

“But that’s insane,” Brienne objected. “Neither of those things are his fault.”

“No, they’re not,” Jaime agreed sadly.

“My mother died having my sister,” she said.

“Eclampsia?”

Brienne shook her head. “She went into labor early. There wasn’t any time to get her to the mainland so she delivered at home. Then a storm hit. They couldn’t get her to the hospital for days. By the time they did, infection had set in.”

“I’m sorry.” He meant it. “You never talk about your siblings.”

“They’re dead.” Now it was Brienne’s turn to stare upward. “Galladon drowned when he was eight. Arianne had leukemia. She was gone by the time she was four. Alysanne was killed in a car accident when she was a toddler.”

“Shit, Brienne. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay,” she said with a shrug. “Everybody has stuff.” She sounded resigned, but she stretched out on the floor next to him. “So what prompted you to stand up to your father and leave?”

He interpreted the question as a signal that she didn’t want to discuss her family in more detail just then. He didn’t know that what he’d done qualified as standing up to anyone. It had been more a case of presenting his father with a fait accompli at the last possible moment. “I was doing poorly in my courses. They sent a letter addressed to me to Casterly Rock. Father opened it—I told you he doesn’t respect our privacy—and he hit the roof. I wasn’t working hard enough. I wasn’t applying myself. I needed to stop partying and start studying.” He waved his hands in the air in a gesture of exasperation. “I never really got university. I wasn’t ever good at academics. I suppose it was the dyslexia to start with, but it was so pointless to me and the thought of working for Father…” he shuddered. “The irony was that Cersei would have killed for an eighth the attention he paid to me. And Tyrion, gods, he was good at everything I wasn’t. He could read by the time he was three. When he was applying to university, Father didn’t have to spend a penny to get him in anywhere. He has Father’s mind, not that either he or Father would thank me for the comparison.”

“You’re very intelligent,” Brienne told him. “You shouldn’t put yourself down.”

He could tell that she meant it. “They do seem to be getting along better than they ever have before, but who knows how long that will last. Anyhow, I suffered through the dressing down. He went home and I was going across the Student Union, and there were tables with recruiters. A few conversations with one officer and I was in. Father did his best to get them to release me, but even he didn’t have the clout. I would have loved to have seen his face when he had to admit defeat—
from a safe distance, preferably behind one-way glass—but still it would have been something to see.”

“Why was your sister mad with you?”

“Because I abandoned her,” he explained. “I left her.”

“But it sounds like you were twenty or twenty-one when you joined up?”

“Twenty,” he confirmed. “It’s different with us. We’re twins. We’ve always been together. It was us against the world and I left her. She saw it as a personal betrayal.”

Brienne started to say something and then stopped.

“She met Robert not long after I left. They got married and then she dropped out of university.”

“When did she start speaking to you again?”

“Cersei had a miscarriage.” He’d come home on leave a few months after and Joffrey was the result. Not that he could talk about that with Brienne. “She almost stopped again after I re-upped.”

Brienne propped herself up on an elbow and faced him. “Did you reenlist to stay away from your father?”

He shifted to his side as well. “No. I stayed because I was good at it. I loved it. There’s this rush you get in combat. It’s like nothing else. And it was so simple. They give you orders. You obey. It wasn’t like with Father. With him, nothing is ever good enough. It was different in the service. I thought I had found a permanent home. I took courses. I got my degree. I advanced. They gave me medals. I have a drawer full of the things. Even Father started to come around.”

“But something happened.” It wasn’t a question.

Jaime felt the words sticking in his throat.

“You had your own Admiral Cain,” she said softly.

He stared at her. How could she have intuited that?

“You talk about those three episodes a lot. Did someone give you orders that you shouldn’t have obeyed?”

He rolled onto his back again. “No, someone gave me orders that I wouldn’t obey.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

So there’s no Aerys and therefore no Kingslayer, but I wanted to give Jaime some kind of similar back story. *Battlestar Galactica* provided a nice shorthand for this. Basically the reference to Admiral Cain alludes to a character who gives her officers some questionable orders. Some follow them. Some don’t.
A Family Affair

Chapter Summary

This chapter's theme: not everyone knows as much as they think they know. Also, roller derby, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Babylon 5*. Seriously. Click. I know you want to. There's cake at the end too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Olenna switched on a smile and an expression of deep interest as two undergraduate students approached the reference desk. She didn’t know where Stannis was, but he was fifteen minutes late in relieving her. “May I help you?”

The first young woman, who looked all of eighteen, hesitated.

The second young woman was about the same age, but significantly more confident. “We’re looking for Bronn. Does he have office hours?”

“Bronn? No, I’m afraid he doesn’t. He is our systems librarian. Was there something I could help you with?”

“Systems is computers, right?” the first girl whispered audibly to her friend.

“Uh, we have a computer science paper and we were told Bronn was the guy to see.”

Olenna found this all very suspect. Aside from the obvious fact that the second girl was lying, in all the time he had been there, no student ever asked for Bronn. Although he had a MLIS, he only worked reference in severe emergencies, and he handled no departments. “The bibliographer for computer science isn’t at this library. I’ll get—” she broke off.

The first girl hit her friend in the arm. Both of their jaws slackened just the slightest bit.

Olenna turned around to see Stannis approaching the desk.

“I apologize. I had to go home to complete some personal business and the traffic was worse than I anticipated.”

“These students need Lyn Corbray’s contact information.”

Olenna was scarcely out of the desk before the two students had grabbed stools and were gazing up at Stannis with what looked like, but could not possibly be, deep personal interest. She gave herself a shake of the head. They were his problem now. She unlocked the door to the staff offices. Brienne was still there. “You’re working late?”

“I’m leaving in a few minutes. I just want to finish this email.”
“I’m giving a little dinner party tomorrow night. It’s quite impromptu. You’ll come, of course.”

Brienne shook her head. “I have plans, but thank you.”

Olenna sighed. “Going to the gym does not constitute having plans.”

“I’m going to a party.”

Olenna arched an eyebrow. She fixed the younger woman with a piercing gaze. To her surprise, Brienne didn’t cave. Olenna wasn’t foiled. She simply asked outright for the details. At her age, she could get away with murder.

Fortunately Brienne possessed an innate sense of honesty and had yet to realize she was entitled to refuse such an outrageous encroachment of her personal privacy.

After a fifteen minute conversation, she left Brienne and returned to her own office. Taking care to shut the door, she phoned Tywin. “They have plans tomorrow night.”

“Oh?”

Olenna didn’t immediately answer. He sounded pleased, but he wouldn’t be when she finished.

“Are you there?”

“From what I understand, they are going somewhere to watch Deep Space Nine.”

“Is this a movie?”

“It is a fourteen-year-old television show. It is part of the Star Trek franchise.” Tywin’s blood pressure was no doubt racing to dangerous levels. “I gather Jaime’s Roku—this is a device he uses to stream programs and movies through his television—is malfunctioning. He seems to be in the habit of hosting parties of his own at his apartment.” Olenna had been slightly miffed to learn most of the library staff seemed to be regular attendees at these; if Stannis came regularly, surely she should have been invited. “Since it’s broken, they are going elsewhere.”

“What is wrong with that boy? Do I need to give him detailed instructions on how to court the girl properly?”

“It’s not a date, Tywin, at least not with Jaime. She told me Davos Seaworth was coming too.”

“I thought you said their relationship was over.”

Olenna rolled her eyes. “It appears I misunderstood.” Tywin was probably making notes right now to have the man bribed or imprisoned or removed—no. They lived in modern times. She needn’t worry that the head of Brienne’s stopgap boyfriend would be adorning what remained of the city gates by morning.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the attempt on Tyrion’s life?”

“He is an adult, I assumed he would have told you himself.” She dropped the publisher junk mail in the recycling bin. “He was fine. Ned is the one who is injured.”

“Good.”

“Tywin, if it weren’t for Ned, your son would be dead.” She put three professional journals into a pile.
“He is a leftist troublemaker who is causing dissension at my university.”

Olenna moved on to her email. “We’ve been over this. No one on the library staff is riling up the faculty.” Not intentionally at least, but she left the thought unexpressed. “And you may be surprised to hear this, but Crownlands is not your university.” She heard his intake of breath on the end. “Tywin, you sound like you’re in the throes of labor when you do that.”

“I want to know what is going on in the library at all times.”

“Odd, I wasn’t aware I worked for you.”

“We are in a relationship.”

“One which you refuse to acknowledge for some ridiculous reason,” she countered.

He didn’t reply.

“For such an intelligent man, you’re beginning to sound obsessed. Honestly, I do not understand you. You and Ned have diametrically opposing philosophies. Fine. It may interest you to know I share some of his opinions. The last time I checked it was legally acceptable to believe in whatever one wants to.”

“My son was nearly killed at your wreck of a library where the past three directors have died in mysterious circumstances. I have just been informed the present director suffered an attempt on his life. Your precious Ned is clearly not in control of either the investigation or of the library.”

Olenna’s voice grew acidic. “One of my reference librarians is on extended medical leave and will be transferring to another campus library when she recovers. Another just took an unplanned two week vacation. We have twenty hours of reference and at least twelve instruction sessions to cover because of this. Our shelving is a danger to our staff and our patrons. Our staff offices are falling to bits. Our fiscal year ends in four months and we have yet to receive our budget from the Provost. The investigation is the purview of Campus Security. No one on their staff is willing or interested in following up. If your son-in-law were willing to fund us adequately and could bring Campus Security to heel, perhaps we would be able to do our jobs without loss of life or limb!”

He didn’t respond immediately. Then she heard the sound of him inhaling again. “I presume this means you wish to cancel our date.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

***

Ned took another ibuprofen and shifted his throbbing leg. He was grateful that Catelyn had insisted on him going back to the doctor’s. The wound had become infected, and he was now on a course of antibiotics. He was feeling better and he’d managed to do quite a lot of work on the laptop. Varys and Olenna assured him everything was under control, but his emails indicated that their definition of control was tenuous.

Arya still wasn’t speaking to him. She looked in the room when she came home from her classes, but she’d simply glared at him and walked past without a word.

He was trying to read the biography on Baelor the Blessed when Cat came in. She had a huge pile of papers and notebooks in her hands. “Hey.”

She set the pile on the bed and shut the door. “We have to talk.”
“What is all this?”

Cat took the book away from him and set it on the nightstand. She sat on the other side of the bed. “I’ve been with Arya.”

“Gods, what now? Don’t tell me, he has her dating one of his nephews.” The extent to which Tywin Lannister had enmeshed himself into his daughter’s life was appalling. “Where is she? I heard her leave.”

“She went out with Sansa, Margaery, and Gendry.” Cat handed him a sheaf of papers.

He looked through them. The first was a letter of resignation. Or rather, it appeared to be a draft of one. Arya thanked “Mr. Lannister” profusely for all he had done for her. The words were heartfelt. Her spelling and grammar were egregious. The notations in red ink puzzled him until he flipped the page over. “He corrected it?” In very neat handwriting, Tywin Lannister marked up every error. On the back, he addressed the style of the letter. The content, he wrote, was emotional. Although he appreciated the sentiment, it was entirely inappropriate for a business letter, and he knew she was capable of doing better. “He corrected her letter of resignation?!”

“Look at the others.”

Sure enough, Arya had given him several more drafts. The second, Lannister wrote, was an improvement, but it was still unacceptable. He suggested she contact Ms Tarth at the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library for assistance. She could locate materials that would help Arya write a better letter. Ned looked at drafts three and four.

“Before you have a fit, he took the fifth one.”

Ned gave her back the papers. “As soon as the semester is over, we’ll send her to Benjen. She can spend the Intercession visiting him and Jon. I want her as far away from Tywin Lannister as possible.”

“No.” Cat handed him a file folder.

He read the contents. Again there were drafts, this time of résumés and cover letters. Again he saw Lannister’s neat, red-inked corrections and suggestions. “I don’t understand.”

Cat gave him another folder.

Here were some of Arya’s macroeconomics papers. In addition to Tywin’s handwriting, he could detect another’s. “Kevan Lannister?”

“Yes. Look at the finished work.”

He did. Arya’s marks were excellent: an A-, an A, and a B+ “All right, they helped her, but—” he stopped at the B+ paper. “This is the actual paper she turned in?”

“Tywin told her the work was good, but she could do better. So Arya rewrote it. That should be beneath the paper there.”

“Is there more?” he asked weakly.

Catelyn exchanged the folder for a notebook.

Here the only hand he saw was Arya’s. He paged through it. “I don’t understand. What are these?”
“Those are her ideas for business ventures.”

“At least he hasn’t got his fingers into—”

Catelyn took the notebook away and stacked everything together. “Ned. You’re missing the point. We shouldn’t have made her quit and we shouldn’t have made her give him that check.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“He’s helping her find another job, you know. That’s why she has all the résumé drafts. He made calls on her behalf. She’s had three interviews.”

“Why would he do that? Cat, she’s a child. She’s our daughter. Why would he go out of his way like this if there wasn’t something in it for him?”

She pulled the pillows out from behind them and punched them back into shape. “If he had some nefarious plan for her, he could have persuaded her not to quit, you know. She’s over eighteen. The way she feels about you right now . . .” She put them back behind his head. “Both he and his brother were surprised she didn’t tell us about Lemon Cakes or the Helmets & Halberds projects. They were appalled that we didn’t know she was working for them. Tywin personally apologized to me.”

“You’re on a first-name basis with him now?”

Catelyn ignored the question. “They both talked about how bright she was.”

“Can you honestly see her as a corporate drone, Cat?”

“No. But I don’t think that’s how they see her future either. They talked about her ideas. She likes starting these businesses. She and Margaery Tyrell,” his wife made a face. “I don’t like Margaery, but supposedly she’s very good at it too; and they said the two of them together are a very good team.”

“So they’ve invested real money into—”

“Ned, Tywin and Kevan Lannister probably spend more money on their suits than they did on the knitting bag business. $2000 is nothing to them. Arya’s upset with you about the amount of the check you wrote. She said it wasn’t enough because there were profits that needed to be taken into account, but that those had been reinvested. She evidently tried paying him back personally and he refused to take her money. I called the bank and he hasn’t cashed our check.”

He didn’t like this. “You want to let her keep on working there.”

“I do, but I don’t think she could. She’s given her notice. He accepted her resignation.”

He crossed his arms. “So what are you suggesting?”

“I am going to call him.”

“No, I don’t want you within fifty feet of him, not by yourself.”

“A telephone conversation doesn’t require me to be in the same room with him,” she retorted. “I am going to ask him to tear up our check. I’ve spoken with Kevan, who is a perfectly lovely man. By the way, Kevan wants us to come to his home for dinner next week with Sansa and Arya. I’ve already told him we accept. We are going to give them our permission to continue on as advisors
for these businesses and we are going to allow Tywin to continue mentoring Arya.”

Ned stared at his wife. She was angry with him. It came out in her every syllable. “I don’t want her under his influence.”

“There is not one thing he’s influenced her to do that isn’t positive. He’s been teaching her about proper business practices. She’s voluntarily reading books he’s suggested, books that aren’t about battles or dragons or knights. She’s going to class. She’s not hanging out with delinquents. She’s not being escorted home by the police!”

He flinched. It had only happened once, but the experience had been sobering.

“She cares about her personal appearance. She’s getting along with her sister—when has that ever happened? She was holding down a 20-hour-a-week position and achieving an excellent GPA, as well as working on her projects. Which of those things are bad?”

“So we’re just going to ignore the fact that he’s a ruthless, amoral, heartless, businessman? Or ignore the fact that he’s got his family members in positions of power all over Westeros? His influence extends across the continent.”

“No. We are going to be a lot more involved in Arya’s life than we have been, the way we should have been before all the trouble started last year. We will continue to instill her with our values. We’re going to make sure she is a critical thinker.”

“And when she gets enticed by the glitter of the Lannisters, all of that will fly out the window.”

Cat took a deep breath. “I love you, but Ned, honestly, you are one of the most stubborn, pig-headed men I have ever met. If you won’t bend, you’re going to lose Arya. It will destroy her and it will kill you.”

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Tyrion did not quite know how his quiet evening with Shae had turned into a party. She didn’t seem unduly upset, though. She took Jaime being here as a sign that Tyrion was willing to become a much more satisfactory boyfriend. He didn’t tell her Jaime’s presence and for that matter everyone else’s presence was due to technical difficulties. Nor did he tell her that his father was probably going to hit the proverbial roof once he met her.

He watched bemused as half of his colleagues and Jaime settled down in front of the television to watch *Deep Space Nine*. He was somewhat startled to learn that with the exception of Shae and Ros, they not only all knew Jaime, but also that they had been in the habit of going to his apartment for similar viewing parties.

Tyrion poured drinks in the kitchen for his guests. Brienne came in to help him.

“Have you heard from your sister yet?”

“No.” Tyrion often went long periods without speaking to Cersei, but he was used to talking to his niece and nephew, and they were not answering their phones.

“He’s very worried. I’m glad you let him come here. He could use the distraction.”

Tyrion looked closely at Brienne. “What exactly is going on with you and Davos?” The man seemed pleasant enough, but they weren’t behaving like a couple. From what he could tell Jaime and Brienne were talking nightly and hanging out a good deal. Why Cersei hadn’t swooped in and
put a stop to this friendship was a mystery. For that matter Cersei’s whereabouts were a mystery.
She might go weeks without communicating with him, but she and Jaime were practically a single
entity.

“We’re not seeing each other anymore,” Brienne told him as she emptied chips into two wooden
bowls he didn’t know he had. “We’re just friends.”

He started to look at her with pity, but then it occurred to him that this was Brienne. The normal
rules didn’t seem to apply to her. He wondered if it was because she didn’t know them.

* * *

When Gendry called and asked if they would like to come along with him to cheer Arya up, Sansa
did not expect to enjoy herself. The activity Gendry had in mind was a roller derby bout. Sansa had
never gone, but she assumed it would be noisy and trashy and a miserable evening all around. Arya
needed the distraction, though. She was dejected and angry; Sansa had never seen her sister so
mad. As Margaery was game, they had all gone.

And it had been . . . fun? It was certainly noisy, but there was an excitement to the experience that
floored her. She hated sports. She’d passed P.E. somehow despite spending nearly every moment
of every awful class trying to avoid participating. But this was different. She’d jumped to her feet
and yelled and screamed as loudly as anyone in the audience.

“I wonder what you have to do to be on a team,” Arya was saying.

Sansa studied the program. She knew one or two of the Crownland Cuties. “Well, first, you have to
be able to skate.”

“It can’t be that hard,” Arya retorted.

“It’s not,” Sansa agreed. She could roller skate. It was one of the few athletic things she could do
and do well. There had been a period in middle school where all the girls held their birthday parties
at the rink. She had gone so much she’d tried unsuccessfully to get her parents to buy her own pair
of skates.

Margaery stole the program. “The names are hysterical. I don’t know if I liked the fishnets, though.
They were tacky.”

Gendry looked like he disagreed, but he didn’t comment.

“Mum and Dad would never let me,” Arya said. She stabbed the lime in her coke viciously. “You
could try out, though,” she told Sansa.

“For roller derby?” Sansa blinked.


Gendry thought it was funny too. “Those girls would eat her alive.”

“Why not? You’re a good skater; you’re fast too. You could be a jammer!”

“I would never have the time.” It seemed like she had something due or some obligation every
minute of the day. Now there was Margaery too. “I think I’m going to quit my job next semester,”
she said changing the subject.
Margaery thought this was an excellent idea. “I don’t know how you stand all those nutcases.”

“Your grandmother has no problem with them.” Sansa wished she knew what the secret was. She seemed to attract every whack job in King’s Landing; it was like they all knew her work schedule. In marked contrast, Olenna Tyrell handled everything and everyone with total aplomb. Almost no one dared mess with her and she deftly put in their places the few who tried.

“Well, that’s Grandmother. Baby, you’re tired all the time. You have way too much going on.” Margaery rubbed Sansa’s shoulders.

Arya and Gendry exchanged glances.

“Yes, we’re a couple, okay?” Sansa said sourly. “You can’t tell Mum and Dad, though. I do not need them meddling in my private affairs.”

Gendry snickered.

“You know what I mean!”

Arya kicked him under the table.

“Since I’m not talking to Dad, it’s not a problem,” Arya informed her. “And I won’t tell anyone.” She looked at Margaery. “You better be good to Sansa or I’ll hurt you.”

Margaery solemnly promised to take proper care of Sansa.

As the waiter set down their food, Sansa slid the roller derby program back into her bag. Maybe once the semester was over, Margaery and she could go skating. She remembered the exhilaration she’d felt racing around the rink. It would be good to experience something like that again.

---

Stannis was not accustomed to being in his sister-in-law’s company for prolonged periods. By his calculations, he had now spent more time with Cersei in the past few days than he had in her twenty-something years of marriage to Robert.

Stannis took a deep breath. “There is one thing upon which I must insist.” He felt he had been a fair host. He had not placed too many demands upon her. She had agreed to several conditions already. Joffrey was not to set foot on his property. That was fine, she said. Joffrey was elsewhere. He had been horrified to learn where and why, but it hadn’t been much of a shock. It also had produced another wave of tears on her part.

When she calmed down he went on, the children were to stay in school. She had wanted to fight this condition, but he stood firm. His only concession was to agree to take their cell phones away. Myrcella and Tommen were not happy about this, but they surrendered them without too much protest. Then there had been that incredibly awkward conversation about his living arrangements and his personal privacy. To that too, she acquiesced. The bedrooms he gave them were upstairs and on the other side of the house. So far, there had been no embarrassing incidents.

“What do you want me to do?”

“I think,” he said carefully, “that you need to go back to Robert’s—”

“—you said we could stay here!” Cersei protested.
“—to retrieve some of your clothing,” he finished as if she hadn’t spoken. “And some of your children’s clothing.” The situation was becoming critical. Myrcella had fared best of the three. She and Shireen were close to the same size, but most of Shireen’s belongings were at Selyse’s. When Shireen came to stay, she would naturally want to wear her own clothes. Tommen had gotten short shrift. Stannis was taller and markedly thinner than his nephew. Although Stannis never paid much attention to fashion, even he was aware that the items he wore were ill-suited to a fifteen-year-old boy. Asha had gone out and purchased some things for Tommen, but it was a short term solution at best.

Asha was generously sharing her clothes with Cersei and the effect was . . . disconcerting. Although his sister-in-law had a slight build, Asha wore her clothes very tightly. There was also the nature of Asha’s wardrobe. Today Cersei was sporting a thin Babylon 5 t-shirt with an ironic slogan proclaiming “The Psi Corps is your friend/Trust the Psi Corps” stretched across the chest, and what he believed were called skinny jeans. It was not that Cersei looked unattractive, it was just unnerving. Her children found it outright disturbing.

“What if Robert is there?”

“I have made an appointment to speak with Robert at Crownlands at 1:00.”

“He can’t know about our being here; you promised—”

“Cersei, let me finish.”

“If he finds out—”

He tried again, “Woman, please listen.”

She shut up.

“I told his executive assistant it concerns Renly.” Stannis didn’t have anything specific to say about Renly, but it was never very hard to find a concern to voice. If nothing else, he could discuss the trust or listen to Robert rant about Loras. “When I get there, I’ll text Asha. She’ll drive you to the house and help you pack up whatever you need.”

Cersei thought a minute and then finally nodded her assent.

Stannis handed her a folder. “This is the information I collected when Selyse and I divorced. Much of it was not applicable in our case, but it may be of use to you. There are some names and addresses of law firms in here as well.”

“I never asked you what happened with Selyse,” she said dully.

Stannis was silent for a moment. “Our parting was amicable.” That was as far as he felt obligated to go in disclosing details about the end of his marriage. “I have to go or I’ll be late for work. Will you allow me to consult with Tyrion?”

She shook her head violently.

He would try again later. He was baffled by her refusal to speak to any member of her family. For as long as she had been married to Robert, her relatives had never been far from her. There was seldom a dinner or a party he’d been forced to attend that didn’t contain at least three Lannisters. Now aside from Myrcella and Tommen, she wanted nothing to do with them. She was frantic that they not be called. The night she’d shown up with her children in his foyer, his suggestion that he contact her father had been met with a positive flood of tears. When he mentioned calling Jaime,
she’d gone into a full-blown panic attack. Only his sworn promise on his daughter’s life that he
would not speak to any of them without her consent had calmed her down.

Cersei set the folder on the coffee table. “I’ll look at it, I promise. We won’t overstay our
welcome.”

“You may stay as long as is necessary,” he said surprising himself.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I lied about the cake. But this week I wrote two stories set in this same universe. The first takes place about 8 years prior and the second is a little Halloween thing probably taking place oh not that long before Cersei showed up on Stannis and Asha’s
door. They are Stannis heavy. No Lannisters (except Cersei) and no Starks, though. Thus ends the shameless self promotion.
I Went to Z’ha’dum and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt

Chapter Summary

Brienne learns the perils of multitasking in meetings. As Tywin experiences the grandeur that is the basement of the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library, he comes to realize his assessment of Sansa is off. Meanwhile Cersei finds out some surprising things about Stannis and reaches a crossroads in her life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Brienne took her copy of the papers Petyr had made for everyone. It was a list of journals up for cancellation. She scanned it and her heart sank. Everyone around the table appeared to have the same reaction.

“This is our worst case scenario,” Petyr told them quietly. He handed around another set of sheets.

“These are core titles.” Olenna rapped her nails against the table.


Petyr coughed until they focused on him again. “Assuming the actual budget matches up with our projections, this is what we will actually have to cut.”

This list was somewhat shorter and better than the first, but Brienne dreaded the reaction from the faculty. She took notes on her iPad as Petyr went over his scenarios.

The notification for her chat app went off. She mumbled an apology and turned off the sound. She was about to close it when another message popped up.

Do the Cardassians and Bajorans appear in the first Star Trek? The one with the bald guy?

She fixed her eyes on Petyr and typed. I'm in a meeting. Why aren’t you working?

I'm in a meeting too! Have you seen what they’re projecting? They’re talking about cancelling the Westerosi Journal of Endodontics!!! Why are they caving with the Science Direct contract?

She blinked and then realized she had two chat windows open. The medical library’s staff meeting was always at the same time as theirs. Myranda was probably looking at the same sorts of lists they were here. Theirs would be worse because STM journal subscription prices were exponentially higher than those in the humanities and the social sciences.

Brienne typed. They need to take a firmer hand with them.

I should say so. Why is the Federation knuckling under to the Cardassians like this?

“All right,” Dr. Stark was saying. “I will draft a letter to the faculty. Each of you will go with Petyr
to your respective departments and present the two scenarios. It’s the best we can do under the circumstances.” He winced. He unscrewed a bottle of ibuprofen and popped a few pills. “Olenna?”

Wench? Are you there?

I am in a meeting. Why aren’t you working?

I took a mental health day. Tyrion said you are a reference librarian so it seems to me that this is really part of your job.

Brienne scowled at her computer.

Cersei still hasn’t called me back. I even drove by the house again. No one is home. I’m worried, all right? I need the distraction.

“I have no idea,” Bronn was saying in his usual laconic manner.

The Provost has his head up his arse if you ask me.

“They asked specifically for you and we’ve at least three requests for appointments with you in the past two days.”

“Could they have meant Brienne?” Tyrion asked.

Everyone was looking at her. Clearly, she had missed something.

“Why would they be asking for Brienne’s help with a computer science paper?” Stannis demanded.

Asha was still staring at the worst case scenario list. “And since when do undergraduate computer science majors write papers?”

Brienne messaged Asha. What are they talking about?

A bunch of coeds are storming the library asking for Bronn and Olenna has her knickers in a twist. I don’t know why. He’s got the degree same as us.

Oh. Brienne sat up straighter. And they’re confusing me with Bronn???

Who is confusing you with Bronn? Hey, is he doing reference now? I had three patrons asking for him yesterday and four for Stannis.

Is it worth me watching the first one? I feel there’s an awful lot of backstory I’m missing.

“If one might suggest something?” Varys ventured. “Perhaps someone might contact Lyn Corbray and inquire about this mysterious computer science paper.”

Jaime wants to know if he should watch TNG first.

I told him he needs to watch them in order, starting with TOS.

Asha said you need to start with TOS.

That’s not my job. If I wanted to understand licensing agreements and terms of service, I would be a serials librarian.

This was getting confusing. Brienne glanced down and made sure she had Myranda’s window on
top. I’ll ttyl okay? She closed the window. Then she typed in the window for Jaime. Go back to work. Then she exited out of the application.

Dr. Stark stood up with difficulty. “Thank you all. Brienne, thanks for volunteering.”

Brienne shot Asha a hopeless look. “What did I volunteer for?” she asked as she walked back with Tyrion and Asha.

“You’re contacting Lyn about why Bronn has a fan club.”

“And you’re chairing the committee on user satisfaction.”

“I’m what???”

Tyrion twisted his face in a smirk. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist. You only agreed to contact the computer science bibliographer. What were you doing in there? You’re usually so focused.”

“Jaime was asking me about Star Trek,” Brienne said with a sigh. “And then Myranda messaged me too and the windows were getting mixed up.”

Asha snorted.

“He still hasn’t heard from his sister. He’s worried.”

“I’m worried too,” Tyrion told them. “I never thought I would say this, but I think we ought to call the police. If it was just Cersei . . . well, she gets in these moods, but I talk to Myrcella and Tommen all the time and they’re not returning my messages.”

Asha twisted her lip. “I’ve got to go.”

“Jaime, Tyrion, Shae, and I are going out to lunch tomorrow. Do you and Stannis want to come too?”

“I have the afternoon off, but thanks.” Asha paused. “Tyrion, I’m sure your sister is okay. Try not to worry.”

Tyrion and Asha disappeared into the back. Brienne headed toward the mail room only to see a young woman looking around in confusion. “May I help you?”

“Is uh . . .” The girl consulted a piece of a paper, “Stannis around? Or Bronn?”

* * *

Tywin silently cursed Ned Stark for the umpteenth time. Using Kevan and Catelyn Tully as mediators, they had worked out an arrangement whereby he could continue to mentor Arya and advise her little band of budding entrepreneurs. The mechanics were proving more difficult than they should have been. Stark refused to allow them to come to Casterly Rock Enterprises headquarters or to Tywin’s home and Tywin was not about to come to the Stark household. At some point, they had hit upon the library as a neutral place. It wasn’t neutral enough for Tywin, not with Stark ensconced there as Director, but it would serve for the immediate future.

Sansa was behind the Circulation Desk quietly remonstrating with a student worker. She returned looking unhappy. “I have to go find us another room.”

“But I already reserved one,” Arya objected.
“They put us in Study Room 6. We can’t use it and the others are all taken.”

Margaery appeared to be as mystified as Arya. “Why not?”

“I’ll be right back.” Sansa hurried off to the administrative offices. Moments later she came back with a key. “Okay, Varys said we can use the conference room in the basement. I thought maybe we could use the regular room, but he’s up there.”

“Who is ‘he’?” Tywin inquired as they went down the stairs. “Your father?”

“She means Petyr Baelish.” Margaery made a face as she explained, “He’s got a thing for Sansa.”

This would be the same man opposing his son. “Isn’t he considerably older than you?”

“He’s a perv,” Arya pronounced.

Sansa fixed her sister and Margaery with a look. “Mr. Lannister doesn’t need to know about this.”

The basement was unprepossessing. He had been down here of course at least twice. The first time had been to inspect the space and the second had been for the ceremony after the installation of the shelving. “Where are the Bs?” he asked.

“We’ll pass them on the way.”

“Is it safe down here?” Margaery wanted to know.

Sansa shrugged. “The aisle we turn down won’t compress if that’s what you’re worried about. Besides Varys had electricians down here for days. He claims they fixed everything, even the lights.” She gestured to her left. “That’s the row, Mr. Lannister.”

It looked no different from any of the others.

She stopped and demonstrated how the buttons worked. “Arya, stand in there.”

Arya was unenthused but compliant.

“No stay here at the end, just in case something goes wrong.”

Arya gave Sansa a sour look.

Sansa went to the next row and hit more buttons. Beeps sounded and the shelves stopped moving. “That’s what’s supposed to happen. Or there’s that tape. You can tap it with your foot and it’ll stop it if the shelves keep moving. But it didn’t.” Sansa resumed leading them down the main aisle. They had crossed into the older portion of the library. She waved a hand down to her right. “Dad would have been way down there.”

Tywin peered into blackness.

“The lights only come on when you’re moving around,” she explained.

Arya made a face. “That’s stupid.”

“I think they do it to save money. It doesn’t work half the time. If you stand too still, the lights shut off on you. Sometimes they don’t come on at all.”

“But this Varys had it fixed?” Tywin made a mental note to add it to the list of projects he was
willing to fund.

“Supposedly.” Sansa didn’t sound optimistic. “The electricity is all jacked up in this section of the library, though. Upstairs too, but I don’t think anyone cares because that’s just the staff offices.”

“Where is this room? Dorne?” Arya was growing impatient.

“Next time you need to reserve a study room, tell them any room but #6. It’s nasty in there.” Sansa hesitated. “It’s sticky.”

Margaery’s face cleared. “Oh my gods. That’s the room? The one they had listed on Crownlands after Dark on Twitter? As a great place for uh . . .”

“Yes,” Sansa said shortly. She glanced at him. “Trust me, Mr. Lannister, you do not want to know.”

Arya, however, did and insisted on receiving an explanation. Tywin was appalled to learn the reason for the aforementioned stickiness. “This . . . degenerate behavior . . . is allowed to continue unchecked?” It was yet another reason why Stark needed to be dealt with.

“Oh, they try and stop it. The campus police go up there all the time.” Sansa’s tone when she mentioned the police was dismissive. She had them turn left and they came directly upon a middle-aged man busily stowing books into a leather satchel.

He turned around startled.

Tywin watched as the older Stark girl exchanged greetings with him. Apparently he was a professor. Margaery said hello to him as well. He inquired after Sansa’s father and mentioned how pleased he was to be able to browse again. She smiled and promised warmly to tell her parents he had asked about them. Tywin surreptitiously glanced at his watch. At last, the man left them.

Sansa’s smile vanished. She unlocked a door and ushered them in to a small, dismal conference room.

“All right,” Tywin began.

“Just a minute, Mr. Lannister.” Sansa whipped out her phone and tapped out a number. “It’s me. Did Dr. Bolton come up yet? Who’s at the reference desk?” She listened and frowned. “Is anyone back in Tech Services? Or in Administration?” She waited. “Okay, put me through to Stannis. No, do it now and when Dr. Bolton comes upstairs, find an excuse to keep him at the desk. Do whatever the prompts on his account say. If he complains, tell him you’re just a student worker.” She made a face and in a voice of iron, she said, “Just do it.” She covered the mouthpiece. “It’ll be just one more second, Mr. Lannister, I promise.”

Arya and Margaery powered up laptops.

“Stannis? It’s Sansa. I’m down in the basement. Tip-In is stealing books. He’s got like seven in his satchel.”

Tywin could hear Stannis ranting in the background. He opened his own briefcase and removed a legal pad and the Lemon Cakes files.

“No, I can’t come up. I’m off the clock right now.” The iron voice was back. “Willem is up at Circ., but there’s no way he’ll know what to do. I saw seven in Tip-In’s bag and he had three he was carrying in his hands. He may put all ten down. He knows I saw him, but I thought someone
should know just in case. Thanks.” She shut off her phone. “Sorry about that, Mr. Lannister,” she apologized in her normal soft, sweet tones.

Tywin had never been terribly impressed with Sansa Stark. Her artistic talents aside, he had always considered her to be an amiable, well-mannered, but somewhat dim young woman. It would appear that he had underestimated her.

* * *

The strange thing about staying with Stannis and Asha, Cersei thought, was how normal it quickly became. She was baffled by his living arrangements, but had gotten used to it. Still she wondered how it worked. As Asha drove her to the house to pick up the clothes, she finally took pity on Cersei.

“What do you want to know?”

“Melisandre? How does that . . .?” she broke off. She wasn’t even sure how to ask the question. Before leaving Robert, she would have made some sly insinuation, but she was painfully aware just how alone she and her children were now. Stannis was very polite with her, but Cersei had seen the looks he and Asha were constantly giving each other whenever she was in the room.

Asha got on the on-ramp to the highway. “Sometimes we’re all together. Sometimes she’s with him. Sometimes he’s with me.”

“But not the two of you . . .”

Asha shrugged. “She’s all about the Lord of Light.”

“And you’re not?” Cersei was fuzzy on Melisandre’s religion. She’d come here in some mad hope that the woman could give her some direction, but Melisandre had yet to appear.

“I believe in the Drowned God,” Asha said flatly. “Stannis doesn’t, but he respects my beliefs. We keep it separate. You can’t do that with Melisandre. It’s always religion with her—all of the fucking time. You never get a break. The only time she shuts up about it is when Shireen is at the house and that’s only because Stannis put his foot down. But when Shireen is here, we don’t do anything. Not that I mind, she’s a sweet kid.”

“But Tommen and Myrcella are here and—” she broke off. She had nowhere else to go. If Stannis threw them out, that would be the end.

“Your bedrooms are above ours and on the other side of the house. Shireen’s is right next door to her father’s,” Asha pointed out.

“Where is Melisandre?”

“Melisandre thought Stannis was the reincarnation of this warrior or god or something. I don’t really know; like I said, I don’t believe in her god. Anyhow, lately she’s not sure she interpreted her visions right. She’s been talking a lot about the North and snow storms and battles. She applied for a library job with the Night’s Watch. That’s why she’s not here. She went to interview.”

Cersei absorbed this information.

“Olenna is going to have kittens if she does get the job. They want someone up there right away. It’ll mean more desk hours,” Asha predicted sourly. “I don’t mind doing four a week, but I’m trying to clean up our records for the new discovery product, and we’re still dealing with the
backlog—"

“How can you—?”

“We can’t,” Asha told her. “I have a paper I’m trying to write. I have the backlog. We have the
discovery product. I cannot take on more—”

“No, that’s not what I mean.” Since she landed on her brother-in-law’s doorstep, Cersei had
learned more about librarianship than she had ever wanted to know. If left unchecked, they would
start talking about funny subject headings and something called authority files. It was worse than
the few conversations she’d endured with Tyrion. “How can you stand to share him?” This was
what she didn’t understand. “If you love Stannis then why—”

Asha stared at her. “Who said anything about love?”

“But. . .”

“Stannis is great in bed,” Asha said simply. “He’s a pain in the arse most of the time, but he is
very, very good at fucking. I think it’s all his pent-up emotional energy.”

This was beyond Cersei’s understanding. Stannis was a lobster. He was a rigid, unbending, uptight
. . .

“It was a surprise to me too,” Asha remarked. “I don’t know how it’s going to work if Mel goes to
the North, though.”

“But you’ll have him to yourself.” For most of her life, Cersei had dreamt of some way, any way
where she and Jaime could be together exclusively. It had never happened before and now thanks
to Father’s threat, it never would. “You live with him; surely it’s more than just sex.”

Asha switched lanes. “Yeah, it kind of is.” She started to go on and then she stopped. “It’s
complicated.”

Cersei couldn’t imagine how much more complicated this relationship could be.

Asha turned onto the exit. “Right or left?”

Cersei gave her directions. Out of habit, she pulled down the sun-visor and looked in the vanity
mirror. She didn’t recognize herself. Since staying with Stannis, she’d gone without makeup. Her
hair looked a fright. She glanced down at the clothes Asha had lent her.

Asha turned up the driveway. “Nice house. Okay, let’s do this.”

“What if Robert’s here? What if he—?” Perhaps this had all been a huge mistake. She could go
back. If she went back she would have Jaime at least. “What am I doing?” she said finally.

Asha took the keys out of the ignition. ”Look, I don’t know you really well. I gather from Stannis
that your marriage has never been a bed of roses. Is that fair to say?”

Cersei nodded.

“I can drive you back to the house so you can collect your kids and you can come back here. You
can tell your husband you had to go out of town or something. My mother used to do that.
Sometimes my father didn’t even notice we’d left.”

“I don’t—”
“Does he hit you?”

He had on occasion. She hit right back, but Robert was physically stronger and bigger than she.
“Is that why I left,” she said truthfully. “There were other—” she broke off again.

“Okay, so we either get your stuff or you go back. Your choice. I have the whole afternoon.”

“Does your father hit your mother?” Cersei found herself asking.

Asha didn’t reply immediately. “He has. Mostly he goes in for emotional abuse.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“I don’t like to give advice,” Asha said. “I’ll tell you this, though. There is no in between. My mother has never understood that. She used to drag us to shelters and then the next morning we’d go back to him. My brother and I were fucked up because of it.” She gave a short little laugh. “No, I take it back; we were fucked up because of all the shit that went down at home, but her indecisiveness didn’t help. So what do you want to do?”

Cersei had never felt this exposed before. “What choice do I have? I don’t have a degree. My father will cut me off—cut us off—if he finds out I’ve left Robert. We’ve spent everything. There’s no future if I leave. I’d lose Jai—”

Asha put the keys back in the ignition. “That sounds like you’re going back to him. We can pick up your kids and I’ll drop you off at your car.”

“There’s no money,” Cersei said. “I never graduated from university. I could never get a job.”

Asha started up the car and began to back down the driveway.

“I have to think of my children.”

Asha hit the brakes. “Look, I don’t care. I just met you a few weeks ago. Your kids seem nice. You seem right—you seem okay. But I don’t care. You don’t have to justify yourself to me. I’m here because Stannis asked me to help. Are we getting your shit or am I getting you to your car so you can come back?”

“Is your mother is still with your father?”

“Oh, yes.” Asha stared out the window. “She calls every once in a while and says she’s going to leave him. Usually I don’t even get a quarter of the way there before she phones me to tell me she’s changed her mind. I stuck it out till I was nineteen. Theon left when he was fourteen. The funny thing is my father likes me. He wanted me to go into the family business. He said I had more courage than any of my brothers.”

Theon . . . he was the one the Starks took in. “You have other brothers?”

“Had. They’re dead. Do not ask me about them.”

They sat in the driveway.

“Can I ask you something?”

Cersei nodded.

“Why were you looking for Melisandre? Or was that just an excuse to get Stannis to take you in?”
“It was something she said to me at Jaime’s party. I said I wasn’t happy with my life and she told me to change it. She seemed so . . . so wise.”

Asha snorted. “You are lucky she’s been out of town. She would have had you at the airport trying to convert people to R’hllor so fast.”

Cersei smiled in spite of herself. “I hardly think so.”

“You don’t know Melisandre. She’s right about what she said, though. If you don’t like your life, you can change it. Stannis isn’t going to toss you and your kids out. He’s a decent man. He’ll help you. The rest is all details. But you need to decide. Stay or go. There is no middle ground.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Petyr is not up to anything shifty in the meeting. Discussions about journal cancellations are a sad reality of academic libraries. STM means Scientific/Technical/Medical. Science Direct is a sort of database containing a huge amount of full text journals, many of which are high-use/high impact titles. The cost for universities to subscribe is usually astronomical. Usually publishers base their pricing on the full size of an institution. So if Crownlands has 15,000 students, even if only 5000 would use STM journals, the pricing is based off the full 15,000.
Charging Parties

Chapter Summary

Olenna's attempt at breaking up her "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day" has unforeseen consequences for Tyrion and Tywin. Petyr makes a move.

Chapter Notes

I keep doing this after the fact--sorry, I really am bad at tagging. If you have any triggers for sexual harassment, you might want to avoid this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Tywin met her in the parking lot of the bar. “I thought perhaps you gave me the wrong address. I’m sorry to see that I was mistaken.”

Olenna ignored the sarcasm. “I need a drink.”

“Our usual place serves alcohol and we wouldn’t have to worry about food poisoning.”

“Do you want to have lunch with me or not?” He really was the most frustrating man.

“I’m here, aren’t I? At an establishment where no doubt the waiter will tell us earnestly that his name is Harrold and expect me to care.”

Oh gods, he was gnashing his teeth. Olenna counted to ten. “Tywin, I need you to listen to me very carefully. My day started at bad. It is now at abysmal and it’s scarcely 1:00. I neither want nor need a fight with you. What I require is a large whiskey and a steak. I want these without judgment. I would like to have your company while I enjoy them, but if you cannot oblige, I’d just as soon eat alone.”

“Very well.”

This was positively effusive for him. They started walking toward the bar.

“Father?”

Olenna swore silently, knowing full well that Tywin was probably doing the same thing. She would never hear the end of this. She turned around and smiled brightly at Jaime Lannister and Brienne. Of course, they seemed flummoxed not only to see Tywin in the parking lot of a dive bar, but also in her company.

“Jaime. Ms Tarth. You’ll join us of course.”

You had to admire him. He knew just how to employ the lord of the manor attitude to effect. He
might have gotten away with it too but for the arrival of Shae and Tyrion.

She took over. “There you are,” she said grandly. “Shall we get a table?”

Tyrion and Jaime were exchanging glances.

“Congratulate, Brienne,” she ordered in a murmur to Tywin. They were a few yards behind the others.

She could see Jaime gaining his equilibrium back.

“I should like to offer my congratulations,” Tywin told Brienne.

“Yes, it’s quite an honor,” Olenna remarked. “The journal accepting her paper is quite a prestigious one too.”

Tywin recognized his cue and began asking her for more details about her article.

They went inside and were seated. Tyrion introduced his father to Shae. Gossip around the library put Tyrion and Shae together, but she had said nothing to Tywin. In the first place, it was none of her business and in the second, dating him was like walking through a minefield without a map at the best of times. There was no need to march deliberately through the areas you knew definitely contained bombs.

Their waitress started to approach the table. Contrary to Tywin’s absurd fears and although she wore a name tag proclaiming her name as “Alys,” the girl, who was their usual server, did not introduce herself to them. She did focus on Jaime. She dispensed water to all and put an extra paper napkin by him. “Just in case,” she told him. “What would you all like to drink?”

“Double whiskey, neat,” Olenna requested when it was her turn. She felt Tywin’s eyes on her, but ignored him. She wasn’t sure if he was silently judging her for drinking in the middle of the day or for dragging him to an establishment where the waitresses wore hot pants and low-cut tops.

The girl wrote the last order on her pad. “Where’s Mr. Split Infinitive?”

“Back at the library,” Brienne told her.

“Oh.” The waitress sounded disappointed. “Well, I’ll get these filled right away.”

Tywin studied the plasticized menu dubiously.

They talked about food for a few moments. Jaime was leaning toward a salad.

“Are you insane?” Tyrion inquired. “Salad in a place like this?”

“Brienne has me on a health regimen.”

“I do not.”

“What do you call that torture you put me through yesterday morning?”

Brienne rolled her eyes. “Exercise.”

Olenna noticed Tywin relax ever so slightly as his eldest son and Brienne bantered back and forth. She thought they were a long way off from the marriage and grandchildren he desired, but there was no doubt about their camaraderie.
The waitress came back with their drinks and took their orders. When Jaime gave his, she shook her head.

“You don’t recommend it?”

“No, it’s very good. It’s just . . . messy?”

“I think I can manage it.”

The girl shrugged. She hesitated and then addressed Brienne. “Your friend, the grammar guy?”

“Stannis?”

“Yes, um, I was reading a book I think he’d enjoy. It’s about punctuation. If I wrote down the title, would you give him a note?”

Brienne nodded.

Tyrion stared after her. “I just cannot understand how he does it. That girl has to be what? Twenty-three? Twenty-four? She could probably have almost any man in this bar and she wants Stannis Baratheon?”

Tywin frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Really, Olenna reflected, for such an intelligent man, he could be so obtuse. “I rather doubt the waitress really cares to discuss punctuation with Stannis. Poor dear, if he does call her, that’s probably what’s going to happen.”

Jaime shook his head. “Asha mangles the Common Tongue constantly. I can’t see her engaging in conversations about semi-colons and Melisandre?” He shook his head. “Ow! Wench, what in the seven hells was that for?”

“I believe Ms Tarth was signaling you to stop speaking, although it really isn’t necessary. Your brother has made enough oblique references to Stannis Baratheon’s . . . activities that I believe I am up to speed. Which one is Asha? The naked harlot or the foul-mouthed girl who misplaced her brassiere?”

Olenna opened her mouth and shut it.

“The . . . er . . . the latter,” Brienne managed.

“And now our waitress wants to join in the fun,” Jaime said brightly. “Ow. Will you stop doing that, wench?”

“No. I don’t like talking about people behind their backs. And stop calling me ‘wench.’”

“Oh, come on. Stannis and three women? Surely that’s tempting enough gossip.”

Olenna made a face. “It’ll only be two if Melisandre takes that job.”

“We don’t know that they’ll offer it to her. All you know is that she did well on the presentation. That means nothing.”

“What are you talking about?” Jaime wanted to know.

“Melisandre,” Olenna said tightly, “is interviewing for a librarian position for the Night’s Watch.”
Brienne was putting a good face on it. A good presentation could make or break a candidate’s chances.

Jaime’s eyebrows shot up. “They have librarians at the Wall?”

“Yes. They’re solo librarian positions,” Tyrion explained. “I think they have one at each of the manned outposts. She’ll hate the dress code. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her in anything but red.”

The waitress returned with their food and a larger pile of paper napkins which she put in front of Jaime. “Just in case.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

“It’s a good job,” Brienne opined. “I looked at it myself.”

Olenna could not lose another reference librarian. She could not. She fixed Brienne with a glare.

Brienne blushed. “You told me I should always keep an eye out. You said it was my duty to consider my career first and the concerns of my colleagues second when it came to my future.”

“Oh, did you?” Tywin did not exactly smile, but he was amused. “That’s very sound advice. I wonder where you came by it,” he said pointedly.

Olenna refused to be baited. He was never going to let her hear the end of it as it was. She sipped her whiskey and ignored him.

“What’s the problem if she gets the job?” Jaime asked.

“They want someone to start right away,” Olenna explained. “We’re not through the First semester. We’re already down one reference librarian, and we’re drowning in teaching requests. Even if it’s pushed through, by the time we get done with searches, it’ll be a year. It will be brutal. We may even have to let Stannis teach on a regular basis.”

Brienne set her sandwich down and stared at Olenna in horror.

“Well, who else do we have? It’s going to bad enough getting the rest of them to pick up more desk hours. Lysa did eight. Melisandre covers twelve. I practically have to drag Petyr out his goatee to get him to take a mere two hours a week. Can you see him voluntarily teaching? He’d be worse than Stannis.”

“Could we swap Stannis for Myranda? She says they teach subject headings all the time. He’d be in his element and we could have someone who wouldn’t frighten the undergraduates.”

It was a good idea, Olenna thought, and it might even work. They’d probably need to throw something else in, but Varys might have some ideas. “He might volunteer for more desk hours in any case.”

“I’ll do a couple more,” Tyrion volunteered. “But only if she gets an offer and takes it.”

“Thank you, Tyrion. “ Olenna took a sip of whiskey. She could persuade Varys to do at least two more a week. He wouldn’t like it, but he could be depended upon.

As Brienne and Tyrion brainstormed solutions, Olenna became aware that Tywin was talking to Shae. She didn’t know much about Shae’s background, but she doubted it was the sort of which Tywin was likely to approve.
“No, I don’t want to teach,” Tyrion was protesting.

“And what did you do in Lorath, Ms? What is your family name?”

Olenna finished off her whiskey. She tried to catch the eye of their waitress.

“Shae is fine.”

“But you’d be good at it,” Brienne insisted. “Your presentation at your interview was fantastic. It was the deciding factor in you getting the job.”

Tywin whipped his head around.

“What?” Tyrion demanded.

“The presentation you gave tipped the scales in your favor,” Brienne explained.

“You recommended me for the job?”

“Of course, we recommended you. Teaching isn’t that much different from presenting. I can work with you until you feel comfortable.”

“What do you mean you recommended me?”

Olenna glanced at Tywin. He seemed as surprised as Tyrion.

“The search committee felt that you were the best candidate. Why are you even asking? How else would you be here?”

“I just want to be absolutely sure. The search committee picked me?”

Olenna was unclear as to why this should be such a surprise. Unless he was ignorant about the search process, she thought. It was his first academic appointment after all. “The search committee makes a recommendation to the charging party. Brienne was chair so she would have sent the letter to Ned and then your appointment would go up through the administrative ranks for approval.”

Tyrion absorbed this information. He pulled out his wallet and threw some cash onto the table. “I have to get back. Shae? You ready?”

She shot him a look, but rose and followed him out.

“What was that about?” Jaime asked.

“I have no idea.” Brienne stared after them. “Why was he so surprised?”

“He didn’t think he did that well on the interview,” Jaime said after a moment. “I remember he told me he thought he washed out.”

Olenna heard Tywin inhaling sharply. It was usually the first sign before he lost his temper.

“But he got the job,” Brienne protested. “We had over a hundred applicants.”

The waitress came back and placed the check on the table. She handed Brienne a piece of paper. “The info on the book is on there with my name and numbers. Tell him I would love to discuss it. Like anytime. Okay?”
“Tyrion has a point,” Jaime mused after the waitress had gone to another table. “What is the mysterious appeal of Stannis?”

“I couldn’t possibly say.” Although she couldn’t see his face full on, Olenna noticed Tywin’s features were arranging themselves into his furious expression.

Brienne opened her purse.

“No,” Tywin said. “I have this. My congratulations again.”

“Thank you.” Brienne rose.

“I’m not finished,” Jaime complained.

“I have a meeting in a half hour and you drove.”

Olenna watched them leave, Jaime bickering back and forth with Brienne. After the door had shut behind them, she turned to Tywin. “What was that about?”

“I was told Tyrion had not been selected for the position,” he said flatly. There was only one conclusion. “And you used your influence to get him the job.”

“You don’t approve.”

“I know how the world works, Tywin.”

“Ms Tarth just contradicted the information I received. He was the search committee’s candidate. What happened?” When she did not immediately reply, he pressed her, “Well?”

Olenna sighed. “The search committee makes a recommendation. It isn’t a guarantee. The charging party has the right to choose someone else. I suppose that’s what must have happened. In this case, the charging party was—”

“—Ned Stark,” Tywin pronounced infusing the two words with a world of venom.

Sansa finished her lunch. She pulled out her laptop and notes. It was quiet in the library lunchroom and she thought she could write some of her paper before she had to go back to work. She didn’t have a lot of time these days. Her commitment to Helmets & Halberds was technically over, but they kept consulting her and she needed to stay on top of Lemon Cakes. As Arya kept on telling her, she was the talent.

“You work too hard,” Petyr Baelish whispered in her ear. He began to massage her shoulders.

She sat straight up and shook him off.

“Sweetling,” he protested. “You’re so tense.”

“I need to finish my paper.”

He sat down at the lunch table and smiled at her. “Of course you do, Sansa. I’d like to help.” He reached out and put his hand on hers.

Sansa pulled hers back. “Great, maybe you could leave me alone so I could work on it.”
Petyr held his hands up. “I forget how young you are. You’re not comfortable in your own skin yet.”

She began to gather her notes together. She could go and study in the student union. It would be noisy, but he wouldn’t go there. Better still she could go out to the reference floor. She’d heard them talking about how he hated doing his desk shifts.

“No need, sweetling. I’ll leave you be.” He gave her a sad little smile again and left.

Sansa rolled her eyes and tried to ignore her unease. She was just getting into her paper when Tyrion came in.

“There is no coffee,” he said staring at the coffee maker.

Sansa looked up. “I guess not.”

“This is not my day.”

It wasn’t hers either. Sansa got up and opened the cupboard. She took out the canister of coffee. Without speaking, she rinsed out the pot and measured out coffee.

“I didn’t mean you should have to make it for me.”

“It’s fine,” she said wearily. She filled the carafe, poured it in, and pressed the on button. She sat back down.

“What are you working on?”


“Do you mind if I sit here quietly while the coffee perks?”

Sansa shook her head. Tyrion wasn’t a bad guy. She knew Dad didn’t care that much for him, but he was nice enough. And unlike Petyr Baelish, he didn’t make her flesh crawl. She began writing again.

He got up and went to the window.

The door opened.

“Just coming through to get some water,” Petyr announced.

Sansa didn’t acknowledge him. She was going to have to say something to Dad later on.

“Sweetling, when you’re older you’ll understand I just want to be your friend.” He reached out and touched her on the cheek.

She pulled away.

“I believe the lady is telling you she’s not interested in being your friend, Petyr.”

Petyr dropped his hand. “I didn’t see you there.”

“That’s apparent.”

Petyr got his water and took off.
“Does he do that often?” Tyrion asked her.

“I guess.” She sighed. “He’s just always there, you know? I shelve books; he’s in the stacks. If I’m working in Circulation, he shows up there. If I’m in here, he wants to chat.”

“We should have you hang out by the reference desk, maybe he’d actually do his shifts.”

She laughed.

“Seriously, though, you should tell your father or Shae.”

Sansa nodded. “I will,” she promised. She thought she would tell both of them. The trick would be getting Dad alone. He was so busy these days. Even though he was working in the same building, he never seemed to have much time.

The coffee maker dinged.

She watched him as he poured out a cup. “Are you all right?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You seem upset.” She thought he looked angry.

Tyrion didn’t say anything right away. “Let’s just say that my worldview suffered an upset today.” He sipped his coffee. “And like most everything in my life, the good came with a double helping of bad, which in retrospect I should have seen coming.”

Sansa didn’t understand him, but she suspected she wasn’t meant to.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, I didn't forget about Cersei and Asha. The action here is happening concurrently to the events in their part of the story.
Cersei makes an unconventional choice and learns some things about Asha Greyjoy. As the Stark brood identify a problem and decide to employ teamwork to solve it, Stannis deals with some legal and moral questions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Asha dumped a drawer full of Tommen’s shirts into a cardboard box. “I don’t get it. Why can’t you go to your brothers?”

“I could go to Tyrion, I suppose.”

“But not Jaime?”

“Father will tell him if I do.” Outsiders never understood about Father or what he could be like.

“So?”

“It’s complicated,” Cersei insisted as she folded jeans and pants.

“You slept around on your husband. That’s your business and your husband’s business. If you had someone you were leaving your husband for, okay, maybe it’s his or her business, but how is it your brother’s business?”

Cersei didn’t say anything.

Asha stopped what she was doing and peered at her. “Shit,” she said, comprehension dawning on her face.

Cersei sat down on the bed suddenly. “It’s always been Jaime for me. Always.”

“And I thought my family was fucked up,” Asha commented, but she kept on packing.

“It’s different for us,” Cersei said. “We shared the same womb.”

“Most brothers and sisters do.”

“We’re twins,” Cersei insisted.

“You don’t have to justify yourself to me. Where is Ser Pounce?”

Cersei frowned. “What?”

Asha peered under the bed. “Tommen asked me to make sure I brought Ser Pounce back. Whatever or whoever that is. I’m assuming it’s a stuffed toy.”
“Oh.” Cersei glanced around. “There, behind you on the bookshelf. He’s far too old for it, but I haven’t the heart to take it away from him.”

Asha tossed the stuffed kitten into the box.

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

“About what?”

“I just told you I’ve been sleeping with my brother for over twenty years.”

Asha fingered a pile of notebooks. “This looks like school stuff.” She lifted the toy and put the rest underneath. “Did Jaime rape you?”

“What? No!”

“Did you force him to have sex with you? Did anyone force you to fuck him?”

“No! We love each other.”

“Then we’re cool. We’re about finished in here. Will Tommen want anything else?” She waited for a moment. Receiving no answer, Asha hoisted the box and took it downstairs.

Cersei followed carrying two shopping bags feeling like she was in a dream.

Asha rearranged the boxes and the bags. “There.”

She stared at Asha. She had just told a comparative stranger one of her darkest secrets and the woman didn’t seem to care. Could it really be this easy?

“Oh, did you want to talk about it or something?” Asha asked as she reversed out of the driveway and started back for the highway.

Cersei found herself not only wanting to talk about it, but unable to stop. She told Asha things that she’d only ever told Jaime. Asha finally pulled over into a rest stop. She told her things that she’d never told anyone. Asha listened, asked the occasional question, but she made no judgment. Cersei finally stopped. She felt relieved and miserable at the same time and then she looked at Asha.

Seven hells, what had she done? She’d told this woman everything. All Asha had to do was tell one wrong person and it would be the end.

As if she knew what Cersei was thinking, Asha shook her head. “I can keep my mouth shut.”

“What about Stannis?” He had only let them stay there because he thought Tommen and Myrcella were his blood. If he knew the truth . . . Cersei sat up a little straighter. There was only one other car here at the rest stop and the people to whom it belonged seemed to be packing up.

“I don’t know what Stannis would do if you told him, but he doesn’t fuck around. It wouldn’t be the way it sounds like it is with your father. You know where you are with Stannis. You wouldn’t be waiting for the axe to fall.”

“That’s not what I meant.” If she could get Asha out of the car . . . there were woods behind the little outbuilding.

“I know what you meant,” Asha said in a flat voice. “I won’t tell anyone. But if you try and fuck with me, I’ll fuck you seven ways from Sunday. You got that?”
Cersei swallowed.

They sat there watching the cars rushing by on the highway.

“However did you become a librarian?”

Asha laughed. “That’s what you want to talk about?”

“I’m tired of talking about my miserable life.”

“So you want to talk about mine?” Asha snorted. “It wasn’t a lifelong dream or anything. Like a lot of us I sort of fell into it.”

“But how? Tyrion always loved reading. I didn’t expect him to become one, but it seems to fit him.”

“Reading has fuck all to do with librarianship.”

“Oh.”

Asha laughed. “I’ve got this uncle on my mother’s side. He reads everything; I mean *everything*. He was thrilled when I became a librarian. I tried to explain that even though I’m surrounded by books and my work revolves around them, I don’t actually read them. He thinks it’s very sad.”

“So why did you become a librarian?”

“You really want to know? It’s a long story.”

Cersei did. It seemed important for her to understand something about this woman who now possessed the power to destroy her.

“I left home when I was nineteen. One of my uncles got me to Deepwood Motte. I didn’t have any kind of a plan. I just wanted out. I drifted along and ran through my money pretty quickly. I did some things.”

Cersei was deeply curious as to what she meant by “some things,” but Asha’s manner didn’t invite inquiry.

“I hitched my way south. No money. I couldn’t remember when I’d last had a bath. There were days when I ate out of garbage cans like that one there.” She pointed to the bin in front of them.

“Did you ever think about going home?”

“Yeah,” Asha admitted. “But I was nineteen and stupid. Going home would have meant my father. I caught a ride with a trucker. He was headed for King’s Landing, but he got handsy and we had a . . . I ended up in Acorn Hall. You ever been there?”

Cersei thought. There had been a lot of different towns and cities over the years. She’d hated most of them. “No, I don’t think so.”

“It’s very quaint: lots of little shops and restaurants. I fit right in.”

Cersei smiled.

“It was raining when I got there. Raining pretty hard, so I wanted to get out of the wet, you know? All those people with their twee little shops weren’t so keen to let me in though. I walked down
their cute little main street and I noticed a police car following me. There weren’t a lot of places to run. There was a tea shop—spelled s-h-o-p-p-e—on the one side, one of those places that sell yarn next to it, a couple of antique stores, and then on the other side there was the library. I was about to just go and plead vagrancy to the cops when I saw the letters carved over the library door. It said ‘Free to all.’ So I thought what the fuck and I went in.”

“What happened?”

“The front hallway was filled with all these little kids getting out from story hour. There were soccer moms everywhere. They looked a lot like you—okay, not the way you’re dressed right now—but like you normally.”

“You’ve never seen me dressed normally.”

Asha snorted. “Designer clothes, shoes that make the outfit ‘pop,’ great little bag? You were wearing clothes like that when you came to Jaime’s party.”

That felt like an eternity ago. “Go on.”

“The kids weren’t paying any attention to me. They were all excited. I remember they had these elephants made out of grey construction paper; I think they’d just been reading Babar. The moms, though, they were shielding their kids from me. I don’t blame them. If I had children, I wouldn’t have wanted them near me either, not the way I looked that day. But there was the librarian. Even if she wasn’t carrying a felt board, I would have recognized her for one right away: floral dress, cutesy cat pin, clunky shoes, glasses on the chain.”

“None of you dress that way.”

Asha shrugged. “This was a while ago and she was a public librarian. When I started going to conferences, the women mostly wore Birkenstocks, flowy outfits, and ethnic jewelry. Now most of them seem to like to dress like ironic hipsters. Anyhow, I went up to her and I asked if it was okay for me to be there. She didn’t bat an eye. She told me I was welcome and to come right on in. It was dry and it was warm.” She smiled. “I stayed there till they closed.”

Cersei had a sudden memory of going to the library with her mother and Jaime. She had been allowed to pick out picture books, she remembered. There was one with a pink-checked pattern a black-and-white photograph of a doll on the cover. Inside there were more photographs of the doll and some stuffed bears in posed pictures. She remembered asking her mother if she could have that one. Mother explained she could borrow the book, but they would need to give it back. She didn’t think they had gone often, certainly not after Mother had died. If they needed or wanted books, Father would have just had someone buy whatever was required for them.

“My father would have pissed himself if he’d heard me asking for anything. Greyjoys don’t need permission. They just take what they want. ‘We do not sow.’” Asha reached for her water bottle. “I found places to sleep, but I kept coming back. I would listen to them working. There were two librarians and two paraprofessionals. People would come in and ask them all kinds of things and they’d figure out the answers or try to help them.”

Cersei knew this was reference. Stannis had gone on about it at great length the one night. She had learned not to ask questions of them about their jobs. They would just explain them and that was usually worse than unsatisfied curiosity. She had made the mistake of inquiring after someone named Marq who apparently owned fields, only to discover they meant MARC which was an acronym related to whatever cataloging involved. It was better not to ask.
“I was there maybe three days and it hit me that maybe they could help me.”

“What did you ask?”

“I asked Ravella, she was the librarian from story hour, what they could do for me. She said she wasn’t a social worker, but she could try and get any information I needed. It’s pretty powerful stuff, information, if you know how to find it and how to use it. I used the library as a base and I gradually got to a point where I wasn’t sleeping in people’s unlocked garages and going through garbage cans. I left finally and—”

“—decided to become a librarian?”

Asha drank some more water. “You’re jumping way ahead, but eventually, yes. I got into a community college at Maidenpool and then finished up the last two years at Rosby. There were a bunch of odd jobs. I moved around a lot after I graduated. But every place I went, I always checked out their libraries. I liked to just hang out and watch. I ended up in Braavos for a bit.”

“Doing what?”

“Some things.”

Again there was that vagueness. “You know everything about me.”

“I didn’t force it out of you,” Asha pointed out. “If you stick around long enough, maybe I’ll tell you one day. Right now, let’s just leave it at ‘some things,’ all right? So where was I? Oh, Braavos. I had to make a trip up to Oldtown for work. Have you ever been to the Citadel?”

Cersei had. One could not be the wife of an academic and not be subjected to it. She chiefly remembered it for being filled with boring, earnest people in dusty clothes who had a remarkable talent for making her feel inadequate. “Several times. Robert loved it there. He used to gas on about going back to teaching and spending his golden years at the Citadel.” He had said that to her all while he ogled an eighteen-year-old girl walking by.

“Their library is pretty fucking fantastic,” Asha opined. “I didn’t want to leave.”

“They let you in?” She thought she remembered the building as being open only to their affiliates. “We went once on a special tour and they said it was an exception. You would have thought we were being granted the right to sit on the Iron Throne from the way they went on.”

“You could hang out in the grounds. I was just sitting on a bench, looking up at the entrance and this old guy sat down next to me. We started chatting. He liked my shirt. I found it at a flea market. It was The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy. You know, ‘Don’t forget to bring your towel.’ Man, I loved that shirt.”

Cersei couldn’t see the humor in it, but most of Asha's cultural references were beyond her.

“I didn’t know what it meant at the time either,” Asha told her. “I just liked it. We started talking and he asked if I wanted to see the library. I got the grand tour. He even showed me where he worked. He was a cataloger. He explained what he did. It clicked for me right away. I remember him showing me the big red books and I was getting it, like really getting it. You have all this information all this knowledge and it’s fucking impossible to get your head around it. You just can’t because it’s chaos. The cataloger controls all that. The subject headings make it possible to control it. It was a great day.” She smiled at the recollection. “I hooked up with him for a while.”

“This cataloger?” Cersei wondered how old “old” was to Asha. Stannis was easily ten years older
than Asha.

Asha shrugged. “It was very easy-going. Qyburn was a no-strings-follow-your-own-path kind of
guy, which is how I usually like it. We liked a lot of the same things. It was fun.”

“Like with Stannis?” She’d seen Stannis smile, but fun was not an adjective she would ever
associate with him.

“Stannis is not fun. Stannis is Stannis. I like and care for him, but he’s not exactly a laugh riot.”
Asha put the cap back on her water bottle. “Anyhow my new friend suggested I look into library
school and I did. I haven’t looked back since.”

“What happened to him?”

Asha started up the car. “We had some philosophical differences.”

Cersei couldn’t imagine what those might be. Asha seemed to be remarkably flexible in her
thinking and morals.

“I notice your eyes glaze over when Stannis and I talk about our work, so I’ll try and make this
brief. I like bringing order to the chaos. People think reference is sexy, but it’s got nothing on
cataloging.”

Cersei assumed that these must be beliefs exclusive to librarians.

“A good cataloger tries to find the subject headings that best describe the item and make it
findable. If it’s not findable, you might just as well not buy it. It’s dead weight. There’s an art to
cataloging. This guy, he was all about power. He liked to hide stuff. He hated the patrons and he
used to try and fuck with them by using subject headings that would never occur to them. He’s in
charge of CIP records for the Library of Westeros now. He’s kind of a like a Dark Side librarian,
the Palpatine of the cataloging world.” Asha laughed. “That makes him sound cooler than he was.
He was pretty good in bed though.”

“Better or worse than Stannis?”

“Nobody is better than Stannis.”

* * *

Technically under Westerosi law, piecework was illegal. Despite Mr. Lannister’s warnings, Arya
decided not to let this bother her. She was reasonably certain that neither Bran nor Rickon would
turn her over to the authorities. Also, she could pay them more than what they got for an
allowance. Their initial reluctance to engage in what they called girl’s work was negated by the
offer of cold, hard cash.

The three of them sat in front of the TV and pinned the backs of fabric together. These Sansa would
then later sew and turn into bags. Arya hated sewing. This wasn’t sewing though and she was
rather good at neatly lining up the fabric and the pins.

“I want to help!”

Arya looked at her cousin Robin dubiously. He was staying in the house with them now that Aunt
Lysa was at the hospital. She was reluctantly about to allow him to sort the fabrics, when his nose
started to bleed.
Sansa put down the embroidery hoop. She grabbed a handful of facial tissues and helped stop the nosebleed.

“He didn’t take his medicine,” Rickon announced when it was over.

“Uncle Petyr said I didn’t need it.”

“That’s stupid,” Arya pronounced. “He’s not a doctor. How would he know?” She didn’t like Petyr Baelish. He was always over at the house these days. Before her father had taken over at the library, his visits were occasional. Now they seemed to be regular occurrences.

Robin wiped his nose. “That’s what he told Mummy.”

Sansa and Margaery exchanged glances.

Bran sighed. “Robin, did you like your old school?”

Robin shook his head vigorously. “They were bad boys. They were mean to me. Mummy said if I held my rightful place as Lord of the Vale that I could make them fly.”

“Nobody has been Lord of the Vale in hundreds of years,” Bran said patiently. “It’s not gonna happen. Nobody knows you here. You have a fresh start. You can make some friends, but you can’t be the kid eating paste in the corner anymore. So forget what Uncle Petyr says and take your medicine, okay?”

“Okay.”

Arya thought it was going to take a lot more than medicine for nosebleeds and seizures to make kids like Robin, but it was probably the only thing likely to make him take his pills. “Go wash your hands and face and then you can help.” He could organize the fabrics. They needed all the help they could get. Actually what they needed was someone they could hire to assist Sansa with the sewing on a regular basis. Pod couldn’t do it anymore; he had too much to do with Helmets & Halberds. At their next meeting, she would talk to Mr. Lannister about viable options.

He ran off obediently.

“Jon said Uncle Benjen told him that Dad and Uncle Brandon used to call him ‘Littlefinger,’” Rickon sniggered. “Because he’s got a little—”

“—That’s not why,” Bran objected. “He’s from the Fingers and he was small for his age.”

Rickon looked at him with pity. “Yeah, right. You know it’s because he’s got a tiny—”

“—Shhhhh, your mother’s coming,” Margaery cautioned.

Mum brought in Petyr Baelish, who she announced, would be joining them for dinner. She went back to the kitchen and left him there with them.

“What are you all working on so diligently?”

“It’s a project,” Arya said shortly. Littlefinger was a good name for him, she thought.

“For what exactly?” He started to move toward Sansa, but Margaery pointed to an armchair.

“Do sit there.”
He wasn’t happy but he did. “Your mother informs me that you and Arya have become quite the entrepreneurs.”

Sansa kept her head bent over her embroidery.

Arya wondered just what Mum and Aunt Lysa saw in him. He was so slimy. Besides she was the entrepreneur. Sansa was along for the ride. Although, Arya had to admit, she’d become much more active a partner lately.

“Petyr.” Their father stood in the doorway leaning onto a cane. “Catelyn said you were here.”

Littlefinger got up and shook hands. “I would say it’s been too long, but an hour doesn’t exactly qualify as a long time.”

Arya hadn’t quite forgiven her father yet, but at least he seemed to see through Littlefinger.

“I was just telling your girls how impressive they are.”

“A little too impressive. It’s hard to keep up with them.”

“Cat said that Tywin Lannister is advising them?”

Dad’s face darkened. “Something like that. Come in the study and I’ll get you a drink.”

Littlefinger shot a look at Sansa but complied. As they walked out, he commented quietly, “Is that really wise? Tywin Lannister is involved in a great many things, not all of them savory.”

Arya wanted to throw the scissors at his scrawny little neck.

“How can they not see it?” Margaery asked Sansa when they were both gone. “He was practically raping you with his eyes.”

“He is the perviest perv who ever perved,” Rickon pronounced.

“We finally get them to let Mr. Lannister help us and Littlefinger comes along and wrecks it.” Arya said in exasperation.

“Mum will talk sense into Dad,” Sansa promised.

Arya wasn’t so sure. She seemed to have an unending affection for her childhood friend. If he said negative things about Mr. Lannister, Mum might change her mind. She was saying as much when Robin came back in.

Bran showed him how to fit the fabric pieces together.

“Uncle Petyr told Aunt Catelyn that he thought it was good for you to work with the Lannisters.”

“What?” That didn’t make much sense to Arya. Why would he say the opposite thing to Dad?

Margaery put her needle and thread down. “He’s playing them off against each other.”

“I hate him,” Sansa said. “He’s all over me at work. I keep trying to tell Dad but he never has time for me. I thought I could tell him today. I wasn’t in his office two minutes when Petyr—”

“Littlefinger,” Rickon insisted.
“—Littlefinger sidled in there with some crisis. He’s a pig.”

Bran inspected the bag he was working on. “We need to take him down.”

Margaery was thoughtful. “Have you ever heard of aversion therapy?”

* * *

Stannis heard his sister-in-law out in growing horror. Cersei seemed to sense it was not going well, but every time she paused, she would look at Asha, and then gamely continue. She was explaining with what Tywin Lannister had threatened her when he stood up and gazed out the window. Tommen, Myrcella, and Shireen were kicking a soccer ball around.

“All of them?” he demanded, turning back to face her. “They’re all Jaime’s?”

“Yes.”

“Robert doesn’t know?”

“No one knows except for Jaime, Tyrion, Asha, and now you. No one else can know. I won’t have my children hurt. You can’t tell them.”

He returned to staring out the window. It explained Joffrey, he supposed. It explained how very, very blond all three children were. “Sixteen?” he asked.

“Sixteen.”

It wasn’t an excuse of course. She had been engaged in incest most of her life, well before she’d ever heard of Robert. She didn’t even sound sorry about the abomination she had committed. Still, sixteen bastards. She talked of Robert saying the name of Stark’s sister on their wedding night. Stannis thought about his own wedding night. Robert had seduced the bride’s cousin, and in a house full of bedrooms, had even chosen the one set aside for him and Selyse to use for the act.

“We shared the same womb,” Cersei was saying.

Asha rolled her eyes. “You said that before. Just so you know it sounds fucking lame.”

“Woman, you are not helping.”

“Shut up, Stannis.” To Cersei, she said, “You had the hots for each other. Either own it or apologize for it. Talking about your mother’s uterus is just gross.”

Stannis found himself agreeing with the sentiment if not Asha’s particular word choices. “I need to think about this.” He stalked off to his study and called Cressen. For once the lawyer was in. Stannis reaffirmed that the conversation was covered under attorney/client privilege and rattled off his questions.

There was a very long pause.

“Is this related to that Melisandre woman you’re seeing?”

“I don’t see how your question is relevant.”

“I’ve known you your whole life, Stannis. You weren’t like this before you met her.”

“Can you answer my questions or no?”
Cressen sighed audibly. “Under Westerosi law, until proved otherwise, the children are the husband’s. If he or the birth father doesn’t dispute paternity, the court doesn’t care.”

“What about the incest?”

There was another long sigh. “It is that woman isn’t it? She is in trouble and she’s dragging you into it.”

“No.” He should never have introduced Melisandre to Cressen. “Well, is it against the law?”

“That’s more complicated. The parties involved are of legal age?”

“Now they are. It began when they were younger.”

“How long ago? One or two years?”

“Decades.”

Cressen made a groaning noise into the phone.

“It is not,” Stannis said tightly, “related to Melisandre in any way.”

“Are they by any chance Targaryens?”

Stannis frowned. “No. Why would that matter?”

“There’s still an exemption on the books for Targaryens regardless of age. Where did the incest occur? In which of the Seven Kingdoms?”

“I believe in the Westerlands and King’s Landing.” He hadn’t thought to ask in which geographic areas the incest had occurred. He supposed he could go back into the room and ask, but this was complicated enough already without introducing regional jurisdictions into the question.

“If the parties are consenting adults, it’s not illegal. If it had been reported when they were underage, Social Services might have been called in.”

“If this was reported now what would happen?”

“It’s not against the law. If Social Services should be called in, it’s possible the children might be put in foster care, at least for the duration of an investigation. How old are they?”

Stannis could see them from the study window. “Fifteen and sixteen.”

“The red woman—”

“Cressen, I swear by the old gods, the new gods, and on the life of my daughter that this has nothing to do with Melisandre.” Stannis gritted his teeth. He wished it did. He missed her desperately. He thanked his lawyer and hung up the phone. He looked at the text she’d sent earlier. 

Interview went well. Expect an offer soon. Staying up here for the time being. For the night is dark and full of terrors, M.

Melisandre offered no explanation, no apologies, and no regrets. If she had been here where she belonged, he would not be facing this impossible dilemma.

* * *
CIP=cataloging in publication (open the front of any book published in the US, UK, Canada, bunch of different countries. in the past 10-15 years. Look at the copyright page. It's there.

The legal stuff is 1/3 made up, 1/3 looked up, and 1/3 taken from what I learned on the Television without Pity forums for Mad Men about paternity, but hey, we have no way of knowing what GRRM thinks modern Westerosi law is like, so why am I apologizing?!
Chapter Summary

When the Stark kids and Margaery implement their plan against Petyr, Ned learns a few things. Stannis reaches a decision about Cersei, who attempts to set herself free with the truth. Brienne's beliefs about fashion are reinforced in an unexpected way. Sansa learns she likes to be in control. Tywin shows Olenna that television has its limits.

* * *

Ned tried very hard to keep himself from snickering when Petyr came back into the dining room clad in an old t-shirt of his and a pair of Robb’s sweatpants. Baelish was a small, slight man and he was swimming in the borrowed clothes.

“I’m so sorry, Dr. Baelish,” Margaery said as he sat back down between her and Sansa. “I can’t believe how clumsy I was.”

“No need to apologize, no harm done.”

“Sansa,” Catelyn prompted.

“Did the gravy burn you badly?” Sansa murmured.

“No, no, sweetling. I’m perfectly fine.” Baelish smiled at her.

Ned wasn’t sure what to make of all this tide of clumsiness. He was the first to admit he didn’t know Margaery Tyrell terribly well, but she always seemed remarkably poised. Not so tonight. She had managed to knock over wine, salad dressing, and green beans all onto Baelish. Sansa, who was always graceful, had done slightly better in terms of quantity and worse in terms of damage. She had dropped a piece of chicken and absentmindedly spilled an entire ladleful of hot gravy over his lap. Fortunately, the heavy fabric of his trousers and his bulky sweater protected him from harm.

He could tell that Baelish wanted to talk about work, but he kept conversation focused on the children. Arya and Sansa both kept saying that Cat and he weren’t around when they needed them. Ned was not going to let that happen again.

“I realize I had the lion’s share of the gravy earlier,” Baelish quipped, “but would it be remiss of me to ask for more?”

“Of course not.” Catelyn smiled at him warmly. “Rickon, there’s some on the stove. Would you be a love and get some for Uncle Petyr? Heat it up a little, will you?”

Rickon obeyed.

Ned asked Robin about his day at school. The boy was coming along, but he needed a lot of help.

Rickon reappeared and started to hand the gravy to Sansa.
“I think it might be safer if you brought it to Uncle Petyr yourself,” Cat suggested.

“Of course, Mum.” Rickon smiled sweetly.

Ned was listening intently to his nephew before that smile registered. When he looked like an angel that usually meant he was up to something. The last time Rickon had smiled like that was right before he deliberately exploded a can of black spray paint all over Bran’s room. He was just recognizing the warning sign when Rickon seemingly tripped and poured the majority of the piping hot gravy down Baelish’s lap.

Any question Ned had about where Petyr Baelish’s accent was affected was shattered as the man screamed like a little girl.

* * *

Stannis rejoined Asha and Cersei in the living room.

“Are you going to tell anyone? Are you going to tell Robert?”

He took up his former position by the window. “I gave you my word.” Cersei and her children had been here over a week and there’d been no word from Robert. His secretary had called to reschedule the appointment he’d made with him. Robert was supposed to be back, but she thought it possible he had extended his stay in Sothoryos to go hunting. It was nearly the busiest time of the semester, and Crownlands’ University President had a penchant for hunting exotic animals. Hunting exotic women was more like it.

The three teenagers had abandoned the soccer ball. Myrcella and Tommen were standing with their backs to one of the large oak trees in the yard and staring anxiously at the house. Shireen appeared to be trying to convince them of something.

The silence was getting to her. She stood up. “We’ll be out of here by tomorrow. Don’t worry,” she told him regally. “I won’t pollute your home anymore with my presence.”

“You may stay,” he said surprising himself.

Cersei sank back into the armchair. “We can?”

“You may,” he corrected. “There are two conditions: if you are going to copulate with Jaime, you will do so at his place. You will not do it on my property.”

She nodded. “And the other?”

“You will contact Jaime and Tyrion and tell them where you are.”

“I can’t! If I tell them, Father will—”

“Your brothers are losing their shit, you know,” Asha commented. “Tyrion’s worried about the kids. He said he talks to Myrcella and Tommen at least twice a week. Now that he hasn’t heard from them, he’s ready to call the cops. Jaime has passed mad and is heading straight to scared.”

Cersei’s bravado drained away. “I could call Tyrion, I suppose, but I can’t tell Jaime, I can’t.”

Stannis looked at her. “I never took you for a coward. All I want you to do is to tell them where you are.” He didn’t understand why this should be such an insurmountable task.

“I’ll lose him. We love each other. We need each other.”
“You aren’t making a lot of sense,” Asha told her. She sat with one leg dangling over the arm of the sofa. “You want Jaime, but you can’t talk to him because your father is going to tell him about your other partners. How does this work long term? Are you just going to wait it out till your father croaks? Is Jaime is supposed to psychically know that you’re pining for him?”

“Know psychically,” Stannis corrected.

“Whatever. Jaime is a nice guy, but he doesn’t seem to be a very deep thinker. And your father is pretty fit for his age.”

Stannis frowned. “How would you know?”

“We met that one time at Tyrion’s,” Asha explained. “I was pretty hung over, but he seemed to be in decent shape. Plus, you can see him standing on the side with Brienne in the uncut video. He could live for the next twenty or thirty years.”

Cersei was confused. “Video? He’s in a video? How do you know my father?”

“That’s not the point,” Asha said waving the questions away. “You risk losing Jaime just as much if you don’t tell him.”

Stannis ignored the question of Tywin Lannister’s physical fitness and life expectancy. He did make a mental note to make sure that Arya Stark understood that his alterations to the release were legally binding. “Do you agree to my conditions or no?”

Cersei swallowed. “All right.”

He didn’t wait. He picked up the phone and dialed.

* * *

Ned faced his children and Margaery. “I want an explanation and I want one now.”

“For what, Dr. Stark?” Margaery inquired, her pretty blue eyes widened.

He finally understood why Catelyn didn’t trust the girl. There was something so practiced about every move she made and every word she spoke. “Maybe this act works with your parents, Margaery, but it doesn’t work with me.”

No one said anything.

“Petyr Baelish is at the emergency room for severe burns.” Catelyn had driven the man there. During the aftermath of the gravy incident, Ned had been horrified to see Arya tip over the gravy boat so that the little that was left, which was still hot, spilled over onto Baelish’s legs. Bran had stuck a foot out and tripped the man. Ned had been so shocked that he hadn’t been able to say anything until after Cat had got Petyr into the car. “I’m waiting.”

“He’s perving after Sansa,” Rickon blurted out.

“What?”

Bran made a face. “He’s creepy and he has a thing for Sansa.”

“Petyr Baelish?” Ned stared at his oldest daughter in shock. “He’s old enough to be your father.”

“That is what precisely makes him a dirty old man,” Margaery said sourly.
“I want you to tell me exactly what he’s done to you.”

Sansa exhaled. “He’s all over me all of the time. He’s gross and disgusting and he won’t leave me alone.”

“At work?” Ned was horrified.

“Here too.”

“Why didn’t you tell me or your mother?”

Sansa shrugged. “I tried. You’re never around. When I tried to talk to you at the library, he came in. I told Shae. She was supposed to talk to you.”

Ned groaned. He’d postponed his appointment with Shae twice now. Each time emergencies had come up.

“Besides, would you have believed me? I tried to tell Mum and she said he’s just very fond of me.” Sansa rolled her eyes.

Rickon made a gagging sound.

“Has he touched you? If he’s hurt you, I’ll kill him with my bare hands. I’ll—”

“He follows me around the library,” Sansa said. “He always sits so close. He’s always there. He was trying to rub my shoulders in the lunchroom and talking about how I’m a woman grown. It’s just so gross. I told him to leave me alone and he won’t.”

Arya crossed her arms. “We decided to handle it ourselves because you’re never around.”

* * *

Brienne wondered to herself why every time the Lannisters decided to have an epic family drama, the gods wanted her in the middle of it. Jaime and she had been going for a drive when he’d received the call from Stannis. They’d picked up Tyrion on the way. She suggested they leave her off somewhere but they’d not paid attention.

Stannis lived in a massive brownstone house in a part of King’s Landing that had once seen better days. It was still a decent area. She had once looked at a carriage house apartment not far from his home and the rent was well above what she could afford. His house was grim and gothic. Brienne would have bet money that the neighborhood kids considered it a test of monumental courage to even go up to the front door.

Jaime and Tyrion felt no such terrors. They practically bounded up the steps.

Stannis let them in. He was taken aback to see Brienne, but he welcomed her as well. The inside of the house was somewhat friendlier. He favored heavy furniture, but her immediate impression of the living room was one of surprising warmth.

At first it wasn’t so bad. She hung in the back while Jaime and Tyrion clustered around their sister asking a flurry of expected questions and telling her how worried they’d been.

Brienne’s exposure to Cersei Baratheon had been limited to witnessing her the time she’d been at Jaime’s party and a few occasions when she’d shown up at the library to throw a fit over her son’s fines. Each time, Cersei had projected a strong image of fashion and luxury.
The Cersei sitting on her brother-in-law’s sofa was not someone she recognized. Brienne was used
to always being the worst dressed woman in the room. It was something of a shock to realize that
Cersei now held that honor.

“Where are Myrcella and Tommen?” Tyrion wanted to know. “Are they all right?”

“Asha took them to the movies; and yes, they’re fine.”

Tyrion was relieved. For the first time he really looked at Cersei. “What in the seven hells are you
wearing?”

“Asha lent it to me. I only got my things from Robert’s today.” Cersei was wearing a pair of jeans
with artistically placed rips down the front. The t-shirt had a picture of a mime strung upside down
over a scorpion pit holding a sign that read “Learn the Words.” “I don’t know what it means,” she
said vaguely.

“Neither do I. That’s not the point.”

“I thought you knew every pop culture reference there was,” Jaime complained.

“It’s from the Discworld books by Terry Pratchett,” Brienne contributed quietly.

Cersei seemed to see her finally. She was tired, weary, and clearly frightened, but among all those
emotions was now something that was very unpleasant.

“This is none of my business,” Brienne murmured. “I’m just going outside and I’ll call a cab.”

“That would be best,” Cersei said narrowly. “This is a family matter.”

Stannis had a coughing fit.

Jaime came over to Brienne. “Hey, I’m sorry about this. I’ll call you later, all right?”

“Everybody has stuff, remember?” Although it seemed to her that the Lannisters had more than
their share of it.

He mouthed a silent “thank you” to her. “Would you be so good as to give Brienne a ride home,
Stannis?”

“I’ll get my keys.”

“Don’t leave me.”

Everyone stared at Cersei.

“Please, Stannis, don’t leave me.”

Brienne heard the plaintive note in Cersei’s voice. She caught Stannis’ eye and gave a little wave
of her hand. “It’s no trouble.” She headed out to the foyer. She was zipping up her jacket when she
heard Cersei again.

“Really, what were you thinking bringing that blonde ox here?”

Any sympathy Brienne had for Cersei evaporated. She shut the front door behind her with more
force than was necessary. She set her purse on the porch railing and took out her phone. She found
a number for a taxi cab company and gave the dispatcher Stannis’ address and her own.
“It’s going to be around $50,” he warned.

Brienne frowned. Of course it was. Stannis and she lived in opposite directions of the other. “Hold on.” She thought she had enough cash. She reached into her purse for her wallet.

“We take credit cards,” he said helpfully.

Her search became more frantic. This was what came of having more than one purse. It had to be back in her apartment, she realized. She cursed Olenna for making her buy the bag. “I’m sorry. I’ll have to cancel it.” Brienne made one final, last, desperate search. Everything that should be there was, except for the wallet. She debated going back inside, but when she glanced up through the living room windows she could see Jaime and Cersei gesticulating wildly at each other. Stannis seemed to be remonstrating with one or the both of them. She couldn’t spot Tyrion.

It was none of her business, she reminded herself.

Brienne went through the contacts in her phone wondering who she could call to get a ride. She glared at the purse and tried Olenna. If anyone deserved to be dragged out on a rainy night like this, it was the woman who had practically forced her to spend far too much money on an accessory. Olenna’s phone went to voicemail. Asha would be at the movies. She made call after call to no avail. Davos. Now would be the time to test his “we can still be friends” theory for real.

“Where are you?” was all he asked. When she gave him the address, he promised to be there as soon as he could.

Brienne sat down on the steps, thrust her hands in her pockets, and waited. The rain was picking up now. She huddled on the steps and waited. Fifteen minutes later, she couldn’t resist a look back at the windows. They appeared to be yelling at each other. Great. Her phone rang. “What’s taking you so long?” she hissed into it.

“Ms Tarth?”

Not now, she thought. “Oh, Mr. Lannister. I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

“I understand from Olenna Tyrell that you’ve been seeing a man named Davos Seaworth.”

Brienne rubbed her temples. “Yes, I wa—”

“—I wonder if you are fully aware of the nature of his business activities.”

“I’m not see—”

He interrupted again, “—I have in my possession some information of which you should be apprised.”

Brienne remembered what Jaime had said. “That’s very—” From the house, she heard what sounded like screams.

“What was that?” he asked sharply.

“I’m sorry. This isn’t a convenient time. We’ll have to discuss this later.” She hung up on him. Brienne closed her eyes for a minute. Screw the rain, she thought. She got up and headed down the front walkway. There was some kind of convenience store at the end of the street. She would call Davos and tell him to meet her there.
She wasn’t halfway down the first block when Jamie pulled up alongside the curb. “Get in.”

“I’m getting a ride from someone. I’m just meeting—”

“—I’m done. Get in.” He gave her a desperate look. “Please, Brienne. I need you.”

Brienne got in.

* * *

Sansa and Margaery hadn’t stopped giggling since they got into the car to go back to their apartment.

“*That* was fun,” Sansa pronounced once they were home. “I know I shouldn’t be laughing, but did you see his face when Rickon poured the gravy down his trousers?”

Margaery snickered. “And the way he squealed. Oh my gods, I loved it.” She took a bottle of wine out of the refrigerator. “Why shouldn’t we be laughing? The man’s had his dirty hands all over you. It’s about time he learned to stay away from you. And now your father knows there’s a problem. It will be better now. See, I told you, your family is just like mine. They worked as a team. This is how it’s supposed to be.”

Sansa accepted a glass of Arbor Gold and they cuddled on the sofa. “It may not be that way once we come out about our relationship.”

“Grandmother’s been hinting,” Margaery admitted. “It’s so stupid.”

“I don’t get why. Loras and Renly are openly living together.”

“Well, she’s not crazy about Renly, but I think it’s more because of his personality rather than because he’s gay. I think it’s because I’m her only granddaughter. She’s had this plan forever that I would marry really well and give her great-grandchildren.” Margaery shrugged. “I’ll make her understand. Your parents are pretty liberal. Do you really think they’re going to have a problem with us?”

Sansa focused on her wine. It wasn’t because they were gay. She was almost 100% certain Mum and Dad would be supportive. It was because Margaery was Margaery. Mum still disliked her and now thanks to tonight, Dad seemed to be thinking Mum was right after all. “I don’t know,” she managed. She decided to switch the topic. “I shouldn’t be drinking. I should be sewing.”

“Arya will kill me for saying this, but you have got to slow down. We need to find someone who can help with the production. It’s all on you and I don’t like how stressed it’s making you.” She put her glass on one of the coasters and turned to face Sansa. “Could you teach Arya to sew?”

“You have got to be kidding me. Arya?” Sansa took a sip of her wine and set the glass down as well.

“No?”

“Only if we want to develop the reputation of being a brand that hires blind drunkards to assemble their products,” Sansa replied. “She failed Home Ec, you know. I’m amazed she does as well as she has with the cutting and pinning. When Arya used to do martial arts, we would go to see her matches, and she’d be amazingly graceful and controlled. Then she’d go home and somehow manage to spill orange juice all over the walls.”
Margaery laughed.

“It’ll be better next semester, but we do need to find someone to help. At least we finally got everything out of the dining room and into my old bedroom.”

“And you into mine,” Margaery purred.

Sansa felt the blood rushing to her face as Margaery whispered a number of things they might do for the rest of this evening. She knew she looked like a bruised tomato when she blushed, but Margaery really didn’t seem to mind at all. Margaery had a complexion made for blushing, but Sansa had never seen her do it, not once. It suddenly occurred to Sansa that it might be very fun to try to make her.

“That is a very wicked smile, Sansa. What are you . . . oh, ohhhhh.”

As Sansa made Margaery blush not once but three times in the course of the next few hours, her theory was confirmed: Margaery did look remarkably pretty when she blushed and it was also an extremely enjoyable experience to be in control.

* * *

Tywin stared at the phone in his hand as if it had personally offended him. “The girl hung up on me.”

Olenna picked up the remote and turned on the television. “I told you to leave it alone.”

“I heard screaming in the background.”

She paused in selecting a program. “Did Brienne sound like she needed help?”

“No,” he admitted. “Still.”

“Brienne is a very self-sufficient young woman. She is more than capable of handling herself in most circumstances.” Olenna resumed flipping through channels.

“Television does not belong in the bedroom.” He did not share the Westerosi obsession with non-stop entertainment. He owned a television of course. It was useful for the news and financial reports. Olenna had three and she watched everything at all hours.

“You are more than welcome to go home to yours.” She gestured to the folder on the bed. “And if you’ll take my advice, you’ll not share that with her. The ball is in your son’s court.”

Tywin tapped his fingers restlessly on the folder. “She can’t possibly be aware of the man’s background.”

“Most likely not, no,” Olenna agreed. She paused on a channel with a movie and then a moment later resumed clicking the remote.

“I seem to be boring you.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact you are.”

Tywin took exception to this.

“The Tywin Lannister Death Glare may work on your children, but it has no effect on me.” She didn’t take her eyes off of the screen. “You asked for my advice. I gave it to you. Leave them
alone."

“I seem to recall listening to your concerns about your granddaughter’s latest relationship at some length.”

“That’s different.”

“How?” He had listened patiently while she fretted about Margaery’s infatuation with Sansa Stark. From what he knew of Margaery and Sansa, he thought if anyone should be worried it should be Eddard and Catelyn Stark.

“Margaery is a child. She is scarcely—”

“She will be attending graduate school in the not too distant future. My son is past forty. He should be married by now. He should have children by now. I fail to see why my concerns are any less valid than yours.”

“The difference is that I know better than to meddle in Margaery’s affairs.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Indeed,” he remarked imbuing the one word with all the skepticism at his command.

She refused to be baited.

He reached over to the chair and put the folder on top of the briefcase. “Very well. I will leave it be.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” He left it unsaid that he would leave it be only for the moment. If Brienne’s relationship with Davos Seaworth progressed beyond where Olenna thought it was, he could always share the information with the young woman. But there was nothing to be gained in arguing about it with Olenna. He took the remote out of her hands and powered the television set off.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I think,” he commented reaching for her, “that we came in here for a specific reason and that we can entertain ourselves far better than that infernal device can.”

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* * *
Chapter Summary

Jaime decides to take a page from his sister's book. Meanwhile, Davos arrives at Stannis Baratheon's and helps out. When the morning dawns, Ned and Olenna deal with the consequences of having half of their staff out and/or injured, and Tyrion calls his father for help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

They drove for a very long time. The only coherent thing Brienne had managed to get out of Jaime was that Tyrion was still back at the house.

She watched as he clutched the steering wheel white knuckled and navigated onto the highway. “Let me drive,” she said finally.

“No,” he pronounced, sounding for all the world like his father. After a few minutes he said, in a more Jaime-like voice, “I promise I won’t get us killed.”

Brienne alternated between staring out the window into the rain and at looking at him with concern.

At first it seemed like he was driving aimlessly, but when he turned onto the highway for the Westerlands, she realized he was going home. The rain got worse and he was forced to slow down.

“Is there anyone I can call? Tyrion? Your father?”

“No.” And then he said simply, “I don’t need anyone. I have you.”

* * *

For as long as Tyrion could remember, Jaime and Cersei had been inextricably linked. As disparate as they were in terms of personality, they were firmly united. Even when they were physically separated, it seemed to mean little. Nothing, not Jaime’s stint in the military, nor Cersei’s marriage had ever actually severed the bonds that tied them together. Until now.

Tyrion watched as his sister shrieked and sobbed. She had thrown herself into the arms of Stannis, who was holding her as awkwardly as he might a 120-pound, squirming sack of potatoes.

“Hello?”

Tyrion turned to see Davos Seaworth in the doorway.

“It was open, sorry. Is Brienne here? She asked me to meet her.”

“She left earlier.” At least Tyrion hoped she had. Brienne was not a gossip, but the fewer people
who knew the truth the better. “She said something about calling a cab.”

“Aye. But she left her wallet at home. That’s why she called me. She needed a ride.” He stepped into the room and took in the scene before him. “I’ll . . . you have your hands full. Perhaps Brienne started walking back. I’ll see if I can find her.”

Tyrion nodded weakly.

Cersei’s cries had only intensified.

“Woman, there’s nothing to be done,” Stannis told her. “He’s gone. Wailing isn’t going to bring him back.”

Tyrion watched his sister in horrified fascination. He had read of women tearing their clothes or their hair, but he had never seen anyone actually attempt it before.

“Right.” Davos marched back into the room and slapped Cersei hard across the cheek.

Everyone including Cersei stared at him in stunned shock.

“She needs water,” Davos said firmly.

Cersei gulped for air.

“And a paper bag.”

Tyrion went in search of both while Stannis half carried her to the sofa. Davos took charge. Before long, she was as close to normalcy as she’d been since Tyrion had shown up to this debacle. Davos asked no questions.

“I suppose we should try and explain,” Tyrion began.

“It’s none of my business,” he said in affable tones. “I am going to try and reach Brienne, though, if you don’t mind.” He stepped into the foyer.

Good, Tyrion thought, because he didn’t think he could sit through hearing Cersei confess more than the once. Stannis seemed relieved too.

Stannis disentangled himself from Cersei, but when he tried to stand up, she panicked.

“Woman, I am not going anywhere. I live here,” he pointed out brusquely, but he stayed seated.

She visibly relaxed.

A minute later Davos came back.

“Is Brienne all right?”

“I think so. The reception was terrible, but if I understood her correctly, she got a ride with Jaime.”

However awkward Stannis was at providing comfort, he was quick enough to catch Cersei as her second bout of hysterics started.

* * *

Jaime punched in another code on the alarm panel. He was prepared to rip it out by the wires if the
noise didn’t stop. Fortunately, it worked on the third try.

He was calmer now. Brienne stopped asking questions early on. She seemed to intuit he wasn’t ready to talk, couldn’t talk in fact.

Beside him Brienne shivered. They were soaked through. The storms had picked up. When they’d gotten out at a gas station toward the end of the journey, it was practically raining sideways.

“Won’t the security company do something?”

As if on cue a phone rang. He found it under a dust sheet and identified himself. There were security questions that he managed to remember answers to. After satisfying them that he was who he said he was, he ended the call. “They’ll probably phone Father, but he won’t come all the way out here tonight.”

Brienne nodded uneasily.

“This is my home,” Jaime reminded her. “I have a perfect right to be here.” He led her into the library. The drawing room was too forbidding. Father’s study was out of the question. The kitchen had always been the staff’s domain. “I’ll go see if I can find some firewood and some towels. Take some of the dust sheets off, will you?”

A short while later they were sitting on the floor in front of the fire, propped up against the sofa with brandy and snacks he’d foraged from the pantry.

“How often does your family come here?” she inquired as she toweled off her hair.

“Father comes up every few months.” He gestured to the dressing gowns they were both wearing.

“Is he going to mind us wearing these?”

Jaime shrugged. “I doubt it.” He had long since ceased keeping clothes here.

“What about the rest of your family? I would have thought they come here a lot.”

“Uncle Kevan and his family stay here occasionally. Tyrion and I have a love/hate relationship with the place. Cer—” he broke off.

“Do you want me to ask questions?”

“No,” he admitted.

Brienne didn’t take offense. “Pass the Cheez Doodles, please.”

“I don’t think they’ll pair well with the brandy,” Jaime bantered, more out of habit than anything else.

“I don’t really drink much,” Brienne reminded him. “What else did you scrounge?”

“There are chocolate bars,” he offered.

She took one. She broke it in half and handed the other part to him. They sat in silence for a time, nibbling on chocolate, sipping brandy, and staring into the flickering flames.

“We seem to end up on the floor a lot,” she commented eventually.
They did, he reflected. “You didn’t want to get the furniture wet,” he pointed out. “We could move up to the sofa if you’d prefer.”

Brienne considered. “No. It’s better on the floor. It’s more honest somehow.”

A sarcastic quip melted on the tip of his tongue. She was right. It was somehow hard to cloak oneself in comfortable self-deceit while lying on a rock-hard surface. Jaime realized she would be content to sit there with him all night if that’s what he needed. If he wanted to talk, she would listen to him. He wondered what would happen to her unquestioning loyalty and friendship if she knew the truth.

They had never told anyone. Tyrion knew, but he’d figured it out for himself. Cersei seemed to think no one else knew. She lived in fear that someone would find out. For years, the chief threat had been Father. Then Robert, and then finally, it had been the children.

Jaime couldn’t comprehend what force had compelled Cersei to share their secret with Stannis of all people. Before she’d destroyed him with the revelation of her infidelities, he’d seen Tyrion staring at her in horror. Asha, Jaime suddenly remembered. She said something about Asha knowing now too. Cersei was unconcerned about them saying anything. They had given her their word.

Years of shying away from other people for fear they might get too close and suspect and years of lies and deceit that had eaten away at the edges of their souls were all rendered meaningless in a single day.

For as long as he could remember, he had been faithful to Cersei. There had never been anyone else. She had lasted, what? Two months before falling into Robert’s bed? He had forgiven her that. He had abandoned her to join up. She didn’t know when or if he would ever come back. But these others, each name had stabbed him in the heart.

“Have you ever been unfaithful to someone?”

Brienne looked at him with her blue eyes. Her expression was unfathomable. “No.”

“No ever?”

“I haven’t dated that much,” she said quietly. “But I don’t think I could do that to someone. My father . . . after my mother died, he had a string of . . . I guess you could call them girlfriends. They generally lasted a year on average before he was onto the next one. Most of them knew he wasn’t interested in anything serious, but there were a few who thought differently. There was one woman . . . I liked her. She was different from the others. She was kind. I think she loved him. I’ll never forget the look on her face after she found out he was done with her . . . I don’t think I could ever do that to another person.”

I have to tell you everything, Jaime. It’s the only way we can be free.

Jaime raised the brandy bottle, she shook her head. He filled his own glass. He took a deep breath and downed it.

“Jaime—”

“—Liquid courage. I don’t know what you’re going to think about me when I’m done, but my dear sister just smashed my world into pieces and this seems to be the only way forward.”

* * *
By the time Shae was finished detailing Petyr Baelish’s harassment of Sansa, Ned thought it was fortunate his kids had decided to take out the man, because it was the only thing stopping Ned from killing him now. A dark part of Ned wished Baelish’s injuries were much more severe than they were. He thanked her and she left. Ros stepped in the office.

“Somewhere on this campus, someone deals with sexual harassment awareness training. Find him or her. I want mandatory training for everyone on staff including the student workers. I also need you to schedule a call for me with the individual who handles complaints.”

Ros blinked but scratched something down on her note pad. “Will do.”

“But that’s not why you came in here,” he suggested.

“Stannis, Asha, and Brienne have all called in pleading emergencies. Tyrion is late. I haven’t heard from Petyr. Needless to say, Olenna is losing it.”

Ned doubted very much that Olenna Tyrell ever completely lost anything, but with that many people out, he could imagine she was coming close to it. “You can add Petyr to the list. He suffered some burns.”

“What happened?”

“It’s not important. Where is Olenna?”

“At the reference desk,” Ros told him. “It was supposed to be Tyrion.”

“I’ll go out there to speak with her. Is Varys in yet?”

“He’s meeting with the facilities people in the basement again.

“Find out which shifts we need then call Sam, Sarella, and Armen.”

“Olenna doesn’t like them staffing the desk by themselves.”

“I’ll speak to her. Call them.”

Ned walked out slowly to see Olenna. He still limped, but he could feel his leg getting stronger every day. Olenna had a line of students. She dealt with them efficiently and pleasantly. Anyone looking at her would have no idea she was probably seething inside. By the time he got there, she was free.

Her expression turned sour. “You’ve heard, I see. I expect Petyr to take at least one of these shifts today. I don’t care what you have to do to get him to pick it up. I’m almost desperate enough to have Bronn out here.”

He gave her the news about Petyr.

Olenna did not take it well. “Four people out. Six if you count Lysa and Melisandre. You’ll have to take a shift.”

“We’ve got Varys and I told Ros to call in the library school students. I can take a few hours today if I have to. That will get us through today. Speaking of Bronn, we should have him start doing hours regularly.”

She made a face.
“He has the MLIS, Olenna. He’s been a librarian longer than I have. He certainly seems to be popular with the students.”

“Yes, with the same ninnies who are also asking for Stannis. That should tell you something.”

He thought she was exaggerating. “You are willing to have me work the desk. Bronn and the library school students have just as much experience, if not more than I do when it comes to reference. As far as long-term solutions go, we have approval for one temporary hire. I’m going to see if we can get approval for a second.”

“We’ll need two. My source tells me that Melisandre was very impressive at her interview.”

Ned forbore pointing out that impressive did not a job offer make or that it was possible that Melisandre would not accept it should one come.

“And now Tyrion is late. I would bet all of my money that the lot of them went out drinking and are hung over.” She frowned. “All right, not Brienne. She’s too honest for her own good.”

As if on cue, the phone rang. Ned doubted that Stannis would lie either. No, if Stannis had called in, he had a reason. Ned started to leave but she signaled for him to stay. It was Tyrion and from the set of her jaw, Ned intuited that he too was calling in.

“Don’t tell me, you’re not feeling well.” She listened for a moment. “Tyrion, we are down four librarians. Don’t give me ‘emergency.’ We have a bloody emergency here.”

“Let me talk to him,” Ned suggested. He took the handset from her. “Tyrion, this is Ned.”

“Dr. Stark, as I was trying to explain to Olenna, I’m in the middle of a crisis.”

“Are you drinking?” It certainly sounded like he had been.

“Gods, I wish I was. What I wouldn’t give for a bottle of Dornish red right about now, but no I am regrettablly stone cold sober. I’ve been up for the past thirty hours.”

Olenna turned the monitor so he could see the gaping holes in the schedule that needed to be filled today.

“Look, if you could see your way to coming in for four hours, that would be—”

“—That won’t be possible. It’s not just the exhaustion. I’m needed here right now. I can’t get ahold of my father and—”

At the mention of Tywin, Ned found his patience evaporating. “—Tyrion, we need you here. This is your job. Unless someone has died, I expect you to—”

“Robert is dead.”

Ned felt his knees buckling.

Olenna got up and pushed the second chair under him.

“The police found his body at the house. He’s been shot. Look I can’t deal with this right now.” He hung up.

Ned sank into the chair. “Robert is dead.” After a moment, he relayed to her the little Tyrion had told him. “Gods. I have to go there.”
“Why?”

“Robert was my best friend. I should be there. His wife, his children—”

“If there’s one thing Cersei Baratheon has in multitude, it is relatives.”

“Tyrion said he couldn’t locate Tywin.”

Olenna switched on a smile and helped a student looking for a journal article. When Ned tried to leave, she latched onto Ned’s hand with a death grip. The student seemed uneasy as to what they were doing, but she made no comment. After the girl left, Olenna reassured him, “He’s a resourceful man. I’m sure he’ll get ahold of his father soon enough. The house must be swarming with people. You’d only be in the way.”

“He was my friend, damn it!”

Olenna sighed. “I am sorry, Ned. I truly am, but you have responsibilities here.”

* * *

Tyrion had never been so happy to see his father, in well, ever.

His father looked around. “Where are Myrcella and Tommen?”

“Upstairs with Shireen. They know Robert’s dead, but they don’t know how—until one of them looks at the news or gets called by a friend. We’re going to have to speak to them sooner rather than later.” Tyrion ran his hand through his hair. “Did you get the lawyer? The way Cersei’s been, I’m afraid she’ll start talking to the wrong person and then who knows what will happen.”

“Barristan Selmy is on his way there. Tell me exactly what happened. No jokes, no puns, no asides. Tell me now.”

Ordinarily he would have taken umbrage at those directives, but Tyrion was past caring. “The police came by at 7:30 this morning to see Stannis and tell him about Robert, and I think to ask questions of Cersei and Asha. The questioning did not go well. They took the three of them in at about 9:00. I started calling for you after they showed up. Where have you been?”

“Why was Cersei here at Stannis Baratheon’s house at 7:30 in the morning?”

“You don’t know,” Tyrion said slowly. “She left Robert over a week and a half ago.”

“What?!”

Tyrion took a deep breath and shared what he knew.

His father listened, his expressions altering back and forth between shock and irritation. “Go on.”

“At some point yesterday, Asha drove her over to the house so that they could get some clothes and personal belongings. Cersei then lost her mind and told Asha everything.”

“I don’t follow.”

Tyrion looked at his father. “She told Asha everything.”

His father frowned. “Explain.”
Tyrion wasn’t quite sure how to proceed. Their twisted nuclear family dynamic depended on tacit understanding and silence. Tyrion had known about Jaime and Cersei for decades now. He had wondered all through those same years if his father knew as well. He looked at him now and saw that stubborn determination to ignore what was staring him in the face. His father knew what he meant. “I think she only intended to tell her about Robert and their marriage, but it all came out. Everything. She told her about Jaime and then about the children.”

Tywin Lannister’s face grew ashen.

There it was. At least Tyrion would be spared the necessity of having to spell it out. Tyrion rubbed the back of his neck. “And then in this same demented spirit of honesty, they came back here and Cersei told Stannis.” He could somehow understand Asha being accepting of the situation. It was the response of Stannis that was mindboggling.

His father sank into the chair. “Stannis?”

Tyrion got up and poured his father some water. “He’s got decent whiskey somewhere, but if we start drinking now we’ll never stop.”

“What . . . what did Stannis do?”

“He was apparently fine with this.”

His father coughed violently.

“I know; it’s insane; we hadn’t heard from her in days. Jaime started worrying after a day and a half went by without contact. I admit, I didn’t give it much thought, but then I’m not as close as they are.” He winced at his words. For once he hadn’t meant them to be funny. “We were starting to get worried. She wasn’t responding to texts or calls. The children weren’t answering their phones. When we went by the house, no one was home. And then last night, Jaime and Brienne were going out somewhere when Cersei called. They stopped, got me, and we came straight here.”

“The children and Ms Tarth heard all this too?”

Tyrion shook his head. “Asha took the kids somewhere earlier. Brienne left pretty quickly. I don’t think she had it in her to sit through another Lannister family psychodrama. As soon as she was out the door, Cersei embarked with this mad self-disclosure. She told Jaime she wanted to be honest and she proceeded to tell him, and by default, Stannis and me, about every affair she’d had in the past five years.”

His father inhaled sharply.

“Unlike Stannis and Asha, Jaime wasn’t as understanding.” He rubbed his eyes. “There was a considerable amount of yelling and then screaming that went on. He called her a ‘faithless whore;’ she accused him of abandoning her in the first place; he said she treated him like a boy toy; she blamed him for not being supportive when her life was falling apart. It escalated from there. I think you get the idea. By the time the others came back, Jaime had long since stormed out and Cersei was hysterical—a state in which she remained for most of the night. Stannis didn’t think we should leave her alone, we were going to take turns sitting up with her, but somehow that became a group activity.”

Father narrowed his eyes.

“Not like that,” Tyrion protested. “Unlike Jaime and Cersei, I prefer to look outside the family for my partners. I am straight so that let out Stannis and Davos, and Asha is not remotely my type.” He
“Davos?”

“Brienne’s friend. She evidently called him for a ride, but she was gone by the time he got here. He came to the door just as Cersei was melting down. He ended up staying. She stopped oversharing by then, so all he knows is that her marriage was in pieces. We finally got her to sleep when the police came by to see Stannis. They couldn’t find Cersei and he was next on the emergency contact list. They were already interested in locating Cersei and Asha for questioning. A neighbor saw the two of them taking things out of the house and witnessed them sitting in the driveway; she thought it looked odd and reported it to the police.”

His father inhaled sharply multiple times.

“They were very interested in Stannis’ living arrangements. I gather word has been getting around about his . . . prowess. Stannis took exception to the line of questioning and suddenly the detectives wanted to talk to him as well. And then one officer recognized Davos from somewhere—”

“How do you know?” It hit him then. “Brienne. I should have known you weren’t going to let that go. Well, they picked him up too, although I gather the reason was unrelated to this mess. He was quite cool about it. He gave me his lawyer’s name as they were taking him in. I called him. I also called Stannis’ lawyer. I’ve been phoning you for hours.”

“Where is Jaime?”

“He’s with Brienne. We know that much. Her phone goes straight to voicemail. We tried him throughout the night. He wouldn’t answer any of us. I’ve never seen him like that before.” Tyrion would have given anything to have not been in the house last night.

“Perhaps it’s for the best.”

“How can you say that?”

His father fixed him with a look.

Of course, he thought. Jaime might now finally be willing to look elsewhere for love, to someone who would give him legitimate heirs. Still that his father could be so calculating at a time like this was appalling. Cersei was being questioned in regards to her estranged, murdered husband’s death, and Tywin Lannister was concerned with his favorite son siring the next generation of Lannisters.

“All right. Myrcella and Tommen will stay with me until this can be sorted out. You’ve done enough. I suggest you go home and get some rest.”

And this, Tyrion thought, mentally kicking himself, was why he should never call Father. He didn’t know why he was surprised. His father had made him think it was only due to his influence that he got his position at the library all in order to get him to spy for him. It probably also had given Father particular pleasure to make him feel inadequate. “Cersei wants them to stay here. I offered to let all of them come to my place. She refused to leave then and I think she’d refuse to leave now.”

“If half of what you say is true, Cersei has amply demonstrated her unfitness as a mother. Her wishes are no longer anything we need consider. They’re fond of you,” he said grudgingly. “You can persuade them that this is for the best.”
“We want to stay with Uncle Stannis.”

Tyrion and his father turned around to see Myrcella, Tommen, and Shireen standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

“I like it here,” Tommen added as support for his sister’s statement.

His father stood up. “At a time like this, one should be with family. Get your belongings. You’ll stay with me for the time being.”

“We are with family,” Myrcella insisted. “Uncle Stannis is taking care of us.”

Tyrion realized with a shock that his niece’s set of her jaw and the tone of her voice were just like Father’s.

“And Asha.” Tommen moved closer to his sister in a show of solidarity. “She’s cool. She’s been teaching me things.”

Oh, this was not going to be pretty, Tyrion thought.

* * *

Stannis signed the last form and walked out of the police station. Davos Seaworth was waiting for him.

“They already released Asha and Mrs. Baratheon. Her lawyer took them both back to your house. Mrs. Baratheon wanted to wait for you, but I promised her I’d bring you back myself. I’ll phone for a taxi.”

“Thank you.” His legs and back felt stiff from a night spent partly in a holding cell and in a dingy interrogation room.

Davos placed his call. “Ten minutes, the dispatcher said.” He looked at Stannis. “You’ll feel better after a hot shower and some food.”

“I have spent the night here before,” Stannis found himself saying.

“Oh?”

“The charges were dropped. It was an altercation about split infinitives.”

“It’s none of my bus—what?”

Stannis shook his head. Robert had been murdered. A bar fight about the placement of an adverb seemed a foolish thing to discuss right now.

“I’m sorry about your brother,” Davos ventured.

“I didn’t love him. He didn’t love me.” Robert was dead. It had been years since there had been any brotherly love between them, but the enormity of it was just starting to hit him. “I should call Renly.” Stannis rubbed the back of his neck. “Is Tyrion still at the house, do you know?”

“The last I heard, yes.” Davos looked around the parking lot. “It might be wise if you didn’t say things like that around here. The police might get the wrong idea.”

“They already have,” Stannis said shortly.
Davos straightened up. The taxi was pulling into the parking lot. “Don’t worry. As soon as we get back to your house, I’ll take off. You have your hands full.”

He had honest eyes, Stannis thought suddenly. He had sat up with them all night helping with Cersei. He could have left at any time, but he had not abandoned them. “You are welcome to stay.”

“I’d like that,” Davos told him.

“So would I.”

* * *

Brienne rummaged around the enormous kitchen of Casterly Rock for coffee. The room felt almost industrial with all the stainless steel and restaurant-quality appliances. She rather doubted that the Lannisters used it much themselves. Some uniform-clad servant probably reigned supreme here producing meals on command for his or her masters. The slight film of dust on everything made her confident that she could brew coffee undisturbed.

Everybody had stuff, she had told Jaime. She had yet to meet a person or a family who didn’t have some angst, some tortured history, or some warped dynamic. Before last night, she had come to believe that the Lannisters had more than their fair share of “stuff.” Now after hearing Jaime’s confession, she thought they might have cornered the market on emotional baggage.

Brienne still wasn’t sure how to take what he had told her. For everything his revelations explained, they raised more questions.

Jaime did not hold back. At least she hoped he had not held back. She couldn’t imagine there being any more deep dark secrets. Of course, she could never have imagined the things he had told her.

She unearthed coffee and filters and contemplated the overly complicated machine in front of her.

“I think we’re better off going into Lannisport for breakfast,” Jaime remarked from behind her.

“You don’t know how to use it,” she guessed, turning around to face him.

“No,” he admitted. He set their brandy snifters in the sink and threw out the snack wrappings.

“You influence, wench.”

“Brienne,” she corrected automatically.

“How can you look so fresh-faced? I feel like I’ve been run over by a car and left for dead.”

Brienne leaned back on the counter. “I didn’t drink a fifth of a bottle of brandy,” she pointed out. Nor had she been through the emotional wringer like he had, but she kept the thought unexpressed.

“And I took a shower and brushed my teeth.”

“Hint taken. Give me twenty minutes and then we’ll go get pancakes.”

“Okay,” she managed. She stayed there for a few minutes after he had left before going back into the library. Aside from the pile of dust sheets on the floor and the ashes in the fireplace, there was no evidence they’d been there. That bothered her somehow. She felt there should be signs that something so significant had occurred here. Brienne glanced around the room and wondered what other scenes it had witnessed over the decades. For all its gothic grandeur and luxury, the bits of the house she had seen seemed so desolate.
Brienne sat back down on the floor and hugged her knees to herself. She considered herself to be a relatively straightforward person. She had a firm sense of what was right and what was wrong. Everything about Jaime was complicated and almost everything he had told her he had done struck her as deeply wrong. How could she possibly reconcile it all? As inexperienced as Brienne was, she knew damn well he wasn’t ready for a relationship with her. He had too many strong feelings about Cersei. He might never be ready for a relationship with her. And if she was truly honest, it was highly possible he wasn’t interested in a relationship with her. He could just be thinking of her as a friend.

When they got back to King’s Landing, she should take a huge step back from him. Brienne thought even Olenna would agree that she had done more than enough socializing for a while. When she was ready, somewhere there had to be someone who was forthright and uncomplicated, who wasn’t engaged in illegal activity, and who would like her back for who she was.

“Better? I even shaved.”

Brienne looked up at Jaime.

He gave her his hand and helped her to her feet. He pulled her hard enough that she stumbled into his arms.

She stepped back quickly.

“It’ll be better now,” he told her. “I can feel it.”

It was his certainty that disarmed her so.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I realize it’s always supposed to be sunny and beautiful in King’s Landing, but it’s been hundreds of years since the events in ASOIAF. Weather patterns change, global warming is probably messing things up. Hence it raining in King’s Landing and in the Westerlands.

Lots of people in libraries have a MLS or a MLIS. They don’t always do desk duty. Olenna should probably not be having the director of library (Ned) staffing a reference desk. Bronn, who in my head, probably does so in a pinch anyhow is actually a more cost-effective choice (as are the library school students who work for them).
Neatness Counts

Chapter Summary

Stannis Baratheon's situation continues to grow more complicated. At Robert's funeral, Ned and Catelyn discover just how entrepreneurial their daughter is. Jaime encounters resistance from Brienne. Meanwhile, Sansa has some adventures in babysitting.

Also, for all you book readers, it's time to play Spot the Lannister! (only one is unidentifiable).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

* * *

Ned wished Cat had never given him the casserole to take over. As common as it was in their social circles to bring food after a death, it was plainly a foreign custom to the Lannisters and the Baratheons. Stannis and Cersei stared at it perplexed. They were prepared for his visit; they were not prepared for a foil-wrapped dish.

“What is it?” Tommen wanted to know.

“Butternut squash lasagna, I think. There are instructions taped to the bottom of the pan.”

“But why did you bring it?”

Asha turned to Tommen. “It’s a thing people do when someone dies.”

“Oh. Why?”

The man they’d introduced to him as Davos Seaworth came to his rescue. “It’s a kind gesture, lad. It’s so that the bereaved family doesn’t have to worry about cooking during their time of grief.”

Tommen opened his mouth again, but Asha cut him off. “We don’t have anything planned for supper. This will come in handy. Thanks, Dr. Stark.” She took it from him.

Contrary to Olenna’s predictions, the only other person here besides Stannis and Asha was Davos Seaworth. Ned would have assumed the Lannisters would be swarming protectively around Cersei and her children.

Asha disappeared into the kitchen with the casserole and the three teenagers followed her.

“I came to offer my condolences to the both of you.”

Stannis nodded. He gestured to a chair and everyone sat down.

“Thank you,” Cersei managed.

Ned was as surprised at her red-rimmed eyes as he was by her attire. He had never seen her dressed so casually. She was wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with Quark’s Top 10 Rules of Acquisition and a
pair of very tight jeans. All of them, even Mr. Seaworth looked utterly exhausted. “Is there anything I can do for you? The children?”

She shook her head.

“I will need to take the week off,” Stannis said quietly. “It may be a little longer. We aren’t sure when they’ll release the body for burial.”

“Yes, of course. We’ll take care of everything.”

“Asha will be back tomorrow.”

Were he and Asha living together? No, Ned thought. Leave it alone. It was only a violation of library policy if they were married. “I’ll let Olenna know. How is Renly handling it?”

“We spoke on the phone this afternoon,” Stannis said as if this answered everything.

Ned tried again. “Do the police have any leads? What do they think happened?”

“They think one of Robert’s . . .”

“Whores—” supplied Cersei.

“—women,” Stannis continued, “shot him after he moved on to someone else. The person they want to speak to is an undergraduate girl. We don’t know anything else.”

He absorbed this information. Robert and monogamy had never been close companions. It was one of the reasons Lyanna never returned Robert’s affections very strongly.

Asha and the teenagers came back out. The kids started setting the table.

“Are you staying to supper, Dr. Stark?”

“Asha, you can call me Ned.”

“May,” Stannis corrected.

Asha rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Stannis. You’re more than welcome to stay, Dr. Stark. I made a salad too.”

“We made the salad,” Tommen objected. “I cut the carrots the way Asha taught me the other day.”

Ned caught the stricken glance Cersei shot her son. Robert had died sometime yesterday. How long had they been staying with Stannis? He remembered his last visit to the President’s House. She must have left Robert and come . . . here? He stood up. “Thank you, but Cat expects me home soon. If you need anything, Cersei, just call. We’d be happy to help.”

* * *

Stannis Baratheon got out of his car and unlocked the trunk. Myrcella and Tommen looked at their grandfather’s house without enthusiasm. Cersei’s face was a mix of panic and dread. He caught Davos’ eye. Davos obligingly started chatting with the two teenagers. “Cersei?”

She came over to him. “I can’t. Please, let’s just go back home.”

Stannis was startled to realize by home she meant his house. “We discussed this. It’s merely until
after the funeral." He lifted out a suitcase. Cersei and Asha’s idea of packing when she’d left Robert had involved shopping bags and cardboard boxes. Consequently, everything they’d brought to Tywin Lannister’s was packed in his own luggage.

“Until Father finds a way to keep us here or to take my children away from me,” she prophesied darkly. “You don’t know what he’s like.”

He set another suitcase on the driveway. “And Tywin Lannister does not know what I’m like. I gave you my word, woman. I said you would all stay with me and you will all stay with me.”

Cersei seemed slightly reassured.

“I will pick you up tomorrow at 8:30.” He’d promised her he would accompany her to any appointments at which she wanted him. There was a very long list of tasks involved with burying Robert and settling the mess of his estate. He lifted the last of the suitcases out.

A servant approached the car and sourly took the luggage inside. Tywin Lannister stood in the doorway of his house. He made a minute nod to Stannis. He rested his eyes on Davos and his expression darkened.

Stannis shut the trunk lid. He was startled when Myrcella and Tommen came up and hugged him. “I will see you all very soon,” he promised. He turned to Cersei. “If you need me, you have my number. I will come for you.”

Cersei put her hand on his wrist for a moment. Then she collected her children and walked into her father’s house.

“Will Mrs. Baratheon be all right, do you think?” Davos asked as Stannis made the turn out of the driveway.

Stannis wasn’t sure. “No matter how many times I tell her she has my word, the woman doubts me.”

“I’ll wager she’s been hurt a lot,” Davos replied. “She’s very insecure.”

He hadn’t thought of it in this way. Cersei had always struck him as being made of iron. Stannis braked at the stop sign, looked both ways, and then proceeded through the intersection. “Asha thinks highly of you,” he said abruptly.

“Does she now? What do you think of me?”

Stannis glanced at his passenger. Before Davos had come to their aid on that horrendous night, he had not been someone to whom Stannis had paid much attention. But after a rather extraordinary thirty-something hours where the two men were in each other’s largely uninterrupted company, he was troubled. He liked Davos. It was impossible not to like him. But Stannis wasn’t a fool. The man was a criminal. Asha held a high opinion of him, though.

_He’s a decent man, Stannis. Fuck his background. Fuck his record. He’s a good man. How do you think my family makes its living? Your brother was a university president and it sounds like he was a piece of shit. Davos could have bailed on us half a dozen times and he’s stayed with us throughout this mess._

“I don’t know yet,” he replied. He drove down the tree lined avenue of mansions. “And what is your opinion of me?” The moment the words were out of his mouth, Stannis wondered at them. Was he mad? What did it matter what others thought of him?
Davos flushed. “I don’t know yet either.”

They were silent for the rest of the ride.

Asha was waiting when they got back. “Everything okay? Was Tommen all right?”

Stannis nodded. She and Tommen had taken to each other. “Cersei is anxious.”

“She was a wreck when they were getting ready.” Asha flipped off the cap of a beer. “Davos, you’re staying for dinner, right?”

Davos looked uncertainly at Stannis.

“You are more than welcome,” he managed.

Davos nodded. “I’ll just go and wash my hands.”

Asha waited till he had disappeared down the hall. “Do you think he’d be interested in being with us?”

Stannis turned scarlet.

“I’ve seen the way you look at him. You’ve been thinking about him,” she said simply. “So have I.”

He would not talk about this. He wouldn’t talk about that extraordinary dream he’d had about the man. Stannis clenched his jaw.

Asha paid no attention. She smiled. “Good. So we’ll see how it goes tonight. Worst he can do is say no.”

* * *

As the septon led everyone in prayer for the late Robert Baratheon, Catelyn snuck a peek at Ned. His face was stoic, but like most Northerners he tended to hide his emotions. Although if she didn’t know better, she would swear that the congregation was composed entirely of Northerners. Aside from Tommen and Myrcella, who were red-eyed, and Renly, who seemed somewhat saddened, no one else seemed to be showing much if any emotion. The faculty at the official university service had been more demonstrative than Robert’s own family and in-laws here at the private service.

The septon finally finished, and the mourners, if that was what they were, gratefully filed into the nearby room for the reception. Other than uttering a few platitudes, most of the things people were saying had nothing to do with Robert Baratheon.

The Lannisters were out in full force. Catelyn had never seen so many blonde people together in one place before. It was startling to her and galling to Ned to see just how many of them seemed to know Arya. Unfortunately, Arya was vague with names.

“I don’t know,” Arya kept saying in response to inquiries from her parents as to their identities. “A cousin maybe?” This was usually followed up by a description.

“He won’t shave or cut his hair until the Lions win the pennant. He works in Marketing.”

“She just got married. Her colors were gold and green. She said red was more traditional for the Lannisters but it just didn’t seem right to her for a wedding. We sold her a Lemon Cakes bag. She’s in Accounts.”
“That’s Mr. Lannister and Kevan’s brother. I think he runs an extreme travel company.”

“She does something with Mergers. She breeds Pomeranians and she makes jewelry. Actually, we should go talk to her. Sansa and Margaery have an idea for Helmets & Halberds and Gendry’s being stupid. I don’t know what her jewelry is like, though. Maybe she’s wearing some.”

Catelyn’s attention was claimed by Dorna Lannister, so Arya unceremoniously dragged her father off to speak with the Pomeranian-raising, jewelry-making Lannister. Catelyn doubted Ned would be of much help, but it was gratifying to see Arya talking to him again.

The boys were hanging out with Myrcella, Shireen, and Tommen. For once they appeared to be behaving.

The Baratheon contingent was not nearly so large and Catelyn knew all of them. What was odd, she thought, was the way in which Cersei had determinedly stayed by the side of Stannis. She had been like that at the University memorial as well.

Renly Baratheon appeared mystified by it as well. He said as much when he and his boyfriend joined her in a corner. Or at least, she thought that’s what he was starting to say before he was distracted by Loras Tyrell.

“Why is Dr. Stark gesturing at Darlessa Marbrand’s breasts like that?”

Darlessa, who must be the woman who raised Pomeranians, seemed alarmed. “Gods, he’s trying to help Arya, I think,” Catelyn said faintly. “She has a business venture. She said something about jewelry for Helmets & Halberds. I should go over there. Ned won’t—”

“Oh, the sideline they want to introduce.” Loras Tyrell’s face cleared. “Margaery told me. Allow me.”

Catelyn started to explain but Renly cut her off.

“I have seen the unedited video. I wish Loras had brought me. I would have killed to see Stannis in person dressed up as a knight locked in mortal combat with Lancel Lannister.”

She found herself smiling. “He was very impressive.”

“It looked like a lot of fun.”

“It was.” Catelyn was relieved to see Loras stepping in and smoothing things over. “Who is Darlessa Marbrand to Tywin and Kevan?”

“Sister-in-law, I think,” he said vaguely. “I can’t remember if her husband is the one who died or the one who lives in Essos.”

“He must be the one who has the extreme travel company,” Catelyn guessed.

Renly shrugged. “Possibly. I have a hard time keeping them all straight.”

Catelyn watched as Darlessa gave Arya a business card. They shook hands. Arya then proceeded to drag poor Ned off to talk to Kevan and Dorna.

“I’m very sorry about Robert.”

Renly gave her a weak smile, but he didn’t reply.
Now Arya was flagged down by another golden-haired Lannister. She too handed Arya a business card. There was much pointing to someone else’s purse.

“To think after all these years, we thought Stannis was the dull one. Now I practically need a scorecard to keep up with his romances.”

“But surely he and Cersei are not . . .” she broke off appalled. It was none of her business even if they were.

“Not as I understand it, no. I meant with his two co-workers.” Renly appeared to be genuinely perplexed as he glanced at Cersei. “I’m not sure what that’s about at all, and this business with her brothers, well that’s a mystery too.” Seeing her confusion, he gestured toward Tyrion who was speaking with a grey-haired bearded man and Theon’s sister. “They’ve never been that close as far as I can remember. Now Tyrion’s over at the house all the time. She’s been staying there with Stannis, you know, with the children. She’s at her father’s now, though.”

Catelyn knew about this. Ned had gone to see if he could be of assistance. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Arya speaking with great animation to an ill-dressed large man with deep facial scarring. Ned’s expression could only be described as polite horror.

“The real puzzle is Jaime. He’s over there by the door with Brienne and his father. Do you know Brienne?”

“She works for Ned and I met her at the video shoot. She seems very nice.”

“Oh, she is. We’re friends, but I’m afraid she’s hopelessly out of her league with Jaime.”

She checked on Bran and Rickon. They still appeared to be merely talking to the other teenagers. “How does Brienne fit into your puzzle?”

“I’m not sure,” he said thoughtfully. “As long as I’ve known Cersei, Jaime Lannister has never been far from her side. Never. He probably spent more time in the house than Robert did.”

Cat didn’t like the insinuation in his voice, nor was she entirely comfortable gossiping about people behind their backs. “That’s not surprising. They’re twins.”

“Well, they’re not so close now. Jaime wasn’t at the University service and he was sitting at the back for this one. He hasn’t gone up to Cersei once.”

She made a noncommittal noise that turned into a strangled cough. Arya, having finished her networking rounds, was bounding up to Tywin Lannister with her father in tow.

* * *

Sansa finished writing out her condolences to the Baratheons and slid the notes into the envelopes. She felt badly for Myrcella and Tommen. She didn’t much care about Joffrey. Hopefully, he was freezing his miserable arse off at the Wall. According to Jon, he was having a rough time of it. That was fine by her. She doubted Stannis or Mrs. Baratheon would care about her polite notes, but if cards and some platitudes were what it took to get out of having to go to the funeral, it was worth it.

Robin sat opposite of her doing his homework. Babysitting him was the real cost of not attending the services. He was a needy, whiney kid. But for some reason, he had taken a shine to Sansa and was slightly more likely to mind her than her parents. This was the reason she was stuck with him now.
She opted to take him to a coffeehouse where she liked to study. Aside from his insistence on having a grown-up drink, it was working out okay. The barista made him café au lait with a couple of tablespoons of decaffeinated coffee. It was kind of cute really to see him drinking it.

“Can we go to the library after? I haven’t been since Papa died. I want to see the funny shelves.”

Considering how the funny shelves had killed his father, Sansa thought this was a strange request and an extraordinarily bad idea. “We’ll see if there’s time,” she hedged. “I have to work on my paper. Don’t you have math?”

“I hate math.”

“It was never my favorite subject either.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Literature. Now do your homework.”

“There’s Uncle Petyr.” He reached up to wave.

Sansa grabbed his hand and pulled it down. “No,” she practically hissed. “Robin, how would you like to sit here right next to me?” If she made him move out of Littlefinger’s eye line, then it was just possible her pervy stalker would get whatever he was there for and just go without seeing her. So far it was okay at work. Since speaking to her father, Petyr had stayed away from her, but he kept giving her these sad-eyed “I just want to be your friend” looks from afar. She did not need to deal with him today.

Robin eagerly scooted over around the bench seat to her side.

“If you can be super quiet and finish your homework, I’ll take you somewhere fun after. But you can’t talk, okay?”

He nodded happily.

Aside from the fact that he was practically in her lap, she was relieved by his obedience. She was about to pull out a compact and try and see if she could detect Littlefinger with the mirror, when to her horror, she heard Tip-In’s mellifluous voice greeting him.

* * *

A long time ago, Jaime had learned how to employ sarcasm and charm to get him out of any number of unpleasant situations. Unfortunately, once anyone got Uncle Stafford going on the subject of his favorite hobby, reenacting, he was immune to both. Brienne didn’t know any better. An innocent inquiry as to the insignia on Uncle Stafford’s lapel pin, and the man was off.

Jaime twice tried to say something withering. Both times the meaning went totally over his uncle’s head. Brienne, on the other hand, was simply appalled at him. Jaime could tell. Then she spotted Renly, and with a polite “excuse me” to Uncle Stafford, which the man totally missed, pushed her way through a cordon of golden-haired Lannisters to reach Renly Baratheon, who Jaime had to admit, was looking a tad forlorn.

“What’s the Battle of Oxcross?”

Jaime looked around for the voice. He recognized it. Then he looked down and spotted Arya Stark, Father’s little clipboard wielding protégée.
“It took place during the War of the Five Kings,” her father explained. “It’s not polite to eavesdrop, Arya.”

Uncle Stafford brightened up. “No, no, I’m always pleased to discuss the greatest conflict in Westerosi history!”

Jaime sighed and performed introductions. His uncle was elated to meet Eddard Stark, prominent medieval historian, and the discussion suddenly plunged into a new level of hellish detail. As Jaime stood silently feeling like he was suffering every blow to every soldier and man serving House Lannister, he could see Brienne speaking earnestly to Renly Baratheon. The two were friends, he had learned. Brienne said they met at university. It was why she agreed to come with him today.

He knew she was still cross with him about his 2:00 AM phone call. Brienne didn’t mind, she said if he was truly in crisis, but she worked hard and she needed her sleep. She did not like being roused from it to answer his questions about Klingon politics. He either needed to learn to keep those till a civilized hour or he had to start looking up the answers for himself. She spoke so firmly that after she hung up on him, he taped little notes by his phones reading “Look at the clock before calling B.”

“You dress up in armor?” Arya asked interrupting Uncle Stafford mid-sentence about the strategic implications about the forces of the King in the North invading the Westerlands.

“I suppose it is a bit silly,” Uncle Stafford admitted.

“No, it’s not. It’s great.”

Jaime saw Ned Stark sighing as his daughter launched into what Jaime thought must be her elevator speech about Helmets & Halberds. He looked over the tops of heads again at Brienne. She and Renly had found a corner to sit and he was evidently pouring his heart out to her.

“Pod can totally custom brand anything with the house sigil of your choice—as long as it’s made out of leather—for a special low price.”

“I have a gorget. It’s seen better days, but—”

“Oh, we sell those too.”

Jaime and Ned watched as Arya whipped out her phone to show Stafford Lannister some photographs of the things her little company produced.

Before Uncle Stafford’s second wife had put a stop to it and by the time Jaime had spotted an opening in the crowd, the girl had sold him $500 of merchandise. Jaime fled just as Arya was taking his uncle’s business card and promising to put her partners in touch with him. Jaime pushed through to reach Brienne and Renly.

“Wench, you left me alone with Uncle Stafford.”

“He seemed like a perfectly nice man.”

He reflected how strange it was that Brienne seemed to like all the difficult members of his family. Renly was watching them with avid interest.

“My condolences, Renly.”
“Thank you.” Renly grabbed a wine glass from a passing server’s tray. “Loras and I were going to get dinner after this. Would you two like to join us?”

“Don’t you want to be with your family?” Brienne nodded her head toward Stannis and Cersei.

“After one visit to the bank, another to the lawyer, a bizarre appointment at the funeral director’s—I swear, Cersei would have been fine with us digging a hole in the back yard and dumping Robert’s body in from a wheelbarrow; thank the seven Stannis insisted on a proper burial—two wakes, two funeral services, and assorted awkward discussions over coffee, I feel I have had all the interaction with my family that I can stand for the next year.”

Jaime stiffened at the mention of Cersei.

“That’s very kind of you. We’d—”

“—Unfortunately, Brienne and I have plans—”

She turned to him, giving him an appalled look. “Which we can change,” she finished. “We would love to come. Thank you.” After she and Renly picked a restaurant and a time, he left to go find Loras and she turned to Jaime. “What is wrong with you? Renly is my friend. He just lost his brother.”

“Who he didn’t particularly like.”

“Who he loved,” Brienne countered. “Renly has always been there for me. You don’t have to come to dinner if you don’t want to, but don’t answer for me again. I know you’re having a tough time, Jaime, but you’re not the only person in Westeros with problems.”

Jaime opened his mouth and shut it.

* * *

From the nearness of Dr. Bolton’s voice, Sansa realized he and Littlefinger had to be in the next booth.

“Sorry about the wait, Bolton. Thanks to our mutual friend, I just came off of a desk stint. I’ve got the books you wanted.”

“Are these charged to me in any way?”

“No one will know,” Littlefinger promised. “I take care of my friends.”

Sansa made a face. Not only was he a pervert, he was also a book thief. Beside her Robin made signs of growing restive. She held a finger to her lips and smiled brightly at him.

“Now that Baratheon’s gone, it should be easier to move him out,” Littlefinger was saying.

Someone knocked over a huge tub of dishes. Sansa strained to hear them over the clatter.

“I don’t want him back in my department,” Tip-In objected. “I thought I made that very clear. If you would let me take care of remov—”

The busboy dropped the tub again.

“—Leave it to me. I just want your support when it comes time to replace him.”
Tip-In didn’t reply immediately. Finally he said, “You’ll have it.”

“Tuna melt for Petyr!” a server yelled.

“I’ve got to get back,” Littlefinger told Tip-In. “Let me know if there’s anything more you need.”

She kept her head down. She heard Littlefinger thanking the server and then the bells on the door. Finally she looked at the entrance. He was gone. Tip-In was probably still in the booth. Robin was fidgeting again. He pushed his finished math homework over to her. She sighed silently and glanced over it. Why wouldn’t Dr. Bolton leave?

As if Tip-In knew she was thinking about him, suddenly she could feel him right there. She pointed randomly at a problem with Robin’s pencil. “Do that one over,” she said in a low voice.

“But the answer is right,” he whined.

“Yes, but it’s sloppy. Teachers care about neatness.”

“I’m afraid Sansa’s correct.”

Sansa deliberately jumped in her seat. “Dr. Bolton! You startled me.” She smiled at him like she was happy to run into him.

“I’ve never seen you in this place before,” he said looking amused. “You always seem to be at the library.”

“They make great blueberry scones here.” It was an utterly inane thing to say, but it seemed to be effective at disarming him.

“Ah.” He smiled at Robin. “This can’t be Rickon. Last I heard he was trying out for varsity soccer.”

“This is my cousin, Robin. Robin, this is Dr. Bolton.”

Tip-In made the sort of remarks a friend of her parents would be expected to say. He asked after her family. He expressed interest in what she was studying. He said pleasant things to Robin too.

If it weren’t for the fact that she knew Roose Bolton to be an utter freak, she would have been charmed. As it was Sansa said all the things she was supposed to say in response.


“Pack up your stuff.” She did the same. To Tip-In, she apologized, “I’m sorry, Dr. Bolton, I told my cousin we’d do something fun if he did his homework. We should get going.”

“Do you need a ride anywhere? I’d be happy to drop you wherever you need to go.”

As if she would ever voluntarily get into a vehicle with him, she thought. “I have my friend’s car, but thanks for the offer. It was good to see you.” She practically dragged Robin by the arm out of the coffeehouse. She ignored his protests.

She got Robin settled in the car. “Since you were very good, how would you like to go with me to the fabric store?”

It would never have worked on her brothers—at any age—but Robin was weird and young enough that he acted like this was the greatest treat imaginable.
Sansa glanced in the rearview mirror to check her face and suddenly froze. Tip-In was sitting in a dark-blue sedan behind her. Even with this light, from this distance, she could see those cold, dead eyes of his. She locked the doors and hit the child safety button just in case. All she needed was Robin bailing out of the car.

“You promised.”

Seven hells, she thought, not now. “Just a second.” She pulled out her phone and called first her father and then her mother. Their phones went to voicemail. That stupid funeral, she thought. She kept her eye on the rearview mirror. A strange little smile was playing about Dr. Bolton’s lips.

“Hey, Robin, why don’t you look at your book while I talk to my friend?” She called Margaery, who picked up on the second ring.

“Hi! You could not have called at a better time. They have me talking to Quentyn Martell. I am bored out of my mind. I don’t see why they’re all so concerned that I have a man in this day and age. I told Grandmother I was happy with you. She said that was fine, but it wasn’t going to get her any great-grandchildren.”

This was not the time to discuss their childbearing options. “Remember when I told you about Tip-In? From the library?”

“Which one is he?”

“Dr. Roose Bolton, your freak of a professor, the one you think has such a sexy voice even though I told you he’s a total creep? Well, he’s sitting in the car behind me. He knows I overheard something I wasn’t supposed to. He’s just staring at me. I can see him in the rearview mirror. Margaery, I have Robin with me. I’d take him to my parents, but they’re all at the funeral.” She turned to Robin, “Keep your eyes on your book, sweetling.”

“Shit, you’re really worried. Drive.”

“What?”

“Just start driving. Maybe he’s thinking about something and that’s how he looks when he’s spaced out.”

Sansa didn’t think Roose Bolton was the sort of man who ever daydreamed, but she did as Margaery suggested. “He’s still sitting—no, he’s pulling out too.” Sansa made a left up at the light. She drove toward the fabric store. He made the left shortly thereafter. When she made a right, he did as well. She glanced into the rearview mirror. He was wearing the same mild, amused expression. “He’s following me. What do I do? I can’t call the police. He hasn’t done anything illegal.”

“I can call Loras. No, he’s at the funeral too. Look, just keep driving. Keep to the main roads. Put me on speaker and I’ll stay on the line with you.”

Sansa drove into the lot of a busy shopping plaza.

“You said we were going to the fabric store! You promised, Sansa!”

She ignored Robin. She wasn’t used to Margaery’s car, but she finally got the phone hooked up.

“Is he still there?”

“He’s parked one row behind me and I swear he hasn’t taken his eyes off me once.” It was like
they were playing some kind of game and he was waiting to see what move she would make next. Sansa put the car in drive and pulled out quickly. There was a lot of traffic and she thought if she drove aggressively she might be able to shake him. She got maybe a quarter mile before she saw his sedan in her side mirror. “I can’t lose him. What do I do?”

“Shit. Drive here. No, I cannot come back to the living room, Mother. I’m on the phone. Sorry about that.”

“Where am I going?” Sansa turned right. She would need to get to the highway. She knew that much. Tip-In made the turn with her.

“Garlan’s. Oh, you need directions.”

“Is your grandmother there?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Put her on,” Sansa said suddenly.

“I know how to get you from there to here,” Margaery objected.

Sansa glanced over at Robin. He was looking at her uneasily. “It’s okay. We’re going to do something even better than the fabric store.” To Margaery, she said, “Get your grandmother. If something happens, she’ll know what to do.”

Bronn always said Olenna Tyrell was not someone you fucked with. Right now, Sansa needed somebody like that.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to Elizabeth, who I believe was the first to guess correctly as to the identity of Robert's killer. I needed him dead and I didn't have the heart to kill off any of the major players in my story (yet).
The Tipping Point

Chapter Summary

In which we learn why Ned and Tywin hate each other; how Brienne truly feels about Jaime; what Cersei wants; and where Sansa and Robin ended up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Ned watched as Arya happily rifled through business cards, making careful notes on the backs of them. “Arya, what do you want to eat?”

“Oh.” Arya looked up and gave her order to the waiter. She stripped her straw of the paper and poked the lime in her Coke. She tidied the cards into a neat little stack.

Ned made his own selections. He and Arya were the only ones who really liked Dornish food. At Catelyn’s suggestion, he had taken Arya out for dinner, just the two of them. He gave the menus to the waiter, who went to put their order in.

“I’m sorry about Uncle Robert.”

“I’m sorry too.” It seemed to Ned that he might be one of the few people who sincerely mourned the passing of Robert Baratheon.

Arya blew into her straw so that bubbles formed.

Ned smiled in spite of himself. “I think you’re a little too old to do that anymore, but I’m glad to see you have some of the old Arya left in you. I miss her.”

She gave him an impish grin.

“So does that mean I can blow bubbles in my Coke?” But she stopped and drank from the straw in the socially accepted manner. Then she took the stack of cards and put them in her bag.

“What were you writing on the backs of them?”

“Notes so I can remember what we talked about and who they were. I’m not so good with names.”

“I noticed,” Ned commented, “but I don’t think they did.”

“Well, they’re all Lannisters. I just called people Mr. or Ms Lannister like I did when I worked there. I’m going to need to know their names, though, if we use them for the projects, like with the lady who makes the jewelry. Darlene or Darla or?”

“Darlessa.” Ned thought her name would be branded in his memory fall all eternity. If Loras Tyrell hadn’t rescued him, he would probably be facing some sort of charges. As it was, he had nearly had to fend off advances. Once it was made clear to her that Eddard Stark was not some sort of mentally challenged maniac, but was trying to express interest in her handcrafted jewelry, Darlessa
Lannister née Marbrand, had turned positively kittenish.

“Yeah, her.”

Ned shook his head. “After you meet someone, say their name back to them. It will help you remember the name for the next time. Say her name now and what you know about her.”

“Darlessa Lannister breeds dogs and makes jewelry.” Arya frowned. “I’ll just forget later.”

“No, you won’t. You have the business cards. Treat it like a test. Study them.”

“It’s no good. I’m not smart.”

Ned stared at her. “You are smart.”

“Not like Sansa or Bran. I know I only got into Crownlands because of Uncle Robert. I heard you and Mum talking about it.”

He didn’t know what to say at first. “I think you misunderstood,” he told her finally. “You did very well on your college entrance exams, Arya. Nobody faked those. You got very high scores all on your own. It’s true I wondered if Robert pulled some strings to get you in because your GPA was a little low, but he swore to me that he had nothing to do with it.”

She seemed unconvinced.

“Your mother showed me the papers you’ve done for your classes this semester. You got good marks on those.”

“Only because Mr. Lannister and Kevan helped me.”

“From what it looked like, they read over your drafts, marked up your spelling errors, and suggested little things you could improve upon, right?”

Arya nodded. “But—”

“But nothing. I have your mother proofread my manuscripts. That doesn’t mean she writes my papers. Your mentors did the same thing for you. They just highlighted areas that needed more work and acted like another set of eyes for you. You earned those marks.” He watched her mull that over. “Your mother and I know you don’t want to go into academia. That doesn’t mean you’re not intelligent.”

“Mr. Lannister says I’m smart too,” Arya commented quietly.

“You believe it from him. How come not from me?”

“Because you have to say it.”

“What do you mean?”

As if it were the most obvious thing in the world, Arya said with an exasperated sigh, “Because you love me.”

“That doesn’t mean I would lie to you.”

“Why don’t you like Mr. Lannister?”
Ned started. He was saved the necessity of forming an immediate reply by the arrival of their food. He waited for the server to leave. “He doesn’t like me very much either.”

“Did something happen back in the old days?”

“We have some philosophical differences,” Ned said finally. “There was never any one incident.” Their mutual dislike had begun at some dinner at Robert’s. Tywin Lannister took exception to the comments Ned made about something in the news. After all these years, he was hard pressed to remember what it had been, but the two men had engaged in a icily polite debate that left Ned in no doubt as to what kind of morally bankrupt man Tywin Lannister was. They’d met over the years and each successive encounter increased the antipathy.

“That’s it? I thought you maybe it was a feud.”

“No.” Ned bit back a smile.

“Oh,” Arya sounded disappointed. “But what don’t you like about him?”

“He’s ruthless with his enemies.”

Arya spooned food onto her plate. “Mr. Lannister said you have to be sometimes so you can protect your family’s interests. Like when the Reyne Corp. tried to squeeze them out. That’s why they had to do a hostile takeover.”

“And what do you think about that?” He would be willing to bet that Tywin Lannister had only shared one side of the story about the Reyne Corp. She probably didn’t know about the massive layoffs, and he doubted Tywin Lannister had told her about his annihilation of Tarbeck Holdings Ltd. and all the people who had lost their jobs when the company went under.

“We’re not big enough to be a concern to Jordana Paige or Namaste,” Arya said. “We don’t have to worry about being taken over.” She carefully removed one of the hot peppers from her dish to the side. “Yet.”

“No, I mean . . . Arya, your Mum and I raised you to have certain values. Just because you’re in business doesn’t mean you can throw those out the window. It’s important to be empathetic and compassionate, particularly with the people who work for you.”

“Oh, are you worried because we have Bran, Rickon, and Robin helping us? I know piecework is illegal. Mr. Lannister told us so, but we don’t have enough liquidity to hire anyone yet, but I promise I won’t exploit them.”

He blinked. “Just be careful, honey. I know Mr. Lannister has been kind to you and he seems to like you, but he’s not a very nice man. Don’t swallow everything he tells you whole. You have to think critically about what people tell you.”

Arya was busy swallowing a huge piece of pork whole, but when she had finally finished chewing, she looked at him, clearly puzzled. “I always do.”

* * *

Kevan set his brandy down. “She is something that little girl. $500. At a funeral, no less.”

Tywin snorted. He was amazed Arya hadn’t talked Stafford out of double the sum and his watch to boot.
“It would have been more, but you know how his wife is. Still, he has friends. I expect they’ll be good for more business,” Kevan predicted. He stretched his legs. “What’s going on with Cersei and Jaime? He was sitting in the back at the service and he didn’t go within thirty feet of her once.”

“Good.” Tywin was pleased that his son had shown up with Brienne. If nothing else, at least this was proceeding on course.

Kevan correctly intuited his brother’s tone as a sign he shouldn’t pursue the topic any further. “Where are Myrcella and Tommen?”

“Cersei took them to Tyrion’s. They’ll be back soon.” Try as he might, he could not persuade his daughter to stay here. She was insistent that tomorrow they would all return to Stannis’ house. It was exasperating, but Tywin suspected sooner or later Cersei would need money. She always did. When that happened, he would be able to make her see sense. He glanced at his watch. He doubted it would be long before Cersei and her children returned. She and Tyrion seldom got along for more than a few hours.

“Dorna and I had a chat with Arya and her father. He seems to be coming around.”

Tywin glared at Kevan. “I don’t care.”

“I noticed they came up to speak with you.”

“Yes.”

“What happened? What did you say?”

He didn’t reply.

“His reaction to Arya and Sansa working with us was natural. One can’t blame him for being upset.”

“I don’t.” He blamed Stark for riling up opposition to him, although it was a largely moot point now. Tywin would still wield influence because of his position on the board, but it was likely whoever replaced his son-in-law would resist following his lead the way Robert had. He could still blame Eddard Stark for a host of other factors. He told Kevan about Stark’s interference with the search.

“Tywin, if Ned had given his stamp of approval to Tyrion’s appointment, wouldn’t you still have told Tyrion to sp—to keep an eye out for you?”

“Of course,” Tywin stopped. “Since when do you call him ‘Ned?’”

“Since he asked me to on the night he, his wife, and his daughters came to our home for dinner. The dinner you refused to attend,” Kevan retorted. “He’s not an unintelligent man. He probably assumed you would have Tyrion snooping for you. Can you blame him for not wanting a spy working for him?”

“That isn’t the point.”

His brother shrugged. “You know I’m right, Tywin.”

“Hmph.”

“Tell me you behaved in front of Arya.”
“I was perfectly civil.”

“Have you tried simply discussing this with Tyrion? No, I can see you haven’t. You always make things more complicated than they need to be.” He glanced at his watch. “I should go. Dorna will be waiting for me.” Kevan stood up. “She wouldn’t have wanted this for you, you know, you wandering throughout this monster of a house obsessing about the imagined wrongs done to you by a library director.”

For a moment, Tywin thought his brother meant Dorna.

“I think she would have wanted you to—”

“—Do not presume to tell me what—”

“—You’re still a good looking man. Granted you have considerably less hair, but I imagine there would be any number of eligible women interested in a little companionship.”

Tywin decided to ignore the slight to his thinning locks and the reference to Joanna. “I’m sixty-six. I won’t be a laughing stock like Father.”

“I’m not suggesting you find yourself a twenty-year-old trophy wife. What about someone like Olenna Tyrell?”

Tywin glared at his brother. Other than Genna, Kevan was the one person left from whom he tolerated this sort of directness, but there were limits.

“Fine, fine, I’m leaving.”

He saw Kevan out and he returned to the family room. Earlier this morning, his grandchildren had removed their homework, books, and games from the room. According to Lorch, they’d packed everything. He suspected they were counting the minutes until they could return to Stannis although only the gods knew why.

He turned on the television, expecting to have to change the channel. Myrcella and Tommen evidently had learned their lesson, however, so he was spared the sight of the program with the irritating psychic detective they persisted in watching. Tywin sat through the news and another hour of market analysis. The house was too quiet. Neither Myrcella nor Tommen were particularly noisy children, but in the week and a half they’d stayed here, he’d grown accustomed to their presence. It was strange without them. It even felt odd not having Cersei sitting on the sofa alternately pouting or raging about the mess her life had become. The momentary peace he felt at having his house to himself for a few hours was vanishing.

* * *

Brienne kept her eye on Jaime. He had gotten a call in the middle of dessert. She could see him outside the restaurant pacing back and forth while he spoke to Tyrion.

“So are you two dating?” Renly wanted to know.

“No. We’re just friends.”

“Tywin Lannister seemed determined for you to meet as many of his relatives as possible,” Loras pointed out. “I doubt he’d bother if you and Jaime were just friends.”

Brienne knew she was inexperienced in the ways of dating, but she was reasonably certain that in
order to be dating someone, at least one of the parties had to ask the other party out. She said as much now.

“He hasn’t asked you out?”

“No, and I haven’t asked him out either.”

The two men looked at each other.

“He’s acting like you’re dating. His father seems to think you’re dating. Cersei hates you. You both act like you’re dating.” Renly touched her hand. “Are you sure you didn’t miss something? Like that time in uni, when Hyle—”

“No.”

Loras peered out the window now. “Is he actually signing autographs?”

Brienne’s mouth dropped a little as she noticed what looked like several Crownlands students clustering around Jaime. Jaime seemed surprised too. “Is it because he’s a Lannister maybe?”

“I’m a Tyrell and the only time I’ve ever been asked for an autograph is when someone wants me to sign a check.”

“Do you want to be dating Jaime Lannister?”

Brienne felt the blood rushing to her cheeks.

“You do like him,” Renly said triumphantly. “Admit it.”

She started to say something and stopped.

“Loras, why don’t you find out what’s going on out there? Make a very thorough investigation,” Renly ordered. “Brienne and I need to talk.”

“You sound like Stannis.” Loras gave an exaggerated sigh, but he went out to join Jaime Lannister.

Renly glanced over his shoulder. “It looks like he’s just as popular as Jaime. Yes or no?”

She knew he wasn’t referring to the autograph seeker who seemed excited to see Loras too. “Fine, yes. I do like him. A lot actually.”

“But?”

Brienne stared down at her dessert. “It’s so complicated, Renly,” she said miserably. “He’s just getting out of a really strange relationship. You’re the one who told me to avoid rebounds. He’s very needy and I don’t think he knows what he wants. I don’t think he sees me like that.”

“Are you sure?”

“No,” she admitted. She told Renly about what Davos had said to her.

“Then it’s not a rebound.”

Brienne shook her head. “And if he was wrong or if I’m wrong? I don’t want to put myself out there like that. It hurts too much.”
Renly started to say something, but was cut off by the return of Loras and Jaime.

“Apparently,” Jaime said in a bemused voice, “I have amazing comic timing.”

“Is that what it was?” Loras responded. He rubbed his hands together trying to warm them from the cold. “I thought you were just clumsy.”

* * *

Cersei unlocked the front door with the key Stannis had given her. The children would enjoy themselves at Tyrion’s. They needed some fun, poor things. For some reason, they were actually sad about Robert. He never paid much attention to them, not that she’d ever encouraged him to do so. They still loved him despite it.

She kicked off her heels, and then knowing Stannis, she picked them up. He didn’t like mess in his house. It had been torture dressing up like this for the past week after wearing Asha’s t-shirts and jeans for so long. Once the business with the police was cleared up, there had been visits to the bank, to the lawyers, to the University, to the funeral director, then the wakes, and then lastly the services. But finally it was all over.

Cersei rather hoped that Robert’s second last conquest managed to escape the dragnet the authorities had set up. She didn’t blame the girl, couldn’t blame her really. She’d only done what Cersei had dreamed about for years. Hopefully, the girl would be in the Free Cities by now.

It felt like coming home as she stood in the tiled foyer. Staying with Father had been agony. She’d consented to it only after Stannis, Davos, and Asha had all concluded it was wisest for the immediate future. A few days after the funeral, they would regroup and help her figure out the best course of action. What she needed to do, they all agreed, was to determine what she wanted to do long-term. They would help her with the mechanics, but only she could tell them what it was she wanted.

Still holding her shoes in her hand, she walked through the drawing room in her stocking feet. Cersei could hear voices coming from the back of the house. They would be in the little parlor that backed out onto the garden and the river.

It was Davos who noticed her first. “Mrs. Baratheon,” he said in a strangled voice as he pulled away from Stannis.

“Cersei.” He was quite muscular, Cersei noticed. Stannis was less so, but he wasn’t bad. All these years she had never realized what lay hidden beneath those boring button down shirts and khaki trousers of his. Robert had been disgustingly fat. Stannis was not.

Stannis turned bright red.

She’d never known before how far down a blush could start.

“We weren’t expecting you.” He tried to move Asha off of his lap.

Only Asha seemed unconcerned. “Oh, hi.” She had on an unexpectedly pretty black lace bra. The straps were pushed down around her shoulders.

“Can I join you?”

“May I,” Stannis corrected weakly.
Cersei dropped her shoes. “May I join you?”

“Fine by me,” Asha said amiably.

Davos looked at Stannis, who appeared to be a little overwhelmed.

Cersei reached back and pulled out the pins holding her hair in its neat, elegant knot. She shook her head and let her golden tresses fall down. She began unbuttoning her blouse.

“Er, why don’t you let us help you with that?” Davos suggested. He seemed to be having trouble breathing.

She was happy to comply. She dropped to her knees.

“Are you certain this is what you want?” Stannis managed.

“You keep saying I need to decide what I want. What I want,” Cersei told him as she guided his hand to her breast, “is to get fucked. I’ll leave the mechanics up to you.”

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Sansa didn’t need her cousin tugging on the sheet to know that someone was in Olenna’s house. She didn’t sleep well in unfamiliar places under the best of circumstances. With Robin thrashing around on the floor of the guest room in Garlan Tyrell’s old sleeping bag and her nerves being at an all-time high from being followed by Tip-In, her senses were on alert.

“Is it the bad man?”

“Shhh, go back to sleep.” She threw back the covers. “I’m going to go see what’s out there.”

“No, stay here,” he whined.

“Robin, I told you. He couldn’t possibly know we’re here. We’re perfectly safe.” Sansa didn’t feel perfectly safe. She could hear someone in the front hall. It sounded like someone had tripped or dropped something. They should have gone back with Margaery. Loras and his boyfriend would be there in case something happened. But no, she had let herself be persuaded by Olenna. No one could reach her parents. It would be safer if they stayed with her, Olenna said.

The Tyrells had been so organized. By the time she’d pulled into Margaery’s brother’s driveway with Tip-In still methodically following her, she had no idea what to expect. What she got was Garlan and Leonette Tyrell, who she had never met, greeting them like honored and expected guests. It wasn’t until they were safely inside that they dropped the charade. Meanwhile Margaery’s mother, Alerie had used her phone to make a report to the police of a suspicious car, with an accurate description of Tip-In. Although Dr. Bolton had driven away, apparently fooled by Sansa arriving at an unexpected destination, they soon learned the police had indeed pulled him over as he’d been approaching the highway entrance. It was all done with military precision and Olenna Tyrell masterminded every step of it.

Did she try and wake Olenna or should she try and get to the phone? Olenna’s bedroom was upstairs somewhere and the only way to get to it would put her out in the living room with the intruder. No, she needed to call the police. Her phone’s battery was dead. It had been low before and then the long call with Margaery had sucked it dry, but there was a phone in the kitchen.

“Sansa,” he whispered.
“Stay here. Nobody is going to hurt you.” She would get to the kitchen and she would call the cops. Then tomorrow she was going to have it out with both her parents about their creepy, weird colleagues and pervy family friends. “Robin, listen to me. Nobody is going to hurt either of us. I am so done with this shit.”

“You said a bad word.” He was shocked but he got back into his sleeping bag.

“Yeah, I did.” Sansa stepped onto the floor. She could hear whoever it was rattling around out there. She didn’t have time to find her clothes. She felt distinctly vulnerable just wearing Olenna’s boyfriend’s pajama tops, but really what protection was a pair of jeans going to afford her? The guest room was on a back corridor. She could either go through the living room, where the noises were coming from, or she could go down the hallway past the bathroom and down to the kitchen. The latter seemed like the best course of action.

She padded down the hallway and pushed open the kitchen door, trying to remember where the phone was. Counter, sink, counter, wall, phone, yes, she told herself. That’s how it went. She heard the floorboards creak and froze. A moment passed. She took another step. The floorboards creaked again. Knife block, she thought. There was a knife block. Silently she felt for it and wrapped her hand around one of the knife handles. She waited in the inky blackness, the only light coming from the luminous numbers on the various appliance clocks. After what seemed like an eternity, she took another step forward.

The lights flicked on.

Sansa lunged forward with the knife and screamed.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, another cliffhanger. I'm evil; what can I say?

The amazing deisegal has created an illustration for this chapter! Original link is here.
Eats, Shoots & Leaves

Chapter Summary

Sansa makes several awkward and unpleasant discoveries. Jaime makes pancakes and Brienne asks him an important question. Tyrion delivers a mash note to Stannis and learns things he would rather not have known. Sansa is mad as hell and is not going to take it anymore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Tywin Lannister swerved just in time to avoid the knife.

“Mr. Lannister?” Sansa’s arm dropped. “Oh, my gods, you scared me.”

He seemed as shocked as she was.

“What in the seven hells is going on here?”

They both turned around to see Olenna Tyrell standing in the passageway between the dining room and the kitchen.

“I heard noises. I thought it was Tip-In.” Somewhere in the back of her mind, Sansa registered that her hostess was wearing a blue peignoir set.

“Were you going to slice him to death?”

She looked down her hand. She had grabbed a bread knife. “Shit. I can’t even stab someone properly.”

“If you like I will stand here while you select the proper implement,” Mr. Lannister commented acidly. “Why is she here?” he demanded of Olenna. “Wearing my pajamas no less?”

“Why are you here and what do you mean wearing your—” Sansa looked down at the green silk pajama tops she had on. They were huge on her. Sansa took in the bottle of wine he had evidently set down on the kitchen table and the keys he had in his other hand. The librarians at work were always speculating about Olenna’s gentleman friend. Never had they mentioned Tywin Lannister as a possibility. “Mr. Lannister is your boyfriend?”

“I wasn’t expecting you,” Olenna explained to Mr. Lannister.

“That is woefully apparent. Do you realize what you’ve done? We’re going to be the laughingstock of the city.”

Olenna took umbrage at this prophecy. “Why are you so worried about what people think of us? We’re both consenting adults. We are both unattached. No one will blink an eye if they find out we’re a couple.”
“Well, we’ll certainly find out which of us is correct shortly.” He glared at Sansa.

“Is that the bad man?”

They all whirled around.

Sansa set the knife down on the table. She then approached her cousin and knelt down. “No, Robin. This is a . . . a friend of Mrs. Tyrell’s. He’s going to stay here and uh protect us from the bad man.”

“Oh, okay.”

Tywin glared at Olenna, whose irritation seemed to be turning to amusement.

“But you have to promise me that you won’t tell anyone he was here, okay? Promise me, Robin.”

The child thought about it, nodded, spit into his hand, and offered it to her.

Great, Sansa thought, just what she needed, but she did the same and shook it so as to seal the deal. “Now go back to sleep. He won’t let anything happen to us.”

“Yeah, he looks mean,” Robin opined in an overly loud whisper.

Olenna practically sniggered.

Sansa privately agreed with her cousin, but right now mean was what they needed.

They waited till he trundled back to his sleeping bag.

“I am waiting for an explanation,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Sansa, I think you had better go to bed as well,” Olenna told her. “I’ll handle things.”

Sansa nodded. This was none of her business.

“And dear? I would appreciate it if you could also be discreet about our relationship. People might talk and then poor Mr. Lannister might have a stroke.”

Mr. Lannister looked like he might have one right now.

“I’m not a gossip,” Sansa said a little indignantly, but she did as her hostess requested. She stepped over Robin and got into bed. It was still hard to sleep. She could hear raised voices for a time.

The light seeping through under the closed bedroom door went out. Sansa relaxed a little. She was just drifting off when she began to hear rhythmic thudding sounds from upstairs. “Shit,” she whispered.

“You said a bad word again.” Robin yawned.

“I’m a grown-up. I can say bad words if I want.” Above them the sounds grew louder. They were both old, she thought. More importantly he was old. How long could he possibly last?

“They’re just moving furniture.”

“What?” Even for weird little Robin, this was an exceptionally strange statement.

“It sounds like that at home sometimes,” he explained. “My real home. Uncle Petyr said he’s just
moving furniture with Mummy and I shouldn't pay any attention.”

Mr. Lannister and Olenna moved the furniture for quite some time before Sansa finally fell asleep.

* * *

“Pancakes always make everything better,” Jaime pronounced.

Looking around at the chaos Jaime has caused in his father’s kitchen, Brienne was pretty sure Lorch did not agree. On the other hand, Myrcella and Tommen seemed happy enough and Brienne had to admit, the pancakes were very good.

“That’ll be all, Lorch.”

Lorch sourly went off to do whatever butlers did. Brienne hoped he wasn’t going to the family room anytime soon. She couldn’t imagine he would be thrilled to deal with the popcorn bits that were all over the carpet or all the soda bottles. She had wanted to clean up, but they had been so tired. It had been such a long day. After their dinner with Renly and Loras, Jaime told her they had to go to Tyrion’s and pick up Myrcella and Tommen. Cersei had left her children with him and then had not returned; Tyrion had plans. Jaime assumed Brienne would have no problem with her spending the night at his father’s house with his children, who didn’t know they were his children, who were still upset about the death of the man they thought was their father. It made her head hurt just thinking about it.

At least this time, she’d gotten to sleep in a bonafide guest room with its own bathroom, but she would be happy when she could return to her own apartment.

“Are we going back to Uncle Stannis’ after breakfast?” Tommen wanted to know as he happily showered his stack of pancakes with maple syrup.

“We’re all packed.” Myrcella was only slightly less generous with the syrup. “Can you and your . . .” She smiled shyly at Brienne.

“—Girlfriend. Brienne’s my girlfriend.”

Brienne started coughing violently.

“Careful, wench. I know they’re good, but small bites.” He slapped her on the back several times.

She hadn’t missed anything. She’d gone over and over all of their encounters and phone calls. She’d checked her chat history.

“Can you and your girlfriend take us there after breakfast?”

“Uh, no sweetling. Now that Lorch is back from his day off, you and Tommen will stay here till your grandfather or your mother gets here.”

He’d never dated anyone. It was startling for Brienne to realize she had more experience in this area than he did, but surely he’d noticed how this worked by observing other people or from watching movies or television shows.

The kids devoured their breakfast and left them.

“Jaime?”

“Do you want more? There’s plenty of batter. I could make you one with your initial.”
“When did you ask me to be your girlfriend?”

* * *

Tyrion found his sister having breakfast with Stannis, Asha, and Davos. He sat down without waiting for an invitation. “Where the hell were you? You said you were going out for a drive and that you’d be back. Do you have any idea what convoluted arrangements I had to make so that Father couldn’t ask questions of me?”

Cersei smiled at him.

He looked more closely at her. She seemed remarkably self-satisfied, calm even. She was wearing the same clothes she’d worn to the funeral, but her hair was down and three of her top buttons on her blouse were undone. He took in the others. They all seemed very serene, even Stannis. Serenity was not an emotion he had ever associated with the man. He fished out a piece of paper and handed it to Stannis.


“Alys is the waitress from the dive bar on River Row. She’s the slender, brown-haired girl who won’t let you drink and discourse on grammar at the same time.”

Stannis stared at the piece of paper.

“She thought you might like to read the book and she expressed a willingness to discuss it with you any time. She gave Brienne that piece of paper with all of her contact information. Brienne forgot about it, but she gave it to me today.”

“Why would she think I would want to read this book?”

“It’s about punctuation. It’s very clever. You would like it, I think.”

“This Alys is the girl who yells at me when I venture to correct anyone? Now she wishes to discuss punctuation with me?”

Tyrion pointed to the piece of paper. “You’ll note she left you three numbers. I suspect that she would like to talk about other things, or maybe do other things.”

Stannis looked at the paper again. The import of what Tyrion was implying didn’t appear to have sunk through.

“Stannis does not have time to waste on a barmaid,” Cersei said sharply. She snatched the paper out of his hands and tore it in half.

“I wanted to read that book, woman.”

She looked at the pieces and handed him one half of the paper. The other she ripped into smaller bits.

Tyrion stared at his sister. She was jealous; there was no question about it. She was jealous of a girl she’d never seen and who Stannis probably wouldn’t be able to pick out of a lineup. He glanced at the others again. Asha was sitting exceptionally close to Cersei. Both Cersei and Davos had what appeared to be love bites on their respective necks. “Seven bloody hells,” he exclaimed. “That’s what you were doing last night?”
Davos seemed mildly embarrassed. Asha kept on doing her crossword. Stannis stared straight ahead and Cersei merely smirked.

He opened his mouth and shut it. They were all consenting adults. If they wanted to . . . no, he wasn’t even going to think it. He thought poor Alys Karstark was better off not being sucked into this demented sexual vortex. If Stannis was foolish enough to become romantically involved with Cersei, it was his business. “Jaime and Brienne took the kids back to Father’s. I’m not talking to him so you’ll have to get there on your own steam.”

The moment he mentioned Brienne’s name in context with Jaime, Cersei’s green eyes narrowed.

“You can’t have them all, dear sister.”

Again, he got the same reactions from the other three. Maybe she had truly found a place where she belonged.

“Did he mention me? Did he say anything?”

Tyrion shook his head. If Jaime was talking about Cersei, he wasn’t doing it with him.

“Was Father mad that I didn’t return them myself?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there,” Tyrion answered. “I expect he’ll call you or want you to come by. You know how he gets when we don’t do exactly as he commands. I hope to hell you have a scarf, though.”

“Why?”

He pointed to the hickey on her neck. “If you don’t, he’s going to express a lot more curiosity about your activities last night than I will.”

* * *

Sansa stomped into her parents’ house with Robin and Olenna in tow. Her parents were sitting at the kitchen table. She knew this was their weekend morning ritual and that she was about to shatter it into a million pieces. She couldn’t bring herself to care.

Her mother saw them first. Her bright smile faded as she saw Olenna. “Mrs. Tyrell,” she said by way of greeting. “It was good of you to drive them back. You could have called; Ned and I would have been happy to pick Robin up from Sansa and Margaery’s.”

“What good would calling have done?” Sansa demanded.

“Will the bad man get us here?” Robin inquired. “Why can’t the mean man stay here with us?” He clutched Sansa’s hand.

“He doesn’t forget anything, does he?” Olenna muttered.

Sansa thought their being stalked by a dead-eyed creep qualified as a pretty memorable ordeal. “Go upstairs, Robin. You need to take your meds, and change your clothes. Then go find Bran and Rickon and stay with them, okay?”

“But the bad man—”

“If the bad man comes anywhere near us today, I will personally rip his head from his body.” She spoke in a flat voice and she meant every word of it. She could feel everyone’s eyes on her. “That
goes for pervy Uncle Petyr as well.”

Robin looked awed.

“Upstairs, now.”

He complied.

“Sansa,” her father began uneasily. “What’s this about ‘the bad man,’ sweetling?”

“Do not call me ‘sweetling,’ ever again!”

“Sansa,” Olenna said quietly, “I understand you’re upset, but your father isn’t—”

“My father wasn’t anywhere near his fucking phone all yesterday or all last night.”

Her mother drew in a sharp breath. “Sansa! We do not use that word in this house.”

Sansa was about to tell her mother what she could do with her rules when Olenna forestalled her.

“Your daughter and your nephew have been through quite the trial.” Without being invited, Olenna took a seat.

As Olenna detailed the events of yesterday, Sansa got mugs for the both of them and poured out coffee. She pulled out a chair. She had never been so angry in all of her life. Perhaps it had something to do with exhaustion or perhaps it was from hearing Olenna and Mr. Lannister having sex again in the early morning hours. It may even have been from having to then face Mr. Lannister across Olenna’s dainty dining room table over croissants and coffee in delicate china cups. But mostly, she thought it was the fact that her parents had not answered their fucking phones all fucking afternoon and fucking night long. They hadn’t even bothered to wonder about Robin. Well, fuck them both.

Sansa never said that word. She had seldom thought it before either, but it felt profoundly satisfying to say it now. She wasn’t sorry, Sansa thought bitterly. She should be able to go through her days and nights without having to worry about her parents’ creepy colleagues stalking her. After this, she would buy pepper spray and make Arya show her some self-defense moves. Then Margaery and she were going to get an alarm system for the apartment.

“Are you sure he was following you?” her mother asked in a horrified voice. “Maybe he was just—”

“My grandson and his wife live in Rosby. Their home is on a cul-de-sac. It seems unlikely that Roose Bolton followed her every move and arrived at the same destination purely by coincidence.”

“I know he’s a problem patron, but he’s a very sound scholar. His book on Bran the Builder is the standard text on the subject. I can’t believe—”

“What the fuck is wrong with the both of you?” Sansa shrieked.

“Sansa, I know you’re upset, but I don’t want you using that word in—”

“FUCK, FUCK, FUCK! I’m twenty-one-fucking-years-old and I will use whatever fucking words I fucking want!” Even as she yelled, she could see the wide-eyed heads of Bran, Rickon, and Robin peering down the back staircase.

Olenna stirred a teaspoon of sugar into her coffee seemingly unperturbed by the outburst.
“BOYS, UPSTAIRS NOW!” her father roared. “All of you. Go do homework or watch TV, but get off that staircase NOW. Young lady, I don’t care how old you are! You are our daughter and you do not use language like that in our house!”

Sansa mumbled an apology.

“Sweet—Sansa, I know you’re upset,” her mother soothed. “It’s just we’ve known Roose Bolton for years. He is a bit . . . odd, I know, well, actually he is more than a bit odd. I’ve never really liked him, but—”

Sansa felt the resentment growing like a dull ache again. She half listened as her mother talked about stress making people anxious. She had so many demands on her time, Mum thought, what with her classes, her work with Arya, her job, and her social life. Maybe, she suggested it was making her imagine things. She talked about how Petyr Baelish had been horrorstruck that he had caused Sansa so much anguish, that it was never his intent, that he would never dream of forcing his attentions on a young girl. Sansa wanted to vomit. Looking at Olenna, she thought the older woman shared the sentiment.

“Petyr the Perv was sleeping with Aunt Lysa, you know,” Sansa said bluntly. “Robin told me.”

“What?” her parents said at the same time.

“I did not imagine his hands massaging my shoulders. I told him to leave me alone and he won’t stop. He keeps saying things like ‘you’re a woman grown’ and ‘I know you’re not comfortable in your body yet, but I want to help you’.” She practically gagged.

Olenna confirmed this. “He follows your daughter around like a dog in heat.”

Ned nodded miserably. “Cat, I know he’s your childhood friend, but her supervisor says the same thing. I can’t speak to Roose, but Petyr’s behavior has been beyond the pale. He’s probably trying to save his job by coming to you.”

“He was at the coffee house yesterday too,” Sansa added, aware that she had regained some lost ground. “He was there to meet Tip-In—Dr. Bolton—and I think they were talking about you. That has to be why he was following me home.”

“What precisely did he say?” her father asked.

“Something about the books,” Sansa said slowly. “Littlefinger told Tip-In, uh Dr. Bolton that he would be happy to get him whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. He must be sneaking them out one of the side doors so the Tattle Tape doesn’t go off.” She thought a bit. “Then they said something about how with Uncle Robert being dead it would be easier to remove someone. I thought he meant you, because Dr. Bolton said he didn’t want that person back in his department.” She stared into her coffee cup. “I thought I covered pretty well when Dr. Bolton spotted me after. I acted like I hadn’t heard them at all.”

Olenna shrugged. “I don’t think Roose Bolton is the most normal of men. It’s entirely possible he was following you for nefarious purposes that have nothing to do with Petyr. Neither of them is trustworthy.”

Her parents looked at each other.

“His car was right behind me the whole way from the coffee house to Margaery’s brother’s,” Sansa said. “I didn’t imagine that. Every time I looked in the rearview mirror, I could see him staring straight at me.”
“As I said, it seems highly unlikely that he would go all the way out there, taking the exact same route as Sansa.”

Again, she saw them silently communicating with each other. Her parents did that sometimes. She thought it must come from having been married for so many years.

“We believe you, honey.”

“I don’t want to work in Circulation anymore,” Sansa said abruptly.

“I think that’s wise,” Olenna concurred. “Stannis was saying he wanted a student to help them with the backlog. If you made it crystal clear to Petyr he’s not to go near her, it should be safe. Also, if you haven’t already done so, a formal conversation with him about his behavior seems called for. It should be done with a witness.”

Her father nodded. “We’re having someone from human resources come in to do a sexual harassment awareness training program. I have someone coming to meet with Sansa as well. I’ll call Shae and Stannis.”

“Perhaps you should stay here for a few days. I’ll have Margaery pack up some of your things and I’ll bring them back here,” Olenna suggested.

Sansa shook her head. “No. She said Loras and Renly will be staying at the apartment for a while until this dies down. I’ll be safe.” She knew what Olenna was up to.

Her mother objected. “But Sansa, it’s a two-bedroom apartment. Where will you all stay? You can’t ask Loras and Renly to sleep on the floor or the sofa for more than a night or two.”

Sansa saw the slightest of smirks playing around Olenna’s lips. It was time to call her bluff, she thought. “Margaery and I are a couple. Loras and Renly can sleep in the other bedroom.” Ignoring their startled looks, she got up. “I’m going home to my girlfriend now.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

**Eats, Shoots & Leaves** is an awesome book. Go read it now. Punctuation saves lives.

From the book:

""A panda walks into a cafe. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots in the air.

"Why?" asks the confused waiter, as the panda makes towards the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife annual and tosses it over his shoulder.

"I'm a panda," he says, at the door. "Look it up."

The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation.

Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves." "


Advise and Consent

Chapter Summary

In which Tywin Lannister pays Jaime a visit and lays out a plan to ensure the arrival of the next generation of official Lannister heirs. Ned steps up to the plate.

Also: theories about Scooby Doo!

Chapter Notes

There's about a 3-4 week gap between the past chapter and this one. Assume we are in what would be our December, which would bring us to the beginning of the end of the fall semester.

* * *

Jaime opened his apartment door to see his father standing there.

“Jaime.” Tywin Lannister swept past him into the living room.

“Did we have a meeting? I just emailed Uncle Kevan the latest on the Crakehall project two hours ago.” His father never came to his apartment. If his father wanted to see him, he summoned him peremptorily.

Tywin Lannister looked around the living room critically. “I suppose I should be flattered you took time from your busy television viewing schedule to complete your assigned tasks.”

This, Jaime thought bitterly, was the reason he telecommuted. He could scarcely imagine being on the physical premises of Casterly Rock Enterprises forty hours a week and being subjected to this sort of scrutiny. At least now his father had to make a special trip to chastise him, not that he ever had before. He turned the television off. “It’s 6:30. I started work at 8:00 and I finished at 5:30. I assure you, Father, you got your money’s worth out of me.”

“Hmph.”

Jaime gestured to the sofa.

His father chose instead to sit in the armchair.

It was going to be one of those father-son chats. Wonderful, Jaime thought. His sofa was more comfortable anyhow. Jaime took a seat and waited.

“What are you doing about that girl?”

Jaime blinked. “What girl?”
“Ms Tarth.”

“I thought you liked her.” It would be just like Father to decide suddenly that she wasn’t a suitable girlfriend for him.

“Why do you think I am here?”

“Father, what are you talking about?”

His father gave him a sour look. “I want a progress report.”

“On Brienne?” Jaime sat back, flabbergasted. It was almost too bad she wasn’t here right now. He could use this as evidence that his father was an interfering control freak.

“You are no longer a young man. You cannot afford the luxury of delay. It’s past time you were wed.”

Jaime rose and went to the kitchen. He took a malbec out of the refrigerator. He was uncorking the bottle when his father joined him there. “I am not having this conversation sober,” he said by way of an apology.

“Well?”

Jaime didn’t reply.

“If she’s still enamored of that fingerless smuggler, I can supply you with ample proof of his criminal dealings.” His father waited before continuing, “Or I can go directly to her with it.”

Sooner or later Father was going to butt heads with Brienne. Jaime thought it would be better for Brienne if he delayed the inevitable as long as possible. “She dumped Davos when she figured out he wasn’t on the up and up, but thanks.”

“Then what is the difficulty? I thought the one saving grace of this debacle with Cersei—”

“—I don’t want to talk about her.”

His father went on as if he had not spoken, “—was that you were finally moving on with your life.”

Jaime considered swigging directly from the bottle, but instead took two jelly glasses from a cupboard.

“You should let that breathe,” Father objected. “And what in the seven hells is this?” He picked up the glass featuring an image of Scooby-Doo.

“I need to do dishes.” Jaime waved to the sink. “You can have the one with Freddy on it if you prefer. He could almost be a Lannister with his blond hair. Although it’s a shade too platinum for us, it’s more of a Targaryen blond. I strongly suspect he’s gay; Tyrion disagrees. He maintains the ascot is merely an affectation of the period and that Freddy and Daphne were getting it on in the Mystery Van.”

His father proceeded to inhale sharply.

Knowing this was the signal that the mighty Tywin Lannister was about to lose his temper, Jaime ran his hand through his hair. “Look, Father. You’re right about the wine. It does need time to breathe. My relationship with Brienne is like the wine. I’m interested in moving forward. She’s interested in moving forward, but we need time.” Brienne seemed to think they needed a lot of
There was a pause while his father considered what he said. “I see. And just how much time will you require?”

“We’re two human beings. It’s not a science.” If he gave way now there would be no end to the interference. What was he thinking? Regardless of whether he gave way now or if he and Brienne married later, there would never be any end to the interference. Father would be there with a time table and a stop watch demanding they produce children of the appropriate gender and requisite number. It would be a repeat of his childhood; there would be endless expectations for Tywin Lannister’s grandchildren.

“I think you will find, Jaime, that if you wait too long, wine turns to vinegar. Time is no longer something of which you have a surfeit.”

Jaime muttered something about Tyrion.

“Your brother is busy chasing after that Lorathi girl of dubious background and as for your wretched sister—”

“—I warn you, Father, if you say one more word about Cersei, I will kick you out of here and I will never speak to you again.”

That earned him a long, thoughtful look. “So that is the sticking point, is it?” His father nearly smiled. “Ms Tarth won’t ‘move forward’ until you move past this mess of your own making. I should have known. She has too much sense to accept you as a suitor right now.”

Jaime supposed he should be grateful that his father’s sudden insight would probably spare Brienne from a visit in which Tywin Lannister would demand she marry his son and breed. Things were complicated enough as it was. Adding Father to the mix would just make it worse.

“It would seem you have some work to do in that department.” His father put the jelly glass back in the cupboard. He glanced around the kitchen. “You might also consider starting to live like an adult. I never thought I would say this, but your brother lives more appropriately than you do. He even has stemware.” He eyed the dishes in the sink. “And a cleaning woman.” He stepped back into the living room.

Jaime set down the Freddy glass and followed after his father. “So I’ll just buy proper wineglasses, get over my incestuous relationship with my sister, the fact that she’s a lying whore, do my dishes, and then you can send out the wedding invitations for Brienne and me?”

“I thought you didn’t want to discuss your sister. The wedding invitations will come from Ms Tarth’s family naturally.” His father opened the bedroom door.

“What are you doing?”

“Have you brought Ms Tarth to this apartment?”

“She’s been here, yes.”

“And she hasn’t run screaming in the other direction. Well, that is to her credit.”

Jaime watched openmouthed as his father inspected the closets and the bathroom as well.

“A larger apartment, or better still, a proper house would seem to be in order.”
“Brienne lives in a place half this size, you know.”

“She makes a fraction of what you do so that’s hardly surprising.” He shut the closet door. “I’ll have Ms Westerling put a realtor in touch with you. I suggest you involve Ms Tarth in the process.”

Father was an unstoppable juggernaut, Jaime thought. Next he would be telling him how many bedrooms and how big the closets should be.

“I’ll leave the details to you.”

“How generous,” Jaime muttered.

His father ignored the sarcasm. “As for the other matter, I suggest you make it a priority. See a therapist if you must, but you will get over it. You will marry that girl and you will give me grandchildren—legitimate Lannister grandchildren.” He collected his overcoat. “I’ll have Ms Westerling give you the names of some qualified doctors as well.”

“You want me to talk about our darkest secret to other people?”

“Considering the number of people who have been told about your disaster of a relationship, it hardly qualifies as a secret anymore. However, you will not widen the circle any more than is absolutely necessary.”

“Brienne knows.”

“And she is still by your side. That should be an indication to you how eminently suited she is to be your wife. I doubt there’s another woman willing to put up with you. Don’t waste time, Jaime.”

And with that Tywin Lannister left.

Jaime poured out a slug of wine into the Freddy jelly glass and drank it down in one gulp. After repeating the process two more times, he phoned Tyrion.

“You don’t sound like yourself,” Tyrion said cautiously.

“Father dropped by.”

There was a long pause.

Jaime dove in and relayed the highlights of the visit. At various points, Tyrion swore, laughed, and commiserated with him.

“I am pleased to know,” Tyrion informed him in a smug voice, “that my wine glasses have Father’s seal of approval.”

“I have wine glasses. I just need to do dishes,” Jaime objected.

“You should have played the Olenna card. My theory about Freddy and Daphne probably only bought you half a minute and just riled him up. Telling him we know all about his relationship with Olenna could have got him out of your apartment.”

He shifted the handset to the other ear. “I’m saving that.”

“For what? For when he drags Brienne bodily down the aisle to marry you?”

“I thought you would be more upset about Shae.”
Tyrion didn’t answer right away. “Shae has moved on. She’s dating a musician. I think he’s a singer or a guitarist.”

“I’m sorry.” They hadn’t discussed Shae at any length, but Jaime had received the impression that Tyrion cared a great deal for her.

“It is what it is. I seem to be dating someone else myself.”

“Seem to be?”

“It’s hard to explain. Remember our little lunch with Father and Olenna when our waitress gave Brienne the note for Stannis?”

Jaime swallowed some more wine. “Yes.”

“I think I’m dating the waitress.”

“I realize I’m half in the bag here, but how can you not know if you’re dating some—” he broke off, remembering what an idiot he had been with Brienne. Still, Tyrion had a lot more experience in these matters than he did.

Tyrion sighed. “Cersei tore up the girl’s note.”

“I don’t want to talk about her,” Jaime said automatically.

“I’m just giving you the context,” Tyrion explained. “Not that I think Stannis would have been interested anyhow. His love life has gotten exponentially complicated. Melisandre is back.”

Jaime started to speak.

“Right, right, I know: you don’t want to talk about she-who-must-not-be-named. Anyhow, this girl, Alys, her name is. She’s a graduate student in mathematics. Her father is a professor in the history department. I went there with Bronn one night after work and started talking to her. She’s given me all her numbers. I’ve given her mine. She seems to be over her infatuation with Stannis—at least I hope she is because I do not have it in me to take up with the ménage à Stannis. Oh! I found out what prompted her interest. Apparently she saw the unedited video where you were all dressed up in medieval clothes; she showed it to me too. I have to admit, Stannis looked pretty good. You on the other hand, your swordplay was very uh . . .”

“Shut up.”

“Anyhow, Alys and I have gone out a few times for dinner: Dornish, Pentoshi, and once Volantene. She cleared an entire plate of honeyed locusts.” He shuddered audibly. “I don’t know where she puts it. She probably weighs 120 pounds soaking wet.”

“Who pays?”

“I do.”

“You’re dating.”

Tyrion laughed. “Brother, I love you dearly, but you know nothing about dating.”

Brienne would certainly agree with Tyrion. Jaime thought. It was very much one step forward, two steps back with her.
“No, it’s more complicated than that. I like her. She reads more than I do.” He sounded slightly awed. “She’s utterly fearless and she’s smart as a whip, but I can’t tell if Alys is interested or not. It’s too bad I’m not speaking to Father. I was thinking about letting her name slip to him. Knowing him, he would just ask her straight out and then I would know.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Jaime warned darkly. “Why don’t you just ask her?”

“Forget about me. Have you warned Brienne yet?”

“I think Father will leave her alone for a while.”

“From the sounds of it, Father has decided that she is to be your bride and mother to his grandchildren. Do you really think he’s going to leave it up to you to make it happen?”

Jaime set down the jelly glass. “He did before.”

“Tell me, has Brienne had the full-blown Tywin Lannister Experience yet? He ordered you to go into therapy. That should give you an indication of how much he wants you two to marry.”

Jaime groaned. “I’ll warn her.” He doubted whether it would do any good; Brienne persisted in liking his father no matter what the evidence was to the contrary.

“You know,” Tyrion said slowly. “I hate to say this, but it sounds like he made some good points. Therapy might not be such a bad idea. Brienne might be more inclined to move things further along if she thinks you’re working out your . . . issues.”

He hadn’t considered that angle, but he shook off the thought. “That’s not the point, Tyrion. I am going to be dealing with Father in every aspect of my married life from now until he dies. And knowing Father, he’ll come back from the grave to keep up what he started.”

“She-who-must-not-be-named and I have the same problem, you know. In case you’ve forgotten, he made me think that the search committee didn’t want me just so he could have me spy on the library staff for him. That’s only the most recent offense. You know about the others.”

Jaime got down on the floor. He lay on his back. “Tyrion, I saw his face when Brienne dropped that little bombshell. He was as shocked as you were.”

“Ha!”

“Brienne told me he came to see her. He wanted to see a copy of the letter she wrote the charging whatever it is. She refused; she said it wasn’t ethical.” He smiled at the memory. That was Brienne for you. “For what it’s worth, I think he was acting in good faith with you.”

“Hmph.”

Jaime almost pointed out that Tyrion sounded like Father, but even in his tipsy state, he knew this observation would not go over well.

“Look, I should go. I’m supposed to take Alys out for dinner. Warn Brienne. You know what Father is like. She should be prepared in case he gets it in his head to try and involve her.”

Jaime wasn’t ready to end the conversation. “How are Tommen and Myrcella?”

“They seem to be thriving,” Tyrion told him. “I’d think between Father and Stannis, they’d be crawling the walls, but they seem happy enough. The gods only know why. Every time I go over
there, the situation is just a little weirder.”

“All right,” Jaime announced. “I think I am drunk enough to ask. What is going on with Stannis and Cersei?”

Tyrion didn’t reply immediately. “I wish I could tell you, but I don’t think they know themselves. At least she’s stopped wearing Asha’s clothes. I thought she seemed happier, but now that Melisandre is back . . . I don’t know. I think the old Cersei is about to emerge with a vengeance.”

* * *

Ned listened grimly as Varys made his report. Increased patrols of campus security had resulted in fewer criminal incidents, although as usual, what remained was migraine-inducing. “We have a repeat what?”

Varys sighed. “We have a serial masturbator. He seems to like the Rare Book Room. He’s been removed three times. I’ve scheduled a meeting with a detective to see if we can have him banned.”

“Not that Slynt idiot, I trust,” Olenna said sharply.

“The man is an incompetent fool,” Stannis agreed.

“No, I have the name here somewhere. He comes highly recommended.”

Six months ago, Ned thought, he would have been horrified. Now he was simply numb.

Next were the reports on Study Room 6. From what Varys was saying, there were hourly-rate motels on the Kingsroad that saw less action.

“What is in Study Room 6?” Ned asked. He had been up there after the first few incidents.

“There’s no electronic or computer equipment, correct?”


Ned thought a moment. “Have the door taken off the hinges.”

“What?”

“The malefactors are using it because it’s out of the way and private. Remove the door.” He saw Stannis nodding with approval. Olenna and Varys seemed struck.

“It can’t hurt,” was Olenna’s comment.

“Has there been any progress about Bolton?” It had taken all his self-control not to confront the man directly. According to what the Rosby police told the Tyrells, Roose Bolton had an excuse. He had obligingly produced the name of a friend who as it turned out lived nearby. He claimed he’d gotten lost. This person had backed up Roose’s story. After another discussion with Sansa and Olenna, Ned was inclined to see this as so much obfuscation, but it left him powerless. This wasn’t medieval Westeros where he could challenge the man in armed combat.

Olenna had put it very simply. “The political fallout from the library director beating the daylights out of the chair of the history department would be catastrophic. Besides are you sure you could win? He strikes me as a man who fights dirty. Leave it alone.”

Varys shrugged. “We sent the letter revoking his borrowing privileges three weeks ago, but there’s been no response.”
Why would he need to respond? Ned thought. He had Baelish stealing the books for him.

“I have quotes about the gates for the employee exits, but they are high, I fear.”

“We’ll have to continue requiring staff to use the front exit.” Ned thought a moment. “What would we need to do to get a regular security presence here at the library? A guard, say, at the entrance?”

Varys considered. “Who would pay the salary of the guard? We certainly don’t have the funds in the personnel budget.”

“Thousands of Crownlands students and faculty use this building regularly. Their safety and well-being is at stake. To whom do I need to make and win that argument?”

Olenna and Varys exchanged glances.

Ned listened as both of them discussed the matter. They seemed to think it was a waste of what little political capital the library had left, but there were ways in which they thought this might be accomplished. To Ned, it all sounded very devious and it was very typical of them. Even when the shortest distance between two points was a straight line, they moved in a pattern that reminded him of an Etch-A-Sketch doodle. Varys knew of one university official with a certain predilection who might be persuaded to support them. Olenna offered to call in a favor with another.

“Yes, yes, that’s all very well,” Stannis said dismissively. “But it won’t be enough.” He turned to Ned. “Arm yourself with numbers: gate counts, number of incidents, times of occurrence. You’ll need a one page précis. They won’t read beyond one page.”

It was a very astute suggestion and it had come from Stannis of all people.

“He’s right,” Olenna said with undisguised astonishment.

“Robert changed from a professor into an administrator,” Stannis said by way of explanation. “They start to think like businessmen rather than academics.”

Varys volunteered to collect the necessary data.

Ned looked at Stannis. It was his turn. He could see Olenna and Varys plastering polite expressions of interest on their faces. Ned wasn’t expecting to be enthralled, but Stannis had made a good case for his being present. He was just as much a department head as much as Olenna.

Stannis made a report for his department. His remarks were brief, cogent, and even interesting.

Ned sat up and he could see Olenna and Varys doing the same. Good, he thought, it would make it easier for them to swallow his plans for restructuring the org chart. He was done letting this library control him. It was time to take control of the library.

* * *
In Stannis Baratheon’s opinion, Sansa made a welcome addition to the Technical Services department. The girl was quiet, polite, and good with details. He and Asha only needed to show her something once for her to pick it up. Aside from the time he was forced to spend regularly keeping Petyr Baelish away from her, he had no complaints with her.

Would that the rest of his life were so ordered.

He was engaged in the preparation necessary for the new discovery product, when he heard Cersei’s voice coming from the workroom.

“Sansa, little dove.”

“Hello, Mrs. Baratheon,” Sansa greeted her in a civil, cool voice only one or two degrees warmer than the one she used with Baelish.

“Aren’t you usually out front, sweetling?”

“They moved me. I work for Stannis and Asha now.”

“Do you?”

Stannis heard the suspicion with which Cersei managed to imbue into two monosyllabic words. He finished up the record upon which he was working, closed out the application, and came out to meet Cersei.

She fixed him with a brilliant smile. “I thought we could have lunch together.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sansa’s surprise and then her open curiosity. Stannis frowned. “I usually eat at my desk.”

Cersei held up a shopping bag. Without waiting for his assent, she swept into his office.

He glanced at Sansa who hurriedly directed her gaze to the computer monitor. He sighed and followed Cersei. He watched as she unpacked containers and set them out on the table. He went and found an extra chair—no easy task—returned with it, and shut the door.

“How long has Sansa Stark been working for you?” She took out a thermos and poured him a glass of lemon water. She opened a bottle of iced tea for herself.
“Three or four weeks.”

“You should have said something. Or Asha.”

Stannis heard the edge in her voice and it perplexed him. “I didn’t think it was important. We have student workers all the time. They come and go.”

“Oh.” After another moment, she asked, “How was your meeting?”

“It went well. I delivered my report exactly as we practiced it.” At her insistence, he cut a significant portion of the content out. He rehearsed his presentation before her several times. He had to admit that she had given him good advice. “They were responsive. Thank you for your assistance.”

She seemed pleased and mollified.

They ate in companionable silence. Every so often, he would look up and see her smiling at him. It was unnerving.

“Where is Asha today?”

“She has meetings till 3:00.”

“And Melisandre?”

“I don’t know.” Stannis carefully speared a piece of tomato with his fork. Melisandre’s return had added a layer of complexity onto an already intricate situation. Despite her confidence, the job at the Night’s Watch had gone to another candidate. He had been sorry for her, but at the same time he had been slightly relieved. She would return to him. They would continue on as they had before.

Melisandre finally made it very clear. Since she no longer believed he was Azor Ahai, they were done. She would find another way to return to the North.

Cersei clearly didn’t believe him. “How can you not know?”

Stannis found Cersei’s recent antipathy toward Melisandre surprising. From the moment she had appeared on his doorstep until very recently, she had been determined to speak to Melisandre. Now she didn’t want to be within ten feet of her. It had begun upon her return from the Wall and it had only increased. “She is not in my department.”

“The staff of the library isn’t large.”

He set down his plate of food and swiveled his chair around so that it faced his monitor. He brought up the desk schedule. “This is the best I can do until Olenna comes back.” He glanced at her. Cersei was tearing into an orange as if it personally offended her. “Come here.” She had a look on her face that he hadn’t seen since she’d been with Robert. “Woman, you asked and I’ve got your answer. Now come here, damn you.”

Cersei wiped her fingers on a napkin and obeyed.

“This is the desk schedule.” He gestured to the block for the evening. “Melisandre is staffing it tonight.”

“But where is she now?”

“How should I know? I told you; she doesn’t work for me. She could be teaching, in her office, at
lunch herself, or in a meeting. She won’t share her calendar with anyone but Stark, and that’s only because he insisted. He’s off somewhere for the afternoon or you could ask him. Olenna won’t be back until 2:00.”

“But you know where they are.”

Stannis stared at her. “The upper management meeting was this morning. Stark mentioned he would be away from the library for the afternoon. I have an appointment with Olenna later today to discuss instruction. When we scheduled it, she was going to be out of the library at meetings until 2:00.” He brought up the staff directory. “There is the phone.” He tapped to the entry for Melisandre. “That is her phone number. Call her if you want.”

Cersei instead sat down. She returned to savagely ripping apart her orange.

It occurred to Stannis that there might be something more here than the whereabouts of Melisandre. Was she upset about Asha or Davos? No, she seemed to like both of them equally. When Davos begged off the other evening due to some prior commitment, Cersei had been disappointed. It could be Asha he supposed, but no, every time he turned a corner in the house, there they were sitting and talking.

“Robert used to have an answer for everything too,” she said. Her half smile failed to sweeten the bitterness in her words.

“I am not Robert.” Stannis wiped his hands and carefully scraped the remaining bits of food from his plate into the section of his wastepaper basket reserved for non-recyclable materials. “I do not lie.”

“Asha told me what went on in here—”

Stannis turned his eyes back on her. “That is over. She’s moved on to someone else. She’s trying to find another job in the North.”

“Then you have been talking to her.” The notes in her voice were half triumphant and half miserable.

“Melisandre has said very little to me. What I just told you came from Selyse.” He could see the questions and speculation forming in Cersei’s eyes.

“You never want to talk about Selyse.”

“I have known you over twenty years and you never expressed the slightest interest in her or me for that matter.”

Cersei put her plate on the table. “That was before. We’re together now.”

He blinked, but he supposed this wasn’t entirely inaccurate.

“We are together now, aren’t we?”

He sighed. “What do you want to know?”

“Why Selyse in the first place?”

Stannis took a sip of his water. “It was never a grand passion. We met when we were in our senior year at Stormlands. We liked similar things. We seemed to have the same goals. I was never in
love with her, but I loved her. It seemed logical to marry and it was fine at first.”

“What happened?”

“She started to suffer miscarriages.”

Cersei’s eyes widened. “You never told us.”

“She didn’t like to talk about them and neither you nor Robert ever seemed to be very interested in us.” It wasn’t a complaint; by the time he was grown, Stannis realized that although they were brothers, they had little in common, let alone love. “She believed the doctor about the first—that it was one of those things. By the third, she was convinced she was being punished by the gods. She practically lived in the sept.”

“But you had Shireen.”

“Yes, and I thought that would be the end of it. Selyse was in the midst of pursuing her doctorate. The delivery nearly killed her and one child was enough for me. We had our hands full with the baby. I was in library school at the time. The program at Winterfell was not online then, so I would drive up, stay during the week, and come home on weekends. That was during the Short Winter, and a storm kept me up there. I called her and she assured me everything was fine. By the time I got back, Shireen was battling Greyscale. Selyse thought that was a punishment by the gods too and that medical treatment would be an insult to them. One or two more days and Shireen would have been scarred for life.”

Cersei didn’t seem to know what to say.

“She had two more miscarriages before I was able to persuade her we needed to stop trying. Throughout it all, she sought spiritual enlightenment. She began with different sects of the Faith, and then she started worshipping other gods.” He was already an atheist well before then, but the whole experience left Shireen a confirmed agnostic.

“When did you and Melisandre become involved?”

Stannis wasn’t sure how much Cersei knew. “Melisandre is the religious studies bibliographer. I never paid much attention to her. She met Selyse as part of her work and before I knew it, Selyse embraced R'hllor as the new one true god. After that, Melisandre was at the house constantly.”

“And then you took up with her.”

“No, she took up with Selyse.”

Cersei’s jaw dropped open.

He didn’t like to think about it. He had long since ceased to love Selyse, but he had made vows and he meant to honor them. To come home on a regular basis and see them together was painful. He had assumed Cersei knew about Selyse and Melisandre; everyone else seemed fully apprised. “One night, the staff was going out drinking and they invited me to join them. Normally, I never accepted. I did that time. I drank a great deal and I ended up at Asha’s apartment.” He finished his water. “Asha told me the next morning not to worry about it. She had no expectations of anything. There were no strings, she said. She means what she says, you know. She is very honest with me—with us.”

“I know,” Cersei agreed. “I’m not used to her openness, but somehow I believe her.”
He was nearly at the end now. “Asha and I began sleeping together on occasion. Selyse continued with Melisandre.” He put the cup back on the table. “Melisandre thinks she experiences visions. She said she saw me in the flames.”

“Is this about you being the reincarnation of a god? Asha told me.”

“He’s not a god. He is the one who defeated the Others.”

“And you believed this?”

“Of course not,” he scoffed. “It was . . . I never knew what Selyse would do. She usually ignored Shireen, but there were times when that would change. If she thought that the god or gods of the month wanted Shireen to suffer . . .” Even now, he didn’t like Shireen to spend too much time with her. “Then Melisandre began making advances to me.” He hesitated. “She is a very beautiful woman. I wasn’t used to being approached in such a way.”

Cersei absorbed all of this.

“There’s not much more to tell. Selyse came home one day and announced she wanted a divorce so she could devote herself to R’hllor fully. I tried to confess my affairs and she told me as Azor Ahai reborn, it was my right to do as I liked.” He made a face.

“Why did you stay with Melisandre?”

“I suppose I’m not much different than Robert after all.”

“I was wrong. You are nothing like Robert. Robert’s mid-life crisis began when he was fifteen and didn’t end until his latest conquest shot him.” She looked at him expectantly, waiting for a better answer.

Stannis considered his next words. “I told you. She is beautiful and exotic. When she learned I was worried about Shireen, she told Selyse that R’hllor didn’t want her harmed. Somehow it was easier too with Asha. We got along better even as colleagues.” He could see this answer was not sitting well with Cersei. “Robert always did as he pleased, just as Renly does now. I’ve always done my duty even when it pained me. No one’s ever thanked me for it. She treated me like a king. It was intoxicating.”

“Do you still find her intoxicating?” She said the last word with a sneer.

Stannis found this frustrating. Cersei swore up and down she was done with lies in her life. She said that she wanted total honesty except that she clearly didn’t.

“And if Melisandre decides that she was right after all and that you are the reincar—” She didn’t finish. “Who’s out there?”

They could hear the loud murmur of voices from the workroom. One of them was clearly male.

Stannis stood. Baelish. No matter how many times he was told to stay away from Stark’s daughter, he returned. He threw open the door intent on removing the acquisitions librarian, bodily if necessary only to see Tyrion chatting with Sansa. “Lannister.”

“Baratheon.”

“What?”
“I wanted you to hear how ridiculous it sounds. We’re colleagues. You could just call me Tyrion, you know.”

Stannis caught Sansa trying to hide a smile. “What are you doing here?”

“We have an appointment.”

Stannis checked his watch. “I’m in here with your sister. Come and join us.”

Tyrion turned red and began to back away toward the door.

“There is plenty of food,” Stannis informed him.

“Oh.” Tyrion followed him cautiously into the office. His face cleared as he saw the containers on the table. “Oh, you really are having lunch.”

“Of course, we’re having lunch. Are there any extra plates?” Stannis demanded of Cersei, who seemed even more displeased at the inclusion of her brother. “I’ll get another chair.”

“From where? Asha practically has hers chained to the floor. Don’t worry about it, call me when you’re done and we can talk then.”

Cersei got up. “That won’t be necessary.” She packed up the containers neatly into the shopping bag. To Stannis, she hissed, “This isn’t finished,” as she swept out of the room.

Stannis stared after her. “I do not understand that woman.”

“What happened?”

Stannis debated.

“I do not want the details of your uh, pairings. Just tell me what happened in broad strokes.”

He obliged and related the barest highlights of the conversation to his colleague.

“Oh, that’s easy. She’s jealous.”

Stannis supposed that might explain it. “How does Stark’s daughter figure into this? Cersei questioned me about her too.”

“I could almost feel sorry for you,” Tyrion commented after a minute. “My sister . . . no, this is none of my business and I don’t want to make it my business. All I’ll say is that you should deal with her jealousy sooner rather than later. Cersei doesn’t just sulk. She tends to act on her emotions.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

The title for this chapter comes from a movie with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Although they never call Hepburn a librarian, that’s exactly what she is. It’s a movie from the 1950s, but it’s surprisingly relevant even today. Plus the clothes are fabulous.
Target Demographic

Chapter Summary

Jaime takes Brienne to look at real estate and reveals his intentions. Arya, her partners, and her advisers have another meeting in the library. Stannis takes her to task for his newfound fame.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

* * *

It was a beautiful house, Brienne thought, but it wasn’t Jaime’s style at all. This house was the sort that was meant to belong to some power couple committed to raising a lot of children or having a lot of regular overnight guests. They were on the fifth and final bedroom, when she caught him looking at her. Behind the realtor’s back, he mouthed “What do you think?” She shrugged. It wasn’t her decision and not for the first time, she wondered why he was dragging her on these house hunting visits. When Myranda bought her bungalow, she’d asked Brienne to go to the one she was almost sure was the house for her, but it was only the one time. Jaime kept taking her to house after house.

“This will get snapped up very quickly,” the realtor told Jaime very intensely. “If you’re interested, you’ll need to put in an offer right away. I’ll let you and your fiancée talk it over.”

“We’re not en—” she broke off. Jaime was shaking his head violently at her. “Great, thank you.”

The realtor went downstairs to give them time to confer.

“You have got to set her straight,” Brienne told him. “She keeps talking to me earnestly about school systems and nearby playgrounds.”

He ignored this. “What do you think?”

“It’s what you think that matters,” she pointed out. “You’re the one who’s going to live here.”

“I hate it too.” He was out of the room and telling the realtor no, before she could say anything.

They followed the realtor’s car to the next home. “Why are they all so big?”

“I expect Father told her that’s what I wanted.”

Brienne gave him an incredulous look. “Why does your father think you need a house with five bedrooms?”

“Probably one for us and one for each of our four children,” he said gloomily as they stopped at a red light.

“Our what?”
“I guess I should tell you. It’s a miracle he hasn’t already paid you a visit to try and persuade you.”

He related the details of his father’s visit to his apartment.

Brienne leaned back in her seat. “Seven hells.”

“I told you. Tyrion told you. Father does not respect personal privacy, certainly not ours.”

“How did your father get the idea that the only thing keeping me from being with you is your apartment? Does he really think I’m that shallow?”

Jaime sighed. “No, but he thinks my apartment signals to you that I am in some delayed young adulthood and therefore that my intentions are not serious. He believes that this mess with my filthy whore of a sister is also a roadblock, which is why he wants me to see a therapist.”

“Did he set that up too?”

“Oh, yes. I go for my first session tomorrow.”

“Do you want to see a therapist?”

“Not particularly.”

“You have to stand up to him. Jaime, you’re over forty. This is insane. You’re looking at houses you aren’t interested in with a pretend fiancée you don’t want for children who don’t exist yet.”

Jaime made a left-hand turn. “You got part of it wrong. That is what is so ironic about this whole thing. I do want you. I think we should get married. I would like to have children with you, and our apartments are totally unsuited for raising them. It kills me when Father is right.”

“Jaime, I don’t—I’m not ready.” What was she saying? He hadn’t even taken her out on a honest-to-goodness proper date yet and he certainly wasn’t ready for marriage.

“I can wait.”

He sounded eerily like his father. Brienne took a deep breath. She took his phone from the dash and called the realtor. “Hi, Mrs. Redwyne? It’s Brienne. Jaime and I are going to beg off seeing the last house.”

Jaime stared at her.

“No, I’m sure it’s very nice, but rather than waste your time, I think we need to discuss what we want—as a couple—and get back to you with better criteria. Right. No, we’ll call you. Thank you so much.” She ended the call. “I hate lying. Pull over into the parking lot.”

He obeyed and turned off the ignition.

“Were you serious just now?”

“Yes,” he said quietly.

She wasn’t cut out for this, Brienne thought. She had never been a girly girl, but was it too much to ask to be taken out on normal dates? “If your sister—”

“—I don’t want to talk about her,” Jaime interrupted.

“Too bad. You just told me you want to marry me. That means you have to talk about her.”
“Brienne—”

She wasn’t going to back down. “If she hadn’t been unfaithful to you, would you still be with her?”

He was silent for a while. “I don’t know,” he said finally.

Brienne stared out the window. “The morning I dumped Davos, he said you were in love with me.”

“I don’t know when it happened, but he’s right.”

The immensity of it hit her.

“Do you love me, Brienne?”

“Jaime—I—this is crazy—yes.”

He looked relieved and she thought, thrilled. “So what is the problem?”

“But you still might be with her if she had been faithful to you.”

He sighed. “Doesn’t it matter that I love you?”

“Of course it matters, but we don’t live in a vacuum. She’s not just an ex-lover. She’s your sister. She’s your twin. You have children with her.”

“They’re Robert’s. They think he was their father. She never wanted me near them. I . . . I never thought of them as mine. I know it sounds odd, but I only think of them as an uncle would.”

Brienne persevered. “My point is that until—no—even after you figure this out, she’ll always be a part of our lives. You won’t talk about her to anyone.” She took a deep breath. “Then there’s your father. I like him, Jaime.”

Jaime muttered something under his breath.

“But you have to stand up to him somehow. I think that therapy is a good idea, but only if you want it.”

His phone, which she was still holding, rang. She glanced down at the number and handed it to him.

He answered it. “Father.” He rolled his eyes. “This is a singularly bad time.”

Brienne looked out into nothing in particular.

“Not now, Father. Brienne and I are having a serious discussion and I really need to get back to her.” He paused, evidently listening. “We aren’t ready for a house. I’m not even sure we are ready for—” he held the phone well away from his ear. “I cannot talk to you right now. Goodbye.” He shut his phone off. “That, wench, is going to earn me seven special kinds of hell for weeks. For you, however, I will court open disaster.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I will see the therapist he found.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”
Jaime turned to face her.

“Your father has the realtor in his pocket. Do you really want to trust to the doctor he told you to talk to? Pick someone else, out of the phone book if you have to.”

He thought about it. “All right, that’s smart. I will see a therapist—someone random. In the meantime, we will date. I will work out my feelings toward Cersei; and then we’re going to get married.” He spoke as if these were immutable facts.

“You don’t just tell someone you’re going to marry them. You ask them first.” Brienne didn’t need him to be on bended knee, but she wasn’t going to let anyone order her into anything.

“We will get married,” he insisted stubbornly.

This time she said it. “You sound just like your father.”

“Don’t push me, wench.” But he smiled.

* * *

Arya had thought the basement of the library was kind of gnarly, but it was like something out of Architectural Digest compared with the warren Sansa was leading them through. “Aren’t there any normal conference rooms?” The study rooms were all booked, even the sticky one, so once again Sansa had to come through with an alternative location.

“They’re working on the basement again. We can’t use the one in Administration because Littlefinger is back there.”

“We could go to the coffee house,” Gendry suggested.

“And run into my other stalker? The one who probably has women hanging in chains in his basement and dead bodies buried all over his back yard? No, thank you.”

Mr. Lannister started to say something, but then thought better of it.

“I don’t think Stannis will mind if we use the workroom. We just have to be careful not to touch anything. He’s very particular.” Sansa switched on lights.

Arya supposed it didn’t matter where they worked. The important thing was that they went over the books and discussed next steps.

The workroom was large. There were various carts of books and journals as well as well a couple of spaces with monitors and computers. Huddled in one corner were a mass of sad-looking computer desk chairs. It was crowded but not messy.

“Don’t sit on that!” Sansa hissed at Pod who was lowering himself onto a dun-colored chair. “It’s not stable. Nobody sit on any of those chairs, please! I’ll get some.”

“Why is it out here if it’s not safe?” Kevan Lannister asked.

“Asha said they can’t just toss furniture. I guess there are people who have to come and take it away. It’s stupid.”

Mr. Lannister looked like he agreed with her.

“Dad told Varys they needed to get rid of all the unstable stuff so they’re here waiting to be
Sansa pushed one chair over to the table. “Okay, this one is mine and the one behind Gendry is fine.” She carefully removed another from a workstation with Star Trek bobbleheads all over it. “Here, Mr. Lannister, take this one. Arya, the one over there the corner should be okay, but be careful. I think it was Tyrion’s old one and it’s kind of temperamental. I’ll get some more from Circ.” Sansa disappeared down a corridor.

Those with chairs looked at them dubiously and sat very gingerly.

“Uh, is that noise what I think it is?” Pod asked while they waited.

Arya heard the rhythmic thumping. From the expressions on everyone’s faces, they heard it too.

“Study Room 6 must be near here,” Margaery hazarded.

“The sticky one.” Arya wrote “Find new meeting place” on her notepad. She was explaining the story behind Study Room 6 to a horrified Kevan when Sansa finally came back with two more chairs.

Finally they got down to business. Gendry and Pod were unhappy about the jewelry that Margaery was determined they sell as a sideline.

“We started out with armor and weaponry. We have a reputation. Our ‘target demographic,’ aren’t interested in buying earrings.” Gendry crossed his arms.

“Your target demographic is extremely narrow,” Mr. Lannister pointed out. “That was the point of your video and your photo shoot. You want to broaden your customer base to maximize your profits. Offering a wider range of products will accomplish that.”

“What’s wrong with jewelry?” Pod demanded quietly.

“What’s wrong with jewelry?” Arya argued. “You haven’t even looked at the options I found.” She opened a folder and passed out the price lists and color pictures she’d printed from the websites.

Gendry rolled his eyes at the first set, which had the approval of Sansa and Margaery. The second set no one liked, except for Arya.

“It’s very . . . uh.” Even Margaery couldn’t finish that sentence.

“It’s edgy,” Arya insisted.

“No,” Mr. Lannister pronounced. “The less discerning head shops carry better versions of this sort of thing.”

“Have you been in many head shops, Mr. Lannister?” she demanded.

A smile danced around Kevan’s lips. He seemed about to say something but evidently thought better of it.

Mr. Lannister gave the both of them a warning glare and flipped the pages over.

The third and last set was much more to everyone’s liking.


Pod shrugged. “Fine.”
Gendry and Pod were unenthused, but everyone was in agreement. That was the important part.

“Now you need to find out if the jeweler will sell to you at a price that will still allow you to make a profit. You also need to find out if he or she has enough stock to keep you supplied.”

Arya handed him the business card she’d got from the lady at Uncle Robert’s funeral. “That’s the percentage she said she would knock off.” She pointed to a number neatly written on the back. Her notes about the lady were below.

He grunted at the number and flipped the card over. “My sister-in-law?” Mr. Lannister’s eyebrows shot up.

“The one who breeds Pomeranians. Darlessa, right?”

“My sister-in-law makes and sells jewelry?” He took the printouts back to examine them.

Kevan seemed surprised he didn’t know about it. “For years now.”

“I like the cuff bracelet,” Margaery commented. “You would look great in that, Sansa.”

“With my little black dress maybe?”

“And your hair down.”

“Straight or curled?”

“Definitely straight.”

Pod and Gendry groaned.

Arya thought they were getting far afield. “I think we could make enough of a profit. She has a lot of stock. She told me it’s all over her basement. She said after her husband died, she just started making it compulsively so she had something to fill the hours.” Arya was going to continue when it occurred to her that Darlessa’s husband would have been Mr. Lannister and Kevan’s brother.

Mr. Lannister didn’t say anything at first. Finally he nodded. “It will serve.”

*I * * *

“I’ve never done this before.”

“Sat in the parking lot of an empty K-Mart?”

Jaime made a token smile. “Had a relationship with someone who wasn’t Cersei. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Brienne appeared to agree with him.

“I thought bringing you along—”

She sighed. “Jaime, that isn’t how this works. Haven’t you ever paid attention to how your friends did this?”

“I don’t have friends.” Jaime leaned back against the headrest. “Not real ones. We never did. Well, Tyrion managed somehow, but I never really had any. Father didn’t like us having classmates over. You have no idea what it was like growing up with him. He didn’t talk to us. He talked at us. Most
of his pronouncements began with ‘Lannisters don’t.’ I had Cersei. Cersei had me. Every once in a while, she’d try to get someone to like her or I’d try and strike up a friendship with someone, but it never lasted.”

“Why not?”

Jaime kept his eyes directed out at the rain. “Some of them just wanted to be friends with the rich kid. Some of them got freaked out by Father. Cersei would get jealous. To be fair, I would get jealous when she found someone too. We had to be careful not to let anyone get too close. My grades were abysmal. Father filled most of my free time with tutors and extracurricular activities. There wasn’t much time. And then gradually, I suppose I started to think like a Lannister. Lannisters have useful acquaintances and contacts, not friends.”

“Your father—”

He interrupted her. “Father is mellow compared to what he used to be like. Uncle Kevan and Aunt Genna swear he wasn’t always so closed off, but I don’t remember a time when he wasn’t. I have no memory of what he was like before our mother died. Cersei claims to. She even says he smiled at her when we were growing up, but she’s very good at seeing what she wants to see. If he wasn’t lecturing us, he either sat there like some sort of statue or he was raging—usually at Tyrion. It was never advisable to bring outsiders home.”

“But you grew up. You were at university. You were in the military.”

“Cersei and I were at the same university. There were a few people I was close to when I was in the service, but we were in combat. I didn’t have a chance to observe them when they were dating.” He took a breath. “I thought by bringing you along—”

“You can’t keep—”

Jaime held up a hand. It seemed important that he be the one to get this. He remembered what she had said after that discussion in the kitchen. “I shouldn’t have assumed you knew what was going on in my head.”

She nodded.

“And I shouldn’t have assumed you would want to live with me just yet?” He could see the relief in her deep blue eyes. “I probably shouldn’t assume or presume things about us in general.”

“Probably not,” Brienne agreed.

“Would it be presumptuous of me to kiss you?” He already had, but it seemed appropriate to ask this time.

“No,” she said softly.

So he kissed her and somehow this time it felt even more right.

* * *

They were delving into how best to market to the re-enactors when one of the office doors opened.

Arya was the first to see Mrs. Baratheon coming out followed immediately by Stannis. Arya hadn’t quite forgiven him for revising his release for the video. Despite no prior practice, he had done really well during the shoot, but they had been forced to cut away a lot of his footage.
“What is going on here?”

“Little dove? Here again?”

Sansa made a face and ignored Mrs. Baratheon. She addressed Stannis. “I couldn’t find a room for our, uh, our group. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“We didn’t disturb anything,” Arya volunteered.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He checked the contents of the carts and the state of the workstations. “You should have asked permission, Sansa.”

“I’m sorry.”

Mrs. Baratheon gave them a tight smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “What can it matter, Stannis, if Sansa and her little friends want to study? Let’s go home where we can be. . .” her voice trailed off as she realized Mr. Lannister and Kevan were at the table with them and in no way could be described as “Sansa’s little friends.” “Uncle Kevan? ‘Father?! How do you know Sansa? What are you doing here?”

“I might ask you the same question.” He swept his eyes over her and then at Stannis.

Arya noticed for the first time that Mrs. Baratheon’s hair was mussed and her skirt was on backwards. It hit her then that the thumping noises had stopped. No one else but Mr. Lannister and Margaery seemed to be making the connection. Arya opened her mouth and then saw Margaery making a furtive shake of her head.

“Is it okay if we work here?” Sansa asked again directing her question to Stannis. “We just need the table. I’ll put all the chairs back.”

He grudgingly gave permission. He turned to Arya. “I mean to hold you to the release. It is a legally binding agreement.”

“We honored it,” Arya told him. “Even though you looked really, really good. Everyone said so.”

“You did,” Gendry admitted. “It’s too bad we couldn’t use your face, because I think it would have had more impact.”

“Then how was Asha able to see my face in the video? Why do I have students coming up to me asking me for my autograph?”

Arya didn’t know who Asha was.

“Asha works here too,” Sansa explained.

“We emailed some of the raw footage to Brienne because she helped. Maybe she showed it to her? I don’t know how anyone else would have seen it.” Arya felt a little guilty for hedging like this. No one had intended to leak anything out, but somehow it had happened and they’d done really, really well because of it.

Mrs. Baratheon turned her head from person to person as they spoke. “What are they talking about, Stannis?”

He ignored her. “I should have been asked before you shared it with anyone.”

Mr. Lannister set down his pen. “Ms Stark and her associates agreed not to broadcast your image
or use it in any publicity materials. They honored the terms of the contract. They were within their rights to share it with Ms Tarth who worked for them as a consultant. Considering your . . . relationship with the woman in question, I would have thought you wouldn’t have minded.”

“Did you want to see the edited video?” Gendry offered. “It’s only a couple of minutes long. We can show you right now.”

That earned him a glare from Mr. Lannister, but Gendry was already turning his laptop so that Stannis and Cersei Baratheon could watch.

Arya was very pleased with the work Sansa’s friend had done. It looked very professional. They’d found music in the public domain. The graphics were great. From the way it was cut, no one would ever know that most of their warriors had no real clue as to what they were doing or that their courtiers had been chowing down on pizza and soda beforehand.

Mrs. Baratheon kept glancing uncertainly from the video to her father to her uncle to Stannis and then back again.

Stannis was silent until the credits rolled. Then he grunted his approval. “Now I want to see what you sent Brienne.”

“That’s longer,” Gendry warned. “It’s like ten-to-fifteen minutes.”

Mr. Lannister made a face.

“I’ll see if Stark will agree to my house for next time,” Kevan promised him quietly.

“Good, because I don’t think I can take much more of this wretched building or all these interruptions.”

There were actually hours of footage, but what they had sent Brienne had been cuts of the best bits. It wasn’t usable in its present form because there were shots of the production volunteers, the actual house, Mr. Lannister, Kevan, Mum, and in one notable moment, the pizza delivery guy.

Mr. Lannister held out his hand for her folders and proceeded to scan through them and mark them up while everyone else watched the video.

Arya thought he was being kind of rude. She knew he was a busy man, but it wasn’t going to take that long.

Arya moved to the side and watched the reactions of Stannis and by default, Mrs. Baratheon, whose puzzlement deepened into utter astonishment.

“But that’s our house,” she said.

“My house, you mean,” Mr. Lannister corrected under his breath, not taking his eyes off of the papers.

Arya didn’t think Mrs. Baratheon heard.

“When was this?”

“About two months ago,” Gendry told her.

Mrs. Baratheon seemed very struck at the shots of Stannis ferociously fighting Bronn and then Lancel. For one moment, Arya hoped she might be able to persuade him to allow them to use his
face, but then it all changed. Jaime Lannister came onto the screen. The camera captured his epic fail as he took out half their production stuff and managed to fall on his bum. It was pretty funny now, but at the time Arya had been furious, which was also memorialized in digital form.

“That’s my girl,” Gendry said proudly.

Arya started to say something. Then she saw Mrs. Baratheon’s face. The footage showed Brienne coming into view. She was laughing hysterically as she helped Jaime up. Then he started laughing too. There was a brief moment when they looked at each other. It was like something out of one of those soppy movies on Lifetime that Sansa loved so much.

Arya did not like Mrs. Baratheon. She never had, but she seemed broken . . . no, shattered all of the sudden. Arya wasn’t sure what to do. Mr. Lannister was in full-on grumpy mode, even for him. He’d been cold like that at work a couple of times although never toward her. Kevan was on the other side of the room.

Stannis was turning his head now toward Mrs. Baratheon. She was clawing his arm with her scarlet-painted fingernails.

“Email me the file,” he said in a very preemptory fashion. “We have to go.” Without ceremony, he escorted Cersei out of the workroom through the warren of corridors.

“That was weird,” Gendry opined, but he turned his attention back to the laptop.

Arya continued to stare in the direction that Stannis and Mrs. Baratheon had gone.

“It is not your concern,” Mr. Lannister told her quietly, still not lifting his eyes from the papers.

“But—”

“Leave it. Finish watching the video you’ve seen a dozen times and when you’re ready to work, sit down.”

Dad said Mr. Lannister was not a nice man. For the first time Arya thought she understood what he meant.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

The amazing deisegal has drawn some illustrations for Game of Stacks!!! Her specialty is Stannis so both feature him. Copied with permission below and original links are here and here.
Non-traditional Students

Chapter Summary

The cat is out of the bag when Tywin discovers what Cersei has been getting herself into at Stannis Baratheon’s house. Meanwhile Cersei makes a tentative step forward into her future. Asha sets Tyrion straight about a few things and in the process sets a few things straight. Sansa takes a really wrong turn.

* * *

Kevan let himself into Tywin’s office. “You’re this close to scaring Jeyne to death. If you keep this up, she is going to quit.”

Tywin turned away from the window out of which he’d been staring for the past half hour. “Who is Jeyne?”

“Your executive assistant? Jeyne Westerling?” Kevan helped himself to coffee.

“I don’t care.”

“You will care when you have to break in yet another secretary. She’s lasted the longest. She said you threw a coffee mug at her.”

Tywin stalked over to the sitting area. “She happened to open the door while I was in the act of hurling it. I did not hit her nor did I intend to do so.” He would have to give her flowers and an apology now, he supposed. Tywin said as much to Kevan.

“A raise wouldn’t come amiss either.”

He was done talking about Ms Westerling. “What did you find out?”

There was a very long pause.

“Well?”

“According to Tyrion, Cersei is engaged in a polyamorous relationship with Stannis Baratheon, Asha Greyjoy, and Davos Seaworth. I assume the last two names are familiar to you?”

Tywin felt his jaw dropping. It took a supreme act of will to get it to close.

Kevan found the brandy and brought it over.

“It’s scarcely 10:00 AM, Kevan.”

“Your face is whiter than snow. Drink.” He poured a healthy slug into Tywin’s mug and then after a moment of hesitation did the same into his own.

This was not how he was supposed to be spending his old age. He drank.

“How did you even find out this was happening?”
“I questioned Jaime about Cersei and Stannis and he said, and I quote ‘they’re all consenting adults. What all of them get up to is their own business.’ He wouldn’t tell me anymore.”

Jaime had, in fact, told him in no uncertain terms that if Tywin wanted him to marry Brienne, he was going to have to stop pushing him back into Cersei’s messes. Jaime had then told him if he wanted to find out more, he could apologize to Tyrion and ask. And then finally, after much shouting, Jaime suggested that maybe if he had been a better father none of this would be happening. As a parting blow, Jaime threw Olenna Tyrell in his face. Perhaps Olenna can advise you. From what Tyrion and Brienne say, your girlfriend knows everything that goes on in that library.

“It was bad enough when Cersei was nearly arrested for her husband’s murder, now this?” He downed some more brandy. “My children,” he muttered.

“If it makes you feel any better, Lancel has found religion. He’s talking about leaving university to devote himself to some deity called R’hllor. Tyrion was able to tell me quite a bit about that.” Kevan made a face.

It did not make Tywin feel any better, but he expressed sympathy and suggested Lancel would regain his senses soon enough. “What else did Tyrion say?”

Kevan sighed. “He said he thought they were all decent if somewhat eccentric people; that he thought they would be careful not to expose the children to anything adverse; and that if anyone wrecked the situation, it was going to be Cersei. That’s all I could get out of him.” He took another sip, swallowed, and then looked at Tywin. “If Cersei won’t tell you, then I don’t see any other option but for you to approach Tyrion yourself.”

* * *

The coffee took a ridiculously long time to perk. Cersei stood by the machine waiting like a sentinel.

“What’s wrong?” Davos inquired as he came down the backstairs into the kitchen.

She fixed a smile on her lips as she turned around.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “You’re in Asha's clothes again. Something’s not right,” he insisted.

“If it’s Mel, I told you, don’t worry. She’s spending her every waking moment trying to figure out how she’ll get a job up North.” Asha poured a healthy amount of one of Tommen’s unhealthy breakfast cereals into a bowl. “She doesn’t think Stannis is Azor Ahai anymore. She hooked up with Selyse again. So she’s out of the picture as far as we’re concerned.”

They kept saying this, but Cersei knew Melisandre had meant more to Stannis than they seemed to think. She’d seen the light in his eyes flicker to life when Melisandre returned. All the woman would need to do was smile once at Stannis and it would all be over.

“I draw the line at four,” Davos quipped.

“Stannis and I do too,” Asha managed between bites. “So what we’re saying, Cersei, is you’re safe.”

She didn’t feel safe, but she kept silent.
Finally the coffee finished.

Myrcella joined them at the breakfast table. She ate her grapefruit quickly and neatly.

Cersei loved her children, but when they were in the house it meant that she couldn’t be with Stannis or the others. She was not about to give her father any more ammunition than necessary. Any time the children were under the same roof, she stayed in her own bed, alone. They’d be at Father’s tonight again, as the weekend was starting. It would be better tomorrow. She was always calmer and more focused after she’d been with them.

As complicated as it was, it all seemed to work. It would not work with Melisandre.

Her daughter slid a manila envelope over to her. “I thought you might be interested, Mother. I sent away for it.”

Stannis appeared with car keys and Tommen in tow before Cersei could reply. Myrcella jumped up. She kissed her and followed them out to the car.

Cersei opened the envelope only to be confronted by a packet of material on a program for non-traditional students at Rosby. She started to shake her head. “I can’t.”

Davos read over her shoulder. “Why not?”

“I’m over forty. I don’t want it known that I never finished university.”

He reached over for the packet and leafed through it. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“You don’t understand what academia is like. Robert was at Rosby for three years. I’m known there.”

“How many credits are you missing?”

“Twenty four, no twenty two.” She had taken something the summer she was pregnant with her first baby. It had been ghastly. Had it not been for Father’s insistence she would never have gone. She remembered all their eyes on her, on her growing belly. No one had said anything, but she was convinced they knew. After she’d lost the baby, she had outright refused to go back.

Davos sat down and took the packet. He read for a bit.

“Then there’s the money. I couldn’t pay for it.”

“Fuck them. Just go. Do what everyone else does. Take out a student loan and go. Don’t worry so much about what other people think.” Asha dumped her empty bowl and spoon in the sink. “I have to get to work. I’ll see you both tonight.” She headed out the door.

“What sort of classes did you have left?”

“Davos—”

He held up the hand missing the fingers. “Just humor me.”

She thought. It was so long ago. “I took most of the requirements. I know I was supposed to take microeconomics and some marketing classes. I’m not sure what else.”

“Those all sound interesting,” he remarked. “They sound like the sort of things you might take up because,” here his voice shifted into a passable imitation of an upper middle class soccer mom,
“you’ve always had an interest in them and now you have the time since your children are grown.” He gave her an impish smile. “If someone confronts you, tell them you dropped out because you wanted to raise your children. Most working women feel guilty about having to put their children in daycare. My ex-wife always did. You could play on that.”

“I will be the oldest person there,” she said in a withering voice meant to end all discussion.

Davos pointed to a picture on the brochure. “I think this white-haired gentleman would have that honor.”

“He’s a model. Those people aren’t real students.”

“We could drive up there now and count the senior citizens.”

“I have children. I haven’t been in a classroom in almost twenty years. I wouldn’t even know where to begin. All the technology has changed.”

“It may have missed your attention, but you’re living with two librarians. I expect they’d be more than capable of helping you navigate your way. I admit I’m not a learned man, but I can help you with Myrcella and Tommen when I’m around.”

“What do you know about taking care of children?”

Davos showed her another picture of two elderly women. “I have seven sons. I admit their mother had most of the part of raising them, but she entrusted them with me from time to time and they all survived. Besides, they’re nearly grown. It’s not as if you had little ones.”

“My credits might not be transferrable.”

“There is that,” he agreed. “But you won’t know until you ask.”

“There’s also Father.”

Davos poured them both more coffee. “He objects to educated women?”

“No, he’s always wanted me to go back and finish.” Aware that she had just diluted the force of her argument she swept on, “You don’t understand. He takes everything over. Rosby wouldn’t be good enough. Then he’ll want to dictate what classes I take.” There would be some money from the estate, although not much; Robert and she had always spent nearly as much as he made. She wanted what was left to go for Myrcella and Tommen’s education.

“Don’t tell him. Just start. By the time he finds out, you’ll be halfway done.”

In the end she agreed to make an appointment. He sat with her while she made calls and then went online to try and order her transcripts. It was as complicated as she feared, but he sat there and provided encouragement and prodding as needed. During the last phone call, he got one of his own. He stepped outside to take it. While she waited on hold interminably for someone, she watched Davos. He seemed to be remonstrating with whoever was on the other end of the line. Cersei was long finished with her call by the time he returned. “Trouble?”

“Work problems,” he said in a genial manner that suddenly reminded her of Asha’s when she’d asked what she had been doing in Braavos. It did not invite questions. Cersei knew he had a record. Father had taken pains to impress it upon her.

Cersei could find out more if she wanted. Father would be only too happy to tell her, especially if
he thought it might mean that she would leave Stannis’ house. “Tell me about Brienne Tarth.”

Her demand took Davos unawares. He began clearing the table. “There’s not much to tell. We went out for a bit. Then we stopped.”

“Because you were in an affair with Stannis and Asha?” she hazarded hopefully. Please, she thought, let it be anything other than Jaime.

“Gods, no. That didn’t start till a day or so after your husband was shot and actually,” he stopped and arched his eyebrows, “I’m not sure I’d call what we’ve been doing an affair.”

“What would you call it?”

“Something very different from what I’m used to,” Davos told her. “I was married for most of my adult life and that was much more, er, traditional. This,” he gestured around the room. “This, er, thing here, is a bit outside my experience. It’s enjoyable, I’ll grant you that, but not in my usual line.”

“So all this is just a bit of fun?” She should have known. Here she thought she was living with people who really cared for her and it was just about the sex.

Davos stacked the papers together. “I wouldn’t be sitting here with you if there wasn’t any more to it. I would have taken off weeks ago.”

“You could just be hoping for a repeat of yesterday morning,” she said suspiciously.

“I’d be lying if I said it hadn’t crossed my mind,” he agreed. “Sometimes I feel as if the four of us are in a lifeboat in the middle of the sea without even the stars to guide us. The odd thing is I don’t want to reach the shore.” He took her hand. “Stop worrying so much, Cersei. Not a one of us is going anywhere.”

She nodded. They sat with their hands entwined for a few minutes before she started thinking about Jaime again. She pulled away. “Brienne. You were going to tell me about her.”

“You don’t really want to know about my dates with Brienne, do you?” Davos sealed the box of Tommen’s cereal. “What’s wrong?”

Unhappily she related what she saw on the video footage from last night. “I still don’t even know what they were doing. Stannis gave me a cursory explanation about helping out Brienne, but I don’t understand how Father and Uncle Kevan are involved.”

“I can clear up some of your confusion for you,” he volunteered. “But if you’ll pardon me saying so, it seems like that’s not the real problem.”

“They’re in love with each other,” she blurted out.

“Aye.” Davos stacked the cups in the dishwasher. “I think they are.”

* * *

Sansa let herself into the apartment to find Margaery looking distinctly pissed off. “What’s wrong?”

“Roose Bolton is what’s wrong.”

Sansa waited. She’d told Margaery all along he was a piece of work.
“I just got back from his office hours. He said I could have an extension on my paper.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“No, it’s not. He sat there with a weird little smirk on his face while I pretty much begged. And then he told me he would make an exception to his policy and let me have an extension. So after I thanked him, which it galled me to do, Dr. Bolton told me I had till 8:30 AM Tuesday.”

Sansa was surprised. “Well, that’s a whole week. You should be able—”

“Tuesday meaning tomorrow.”

“Oh.”

“He said if I got it in even a minute late, he would automatically deduct two letter grades.”

Sansa winced. “How much more do you have to do?”

Margaery sourly shoved her laptop toward Sansa. “I keep trying to work at it, but just knowing the orders are in the other room piling up is killing me. I can’t focus.”

She scanned through what Margaery had. It wasn’t much.

“It’s going to take me the better part of the next twenty-four hours to finish this,” Margaery wailed. “I hate him.”

“Not nearly as much as I do,” Sansa told her. “I have to go over to the history department this afternoon.” Seeing the question on Margaery’s face, she explained, “Dr. Karstark gave me a C+ on mine. So now I have to see if he’ll let me redo it. You’re not the only one who has to beg.”

“You? A C+?”

Sansa didn’t really want to talk about it.

“I don’t think you should go over there alone. What if Dr. Freak Show sees you?”

“My appointment is for 4:00. I should be out of there in fifteen minutes tops. I looked up Tip-In’s class schedule. He finishes at 4:20 and the room is halfway across campus. I’ll never run into him.” Sansa hugged a throw pillow. “Why don’t you go somewhere else to work on your paper? Somewhere where you won’t be distracted? If Karstark has a heart, I can deal with the orders.”

"* * *

They hadn’t told him about the endless meetings in library school. It probably explained all the group work he’d been forced to endure, though, Tyrion thought. Normally Dr. Stark ran a tight meeting, but at some point the floor had been turned over to Melisandre and things had gotten lengthy.

“I see, Melisandre,” Olenna finally commented in a saccharine voice that Tyrion had learned to dread. “So because you have run out of money from your collection funds for theology, we should all turn over our funds to you so that you might buy more monographs on a very minor deity.”

“R’hllor is hardly a minor deity. He is the one true god.”

“We have more than adequate coverage on him,” Tyrion pointed out. “I’ve checked the circulation records. The books aren’t being checked out. We have other subjects for which we collect.”
Melisandre waved this away as inconsequential. “Just because a book is not borrowed does not mean it is not used.”

“I examined the books myself, Melisandre. I don’t think the spines have been cracked on more than a few of them.” He almost mentioned his nearly getting killed in the process, but she was just as likely to turn the incident into a sign from her one true god.

“I have three subject areas,” Brienne added. “I don’t have extra money to give up.”

Tyrion glanced at Stannis and Asha. Asha seemed disinterested, which was not unusual for her. Stannis listened attentively, but said nothing. Varys would side with Olenna. Dr. Stark seemed to have little patience for Melisandre. Baelish was doodling. “If the bibliographers have money at the end of the fiscal year, we can talk. Until then, I think we should proceed as usual.”

Dr. Stark agreed.

“You should all look to your sins,” Melisandre pronounced. She rose and swept out grandly.

It was hard to follow such an exit and Dr. Stark wasn’t foolish enough to try. He mercifully called the meeting to an end. Baelish cornered him. Olenna and Varys were all too casually leaving from another exit, no doubt to plot and plan. It had not escaped Tyrion’s notice that they were usually thick as thieves. He could almost feel sorry for Dr. Stark. Stannis waylaid Brienne at the door.

Tyrion walked back toward his office with Asha.

“She’s not going to let it go, you know,” Asha warned him.

He nodded. He thought he could handle Melisandre. Rumor had it that she was applying to every library post anywhere near the Wall, not that there were a plethora of those. “How is my sister doing?”

They cut through the reference floor.

Asha stopped a student who was eating pizza while using the computer. “Put it down.” She pointed to the slice.

The student was startled enough to obey.

Asha scooped up the pizza box. “No eating in the library. Have some respect.” She kept on walking.

Tyrion unlocked the door to the staff part of the building. “That took some—”

“Balls?” Asha dumped the pizza box in the trash.

“I was going to say nerve.”

“That too. This is not a frat house.”

That Asha should be the upholder of library decorum seemed supremely ironic to Tyrion and he said as much.

“This is the library. Our roof, our rules. The kid can eat his fucking pizza somewhere else.” She examined her greasy hands. “There are never any paper towels around when you need them.”

“Cersei?” he prompted.
Asha wiped her hands on her jeans “Fuck it. It’s nearly time to go home anyway. She’s okay, I think. Davos has been working on her to get her back in school. We have to get her doing something. It was one thing when she rearranged all of the furniture three times in a week; I don’t think Stannis noticed. But now she’s trying to befriend Shireen and she’s freaking the poor kid out. And she will not shut up about Mel or Brienne.”

“Going back to university is not going to change my sister.”

“No one wants to change her, Tyrion. We’re very happy with her and we like her just the way she is.”

Tyrion found this inconceivable. No one liked Cersei. They were enthralled or exasperated by her, but mere like? Not even Jaime had ever liked her. Tyrion recalled a few instances of other girls coming home with her to play on occasion when they were children, but those “friendships” usually lasted a week or two at best.

“You’ve got to talk to your brother, though. He finally got it through his head that Brienne doesn’t really like sci-fi. So he’s calling me non-stop. I don’t mind handling the Trek questions, but now he’s found Lost.”

“Seven hells.”

“Yeah, and if you thought he was obsessed with Battlestar Galactica—” Asha made a face. “Like I fucking care what’s in the hatch or what the numbers mean? I have things I’m doing at 1:00 AM.”

Tyrion didn’t want to know what those things were. “I’ll speak to him.”

“And can you do anything about your father? It might help if he would just talk to her. The silent treatment is killing her worse than the shouting.”

“If I could make Father do anything, I would be emperor of the world. Even if I could, I’m not speaking to him just now.”

Asha set down her notepad and pen down on an empty book cart in the corridor. “Why not?”

Tyrion really didn’t think it was any of her business and said so.

“You asked about your sister. Do you want to help her or not?”

“It’s not that simple,” he protested. He was really sick of having to explain to everyone what his father was really like. Either they thought he was the demon monkey puppet of Tywin Lannister—like Dr. Stark—or they thought he was exaggerating. “All right, say that I talked to my father. He’ll help her but only if it’s on his terms, which will probably mean she takes her children and moves in with him. He’s never cared for Stannis. Davos has a record and Father knows it and he—”

“Yeah, I know what he thinks about me. He said a few things this weekend when he picked the kids up.”

Tyrion didn’t know what to say. “It doesn’t help that you two work here.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with it?”

Tyrion shared his father’s theory of the librarians sowing unrest amongst the faculty.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me. We can’t get them to say word one to the provost about
increasing the budget, and he thinks we’re trying to control administrative politics?” Asha rolled her eyes. “Brienne said he’s a rational guy.”

“Brienne is naïve,” Tyrion told her.

“When your sister showed up at our door, she was a mess. Do you know what kind of courage it took for her to leave her husband?”

Tyrion realized Brienne wasn’t the only person who was naïve. “I don’t know what Cersei told you, but trust me: my sister is not some delicate little blossom.”

“Yeah, I figured that out the first time I met her. But for fuck’s sake, her husband fathered sixteen bastards. You don’t think that’s a lot of shit for anyone to put up with?” Asha didn’t wait for him to answer. “You know he hit her, don’t you?”

“I’m sure she hit him right back.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Asha demanded. “Her kids aren’t stupid. You don’t think they picked up on what was going on in the house? You don’t think it’s messed them up seeing their parents striking each other? Tommen’s told me things. She went to your dad for help and not only did he turn her down, he tried to make it so she had to go back to her husband. What kind of piece of shit does that?”

Tywin Lannister did, Tyrion thought.

“I realize she’s been a bitch to you and I’m sorry, but nobody deserves to be treated the way she’s been treated.”

He didn’t know what to say.

Asha picked up her notepad. “Forget it.” She started down toward her office.

“Asha.”

She turned back.

“What do you want me to ask Father to do? I can try, but there are no guarantees.”

Asha considered him. “There’s a program at Rosby for non-traditional students. We’ve got her looking at it, but she’s worried about the money.”

“You do realize that my father’s financial support comes with strings, don’t you?”

Asha suddenly stood straight up. “What did your father want for her? Like before she became involved with Robert? Ultimately?”

Tyrion realized she was serious. “She was supposed to graduate, work for him, marry someone of his choosing, and produce children. Robert wasn’t the man he had in mind I’m sure.”

“She’s kind of old for more kids and I don’t think she’s in any kind of shape to get married again right now,” Asha said thoughtfully. “But what if she graduated and then went to work for him? Would he be all right with that?”

It was like talking to a block of wood. “Asha, you don’t understand what he’s like. It’s not that simple. He’s going to want to take over.”
“Your father sounds like he’s a reasonable, intelligent person. What Cersei wants seems like it’s in line with what he wants. She said she wanted to work at his company from the time she was little, more than you or Jaime ever did.”

Except for the part about his father being reasonable, Tyrion agreed with her. It had always galled Cersei how Father focused on Jaime.

“I know you think our living arrangement is odd, but it works for us. She doesn’t do anything while the kids are around. Davos has his own place and he doesn’t bring his work home with him. Myrcella and Tommen just think Stannis and I are dating. And honestly, I don’t see this being a long-term situation. Cersei will want to settle down with one person.”

He wasn’t sure what this had to do with his father and it seemed to be entirely contradictory to what Asha had been saying moments before.

“Stannis isn’t a tycoon, but he’s ambitious. They seem to do pretty well together. She’s been giving him advice about his career. She’s smart like that. He listens to her. He’s close to finishing his dissertation. Once he has the PhD, he can move up the ranks if that’s what your father wants. Stannis knows all about her sh—he knows the score. He likes her kids. He’s going to want a more conventional relationship too soon enough.”

“But you and he—” Tyrion was utterly baffled.

“Your father has long-term goals, right?” She waited until he nodded. “If he really sits down and thinks about this, I bet he would realize that Cersei and the kids are where they need to be for those to happen. What Cersei needs is some reassurance that he’ll help with her tuition for university so she can spend whatever is left from her husband’s estate on Myrcella and Tommen’s education. Rosby is close enough that she wouldn’t have to uproot her kids and move. They need to be near their grandfather at a time like this. I think it will mean a lot to her if she has some agency in the decision. She needs support, not orders. She’ll be a lot more amenable to his guidance if he lets her have her way with this. She could go somewhere more prestigious for her MBA if that’s what he wants. They’ll be at uni themselves by then anyhow.”

Tyrion opened his mouth and shut it.

“As for this uh, theory that we’re doing anything to fu—er” she paused, “to manipulate faculty, there’s only one person here who seems to be doing any of that, and I don’t think he’s going to last too much longer.”

“Dr. Stark—”

Asha crinkled her face. “What? No, not Dr. Stark.”

“Then who—?”

“This is why I stay out of this political sh—er stuff. Think about it, Tyrion.” She grabbed her notebook and pen and sauntered back to the Technical Services area.

Tyrion stared after her. Finally realizing it was past 5:00, he collected his belongings, and headed out of the library.

Sam was leaving as well. “Did your father find you?”

“What?”
“He came by looking for you. I offered to take him back but he said he could find your office by himself.”

“When was this?”

“As about five or ten minutes ago.” The library school student glanced at his watch. “I have to go. I have class soon.” He waved a farewell and left Tyrion standing on the front steps.

The library was located on the highest part of the campus. Tyrion squinted and could make out his father’s unmistakable form striding in the distance toward the parking lot. He suddenly recalled how Asha had stopped slouching and delivered to him what was for her, a remarkably articulate, profanity-free proposal, sprinkled with positive remarks about his father. As he processed what Asha had just done, he began to chuckle,

It struck him as a little sad that she voluntarily stayed out of politics. Asha appeared to be very adept at them.

* * *

Dr. Karstark expressed his disappointment with Sansa at length and loudly. She wasn’t happy about having to be in his office. She would give just about anything to never be near the history department ever again. In fact, if she managed to pass this class, she was going to make sure she didn’t take any more history courses—at least not as long as Dr. Roose Bolton was at Crownlands. She would find something else to minor in. When Dr. Karstark demanded that they meet, she had tried desperately to get him to agree to any other location on campus. No, he insisted. They would meet in his office and they would meet at 4:00. It was well past 5:00 now and through the corner of her eye, she could see his colleagues leaving their offices like rats fleeing from a sinking ship.

“I got overextended this semester,” she told Dr. Karstark truthfully. Next semester, she would be quitting her job at the library. She had to let something go and it would be the easiest thing to cut. He wasn’t content with the explanation. The lecture went on. She was a good student, but she was falling behind, he said. He had half a mind to talk to her parents.

Sansa drew herself up. This wasn’t high school. She was twenty one and he wanted to go running to her mummy and daddy just because he knew them?

Now he started talking about his own children and how he had made sure they were careful to keep their priorities in order and to keep him informed of their activities.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if he knew that his daughter was going out with Tyrion Lannister, a man probably ten-to-fifteen years older than she, or if he knew his son’s main priority was to drink himself senseless at least once a week, but that would just extend this agony. Instead she nodded politely. “Should I rewrite the paper for you?”

“It won’t make any difference to your grade, Sansa,” he informed her.

Sansa wished he didn’t have such a booming voice. “What would you like me to do?” she asked finally. The light from the hallway was dimming. The people were probably turning off light switches as they headed home. She wondered if the lights were on timers like the ones in the library.

What he wanted her to do was express contrition and promise to focus on her academics. If she did well on the final paper, he would agree to make it worth enough to get her a B in the course.
Sansa consented. She started to get up, but he kept on talking. Mostly it was about her father and how she was somehow tarnishing his reputation. This made no sense. How could one class paper from an undergraduate on the economic impact of the Iron Bank of Braavos on modern Westeros damage the reputation of an internationally renowned scholar?

Finally he finished and allowed her to leave. She hoped Dr. Karstark was going home as well so he could walk her out, but he informed her he needed to stay and work on his book. He knew where his priorities lay.

Sansa gathered her belongings and left. If Dr. Karstark knew where his priorities were, he wouldn’t let his stupid acne-ridden, wishful-thinking TA, who was pissed she wouldn’t go out with him, have the final say in what the grade on this paper was.

She knew Dr. Bolton’s office was to the left so she purposely went right. It was the long way around, but she wasn’t going to risk an encounter with him. She’d seen him once or twice around campus since the night he’d followed her in his car. He didn’t approach her when he saw her, but Sansa had no desire to see him, let alone talk to him, ever again.

She turned down a corridor, came to the end, and pushed the button for the elevator. They were notoriously slow in this building. Better to wait, though, than to meet him in a stairwell.

“He suspects us, damn it.”

Sansa froze. It was Littlefinger.

“I told you before to calm down, Baelish. He has no proof.” The second voice was low, quiet, but unmistakably Tip-In’s.

Littlefinger said something she couldn’t make out.

Shit, shit, shit. She couldn’t tell where the voices were coming from. She punched the down button again. Or she could go back to Karstark’s office. Yes, she would do that. He wanted to treat her like a helpless child. Fine, he could bloody well escort her to the bus stop.

“If you had been able to exercise some self-control with his daughter, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

Their voices were louder now.

“Oh, and following her halfway across Westeros didn’t tip him off?”

“The difference is that I know I when to stop.”

Sansa swiveled around. Every door was shut and dark. Most of the hallways were lit only by the emergency sign lights. Where were they? She kept going toward Karstark’s office.

“You’ve had ample opportunity to remove him and you’ve botched the job twice now—and inconvenienced me in the process. He would have been dead by now if you had just trusted to my expertise.”

The stairwell. If she could just get there, she would be safe. She was rounding the corner when she ran straight into Littlefinger and Tip-In.

Littlefinger was startled.
Tip-In’s surprise faded very quickly into amusement.

Sansa opened her mouth to scream, but before she could make a sound, Tip-In was covering her mouth with his hand and dragging her back into the darkness.

“Now now, Sansa. We wouldn’t want to alarm poor Rickard. Not when he’s working so hard on his book.”

The world went black.

* * *
Chapter Summary

While Cersei makes plans for her future, Sansa discovers what Roose Bolton’s basement is really like. Catelyn finds she has the wrong answer to the question “Do you know where your children are?”

Chapter Notes

There are a few mentions of Ramsay, but nothing that should be triggering.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa had once sourly conjectured with Margaery that Roose Bolton probably had corpses chained to padded leather walls in his basement.

Well, here she was in what she assumed was his basement and it wasn’t anything like that. It was an unremarkable room. Not that she could be prepared for kidnapped and tied to a chair by a book-thieving, conspiratorial weirdo, but never would she have expected to be imprisoned in someone’s rumpus room either. It was actually on the cheesy side. There was fake wooden walnut paneling, a wet bar, a neon sign for Miller High Life, and an assortment of bowling trophies on the shelves behind the bar.

He held up a bottle of acetaminophen. “Open your mouth,” Tip-In commanded.

Sansa obeyed, swallowing the pills and then the water he held up to her lips.

Tip-In let her drink and then put the water and the Tylenol bottle on the wet bar. He sat down in a chair opposite her.

Gods, his eyes were cold, she thought. “I . . . uh never thought you would be into bowling, Dr. Bolton.” The moment the words were out of her mouth, she realized how weird they must sound.

He was taken aback.

Well, okay, that was good, she thought. He was less scary when he was off balance. “The trophies.”

He glanced behind him and his face cleared in comprehension. “Oh, those aren’t mine. The previous owner left them.”

Who left trophies behind when they moved? Shit, he probably did have bodies buried all over the place.

“It was a foreclosure,” he told her pleasantly. “They left in the middle of the night. I’m afraid I
haven’t gotten around changing to this part of the house yet.”

“Oh. They say that those people can really damage a property. Did they take the appliances and stuff?” Get him to see you as a person she told herself. Act like this is normal.

“Yes,” he replied. “I had to replace most of the fixtures in the house.” He paused and then giving her a half quizzical look, continued, “But you’re not really interested in real estate, are you?”

“I watch a lot of HGTV.” This was true. Margaery was obsessed with *House Hunters* and half a dozen other programs on the network.

Tip-In smiled.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say, Dr. Bolton,” Sansa said. She told herself she needed to be calm. She had seen enough Lifetime TV movies to know that breaking down into tears and begging was probably not going to be effective. “I’m sorry, I guess I was just taken by surprise with the beer sign and the wet bar. It just didn’t seem like your style.”

He made her a little bow.

He’d given her Tylenol. Why would he do that if he was going to kill her? She tried to remember if he had a wife or kids or anything.

“I live alone.”

Shit.

“Which is fortunate for you,” he continued. “Ramsay doesn’t have much self-restraint.”

“Who’s Ramsay?”

“My son. He’s in a hospital for the criminally insane,” he said as if he was telling her that the store was out of Cheerios.

People were going to miss her. Margaery would know something was wrong.

“I don’t think anyone is going to think to look for you here anytime soon,” he remarked. “Baelish tells me your father is driving up to Winterfell tonight. Your mother seems to be overwhelmed and your girlfriend is working on a paper for my class. She was late with it. I told her she had till tomorrow morning before I would remove two letter grades automatically. She left you a message. She’s staying at her brother’s so she can concentrate. You really should have a more secure voicemail password.” He smiled again. “And I can send texts from your phone if anyone should become concerned.”

It felt like he was in her head.

He stood up.

“How did you know I was lying to you that afternoon—at the coffeehouse?”

He was behind the wet bar now, rinsing the glass out. “You lied very well. The bit about the scones was a clever detail.”

Sansa blinked. “Scones?”

“You told me they made excellent blueberry scones. That and your manner nearly convinced me; I
almost believed you were pleased to see me. I wasn’t certain until you walked out. You were in such a hurry to leave. I thought you were going to yank your little cousin’s arm right out of its socket.”

“People know you followed me that night.”

“Yes, they do. I believe I explained it satisfactorily to the police.” Tip-In adopted an expression of mock innocence. “I was visiting a friend in Rosby and I’m afraid I got rather turned around.”

“How did you get them to buy it?”

He shrugged. “Baelish located someone nearby who was willing to claim I was expected. The police contacted him and he verified my story.”

Sansa watched as he dried the glass out methodically.

“No other questions?”

“You seem to know what I’m going to ask before I do.”

Tip-In returned to the chair opposite and considered her. “You’re a surprisingly smart girl, Sansa. It’s really too bad you have such an unfortunate habit of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

She didn’t think that was fair. “Dr. Karstark made me come to his office,” she retorted. “I didn’t exactly want to be there for a lecture on how I needed to work harder. It’s not as if he even reads the papers. His grad student was the one who marked it.”

“That can be a problem,” he acknowledged.

“Why are the TAs always so harsh?” She was trying to get him to see her as a person and not as whatever it was he saw her as, but it was something she had wondered about ever since she’d started university.

He shrugged. “They take themselves too seriously. You should have taken my class. I do not allow my graduate assistants to have the final say in the grades.”

“I told you it was full.” She sighed. “I don’t suppose I’ll get the chance to take a course from you again.” She tried to keep her voice light.

It earned her a smile but no reassurances. “I can see why Baelish likes you so much.”

Sansa knew she should be terrified, but at the mention of Petyr’s name, she grew glacial.

“His affections are not returned?”

“Littlefinger is disgusting.”

“Littlefinger?”

She explained the origin of the nickname to him.

Tip-In laughed outright, but then he seemed to collect himself. “You haven’t asked me what’s going to happen to you.”

“I assume it’s nothing good.”
“You’re very self-controlled,” he commented with approval. “You’re going to stay here for a while. After that, we’ll see.” He stood up. “As enjoyable as this chat has been, I’m afraid I have things I need to do.”

Sansa watched as he went up the stairs.

He paused on the top step. “Scream if you like,” he told her pleasantly. “I don’t have any neighbors.” With that he turned off the light and shut the basement door.

She heard a lock click into place.

The Miller High Life sign glowed in the darkness.

*C * *

Cersei let her father in. She didn’t understand how Asha could have predicted he would stop by, but here he was.

“I wish to speak to you alone. Are your . . . lovers here,” he practically spat.

She shrank a little, but this was not unexpected either. Tyrion had warned her that Father had somehow found out. “Stannis is working tonight. Davos is out of town, and Asha took the children to the supermarket.” She led the way to the living room and sat uneasily.

“I suppose it is useless to get you to come to your senses.”

“We’re not leaving, Father.”

He pressed his lips together in an expression of disapproval, but he sat opposite her. “Have you considered your long-term plans?”

Cersei took a breath and then explained what she wanted to do. Asha suggested she just say it openly and honestly. If he said no, they would put their heads together and figure out an alternative solution.

“Why not Crownlands?”

“I haven’t been a student in twenty years. It will be an adjustment. Rosby has a special program for non-traditional students.”

Father didn’t say anything. He simply stared at her with those icy green eyes of his.

“Even if I could get accepted at Crownlands, they would all know who I am. I would be a figure of ridicule.” The moment the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. This was when Father would tell her if people laughed at her it was her own fault.

Instead he nodded. “Rosby might be a better fit. I will pay for it.” He didn’t speak right away. “I will take care of Myrcella and Tommen’s private school tuition.”

“Their fees are paid for the rest of the year.”

He went on as if she hadn’t spoken. “I will pay for their university educations as well. Joffrey has made his own bed. He is on his own.”

She bit her lip. Joffrey wouldn’t be released for four-and-a-half more years. There was time enough to worry about paying for the remainder of his tuition later. “I thought I could use what is left from
the estate for Myrcella and Tommen’s university tuition.”

“It would be wiser to take what little Robert left and create trust accounts for them.”

“All right,” she said eagerly.

“I should like to see them on a regular basis.”

Cersei was expecting him to demand it, but no, he seemed to be making a request. “Perhaps on the weekends?”

“That would be acceptable. We can work out the details later. And after you graduate? What do you intend to do?”

She could hardly breathe. “I always wanted to work for you, but if that isn’t possible, I’ll find a job somewhere else.”

He stood up. “Naturally you will work for me. It is about time you started contributing to our family’s success.”

It took everything she had not to snap at him. She’d put in twenty years as Robert’s smiling wife so that Father could exert his influence.

“If I hear one word—” he stopped, paused, and regained control. “I trust that your sexual escapades are going to remain a very private matter.”

She swore to be discreet.

Father rose.

Cersei thanked him and he left.

Her knees gave way after he drove away. She sank onto the front stairs. Asha and the kids found her there when they got home.

“Well?”

“I think it’s going to be all right,” she said in wondering tones.

Asha’s lips twisted into a self-satisfied smile. “Told you.”

* * *

Sansa had to admit that the conditions of her captivity could have been much worse. There was a full bathroom off the rumpus room. It was also windowless, but it was immaculate, and Dr. Bolton would untie her to let her use the toilet. Twice he let her shower. He gave her privacy while she was in there. He fed her regularly. He apologized for the accommodations. He sat and chatted with her. He even brought her blueberry scones from the coffeehouse.

She forced herself to be polite. She tried to use his name. She did everything she could to make herself seem like a person to him.

It all felt pointless.

Sprinkled in with the conversation—and it was usually good conversation, she had to admit—Tip-In would say something in his mild, melodious voice that made her shudder on the inside.
It was Baelish’s idea to kill your uncle with the shelving. I thought it a little dramatic myself, but fortunately the electrical work required wasn’t too onerous.

Ramsay doesn’t know when to stop. I tried to teach him to pick his companions more carefully. I told Ramsay he should choose someone no one would go looking for once he needed to dispose of him—are you cold? I would be happy to turn up the thermostat for you. No? Well, the boy just will not listen.

Baelish wants me to move you into his care, but I think you’re better off here, don’t you? His infatuation with you might get in the way when we need to decide what to do with you.

She didn’t know if it was day or night. She thought he might be playing games with her by changing up the meals on her. She woke up several times to find him ready with sandwiches or breakfast for her. She felt full most of the time. Granted she wasn’t doing much, but she couldn’t believe so much time was actually passing. If he wasn’t there, she sat in the dark. He left the beer sign on as a sort of night light. It seemed to amuse him.

Dr. Bolton had told her more than once he liked how calm and self-controlled she was. She thought it went beyond him wanting a docile prisoner; he complained repeatedly about his son who was a hothead and overly dramatic students.

She wasn’t Arya. She didn’t have any amazing martial arts moves. When he held the gun to the back of her head as he marched her into the bathroom, she knew if she tried anything, he’d pull the trigger without a second thought. All she had at her disposal were good manners, intelligence, and a sense that he was amused by her.

“So what are you going to do with this room, Dr. Bolton?” Sansa asked.

“I hadn’t really thought about it. I have more than enough space upstairs. The realtor suggested it would make a good ‘man cave.’” He said the last ironically.

“Maybe a home gym or a media room?” Sansa suggested.

“I don’t watch much television and the downstairs bedroom suffices for my exercise equipment.” He looked at her. "Why are you so interested in what I do with my house?” Tip-In asked with genuine curiosity.

Sansa shrugged. “It was always so crowded at home. I didn’t get my own bedroom till Robb and Theon left. I used to fantasize about having a whole house to myself and try to furnish it in my head. It’s better at the apartment, but we have all the stuff from the businesses there. There’s not a lot of room.”

“Businesses?”

“It’s mostly Lemon Cakes, but the other stuff, which was supposed to stay at the guys’ place, is starting to creep in there too.”

He furrowed his brow. “Do you sell baked goods?”

She told him the basics; it was nothing he couldn’t get off their website so she didn’t feel any trepidation in talking to him about it. “I was planning on quitting my job at the library. The business is taking off or was.” She was the talent, as Arya and Margaery kept reminding her. If she was gone for any length of time, they would miss her.

“That’s very impressive for someone so young. How old are you? Nineteen?”
“Twenty one.” It had been Arya and Margaery’s idea to start Lemon Cakes, but neither Arya nor Margaery was tied to a chair with a confessed killer. If he wanted to admire her for her supposed business acumen, she wasn’t going to correct him.

He pulled his chair a little closer to hers. “What would you do to this room?”

“It’s hard to say without knowing about the rest of the house.” She paused hoping he’d tell her something of the floor plan, but he merely waited. “I don’t know. I don’t know you very well.”

“If it was your house,” he suggested.

Sansa did her best to keep her face emotionless. “A craft room maybe? It seems pretty dry down here.”

“It is. Go on.”

“I’d take out the wet bar and paint the walls. I don’t know how expensive it is to take out paneling. On one of those shows on HGTV, there was a contractor saying that paneling is usually put up to hide problems.”

Tip-In leaned forward. “What kind of problems?”

“Cracks in the foundation and stuff, I think.”

He stiffened. “What?”

“Didn’t you have an inspection?”

Tip-In frowned. “No.”

Gods, he really was alarmed. Probably not concerned enough to do anything with her here though, she reflected bitterly. “There’s a program on HGTV called Holmes Inspection; you should watch it. The guy talks about that kind of thing all the time.”

He nodded apparently making a mental note about the show. “What else would you do with this room?”

“Well, if I couldn’t take the paneling down, I would paint it like I said. I don’t know about the floor. Maybe Pergo? Not carpet. Something easy to clean.” Sansa nodded her head at the wet bar. “Since there’s electrical there, I would put in a work surface for my sewing machines; I have three.” She could see him looking puzzled. “They each do different things,” she explained. He seemed to want her to keep talking so she continued. “Then I’d put in storage for the fabric, my yarn, all the embroidery supplies, and my notions—needles, thread, buttons, zippers, things like that. I’d want another surface for cutting fabric. I’d put my pattern books up on shelves. Is there wireless in the house?”

“Yes.”

She saw that he immediately regretted sharing this knowledge so she went on quickly, “Okay, well then I would have a computer desk over there maybe for the business stuff. There’s a lot of record keeping. And I’d put a big cupboard for the shipping materials on the left. They take up so much room and I don’t like a lot of mess.”

Tip-In nodded. “I’m not fond of clutter either.” He sipped his water. “I didn’t realize there was so much involved with crafting.”
“It’s a business, Dr. Bolton,” Sansa explained. She was so tired. She wasn’t sure what was worse: sitting alone in the dark or talking to him for hours on end. “But yeah, crafting can take up a lot of room. Didn’t your wife sew or knit or crochet?”

“What makes you think I was married?”

Now it was Sansa’s turn to frown. “Well, you have a son so I guess I just assumed . . .”

“Ramsay’s a bastard.”

“Oh.” She couldn’t think what the polite reply was to that.

“I have been married before,” he volunteered.

“Oh yeah?”

“Three times,” he told her with an enigmatic smile.

And this, Sansa thought, was when he was going to tell her something creepy, like how he made them into clothing or ate their livers “with fava beans and a nice Chianti.”

But instead he turned the topic of conversation back to her. “You said you knit.”

“Yes.”

“What sort of things do you knit?”

“I don’t do as much as I did before because of the business. I make a lot of socks, cowls, shawls, items for myself mostly. It’s usually too warm here for sweaters.”

“Winter is coming,” he said half ironically.

“No one will wear them.” Sansa was kind of bitter about it. She made beautiful things and no one in her family was appreciative. The most Margaery would wear was a scarf; she liked revealing, light clothing and knitwear didn’t appeal to her. “I’ve sent some socks to my brother at the Wall. I might be able to make Robin something. He’s young enough he’ll put on what you tell him, but it’s just a waste to knit things for anyone else. My parents just say ‘thank you so much, sweetling; it’s beautiful’ and it ends up in a drawer.”

Dr. Bolton seemed taken aback by her tone. “Why do you keep on doing it then?”

“I like the process.”

He took that in. “I know what you mean. Not about knitting, of course, but sometimes it’s the work rather than the end result that’s so very satisfying.”

“It’s too bad because there are some amazing patterns out there and I am really good at it.” The words were out of her mouth when the import of what he had just said washed over her. She sincerely doubted that he was talking about writing books on medieval Westerosi history when he used the term “work.” Dr. Bolton was looking at her very thoughtfully, though, almost with approval.

“Couldn’t you sell these items?”

“Not unless they’re from my own patterns. It’s a copyright violation otherwise. And I can’t just make things because I like to. I don’t have the space and it’s too expensive.”
Dr. Bolton expressed surprise.

“Knitting is not an inexpensive hobby.”

“What does it cost?”

Sansa tried to shrug. “It depends on the garment, the size of the person, and what fiber you use.”

“If you were to knit me a sweater, what would that run?”

Sansa hoped they were still in the hypothetical world where this was her house and her craft room. Although if he gave her needles and yarn, she would have her hands free . . . “Would you stand up, Dr. Bolton?”

“Why?”

“So I can get an idea of your size,” she said patiently. “Now would you turn around? Okay, that’s good.” Sansa waited till he sat back down again. “Anywhere from $75 to $200, depending on the fiber.”

“I could buy a sweater in a store for half the cost.”

“You could buy something off the rack made out of an acrylic blend that will last you about two years for half the cost,” she corrected. “When I make a garment, it’s made to measure; it’s out of really high quality fiber; and if you take care of it properly, the garment will last you a lot longer than two years.” She spoke a lot more vehemently than she intended.

Dr. Bolton considered her. “It’s that expensive?”

She was sitting in a maniac’s basement talking about the merits of handcrafted garments, she thought. “Yes, unless you use craft store yarn.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“If you went to a craft store, like Hobby Lobby or JoAnn’s, you can buy yarn there. Most of it is inexpensive like Red Heart. It’s acrylic. You can buy yarn very cheaply, but it’s not very good. I’ve used it for baby things. Those need to get washed a lot and it’s not like they’re worn for more than a month or so, so it makes more sense. But it takes a lot of time to make a sweater for an adult, and I like to use something that’s of better quality. So I go to local yarn shops or buy fiber online. You pay more, but it’s worth it. That’s the reason I spend so much on my needles too.”

“Good tools are very important,” he agreed seriously. “That is one lesson Ramsay seems to have learned.”

Sansa half listened and half screamed inside as Tip-In explained how a good knife was really essential if you were going to flay someone. She sat there trying to keep her face very inexpressive. Dr. Bolton knew more about flaying than anyone had a right to. He shared a cautionary tale with her about his bastard son using a dull knife on one of his “companions” that made her want to vomit, but she listened very politely.

“I’d like to see your work,” he told her, “but I’m afraid it—”

Sansa really didn’t want to hear the end of that sentence. “It’s online, you know.” She rattled off instructions and waited while he pulled up the photos on his phone.
He took his time examining them. “This is very impressive.” He held up the phone to a picture of a Fair Isle cardigan she had knitted for herself. He also liked the look of the socks she’d made for Jon. “I was on the plane to Qarth for a conference and they allowed someone onto the plane with her knitting needles.”

“Knitting needles and crochet hooks are fine. You can’t bring on scissors though.”

Dr. Bolton was thoughtful. “I sat next to her. They were made out of metal and there was a very long cord connecting them. I believe she was making a pair of socks.”

“Oh, those are circular needles. I prefer to knit with those; the best are made out of nickel-plated steel. She was probably doing magic loop.”

“The tips seemed quite sharp.”

“Were the socks lacy looking? You need sharp points for lace.” There was a pair in her bag which held a lace weight shawl which presumably was in possession now.

He couldn’t remember. However, he was deeply interested on her opinion of the tensile strength of the cord. Would it be sufficient to strangle someone?

Sansa managed to tell him quite truthfully that she really didn’t know.

* * *

Catelyn’s phone went off in the middle of the night. Ned, she thought alarmed. He had driven up to Winterfell as was required by the library school; he wasn’t due back for days. The snows were bad up there. She took the call.

“It’s Margaery. Is Sansa there?”

She rubbed her eyes. It was 3:13. “Do you realize what time it is?”

“Is Sansa there?”

“Isn’t she with you?”

“She’s not here. The bed’s not been slept in. The cardigan she put on the bed is in the exact same spot as when I left Monday morning. She didn’t come home to you?”

Catelyn sat up. “Not that I know of. When was the last time you saw her?”

“Monday morning. I stayed over at Loras and Renly’s to finish my paper. Then I had classes and I had dinner at Grandmother’s. I thought maybe she was out when I got back, but she’s not here!”

It was Tuesday night. No, it was technically Wednesday morning. “Maybe she’s with a friend. Did you try calling her?”

“Of course, I tried calling her. I texted her too. She hasn’t got back to me.”

There were a host of possible explanations, but Catelyn threw back the covers. “Hold on.” She did a check of Arya’s room, the living room, and Sansa’s old room. “She’s not here,” Catelyn told Margaery. “I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about,” she said without conviction. “Perhaps she forgot to charge her phone.”

“Sansa would have left me a message,” Margaery insisted. “Especially after what happened with
that freak who followed her. I’ve called everywhere. I even called Gendry and Pod. No one has seen or heard from her since this Monday.”

It was the panic in Margaery’s voice that did it. There was nothing practiced or artificial in her tone. It was all genuine worry. “Where are you?”

“The apartment.”

“I can’t leave the boys alone. Can you come here?”

Margaery assented.

She would do a thorough sweep of the house and then she would start making calls. She’d done her best to reassure Margaery, but Catelyn was now wide awake and worried to death.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

For the non-knitters among you, circular needles look like this.

Magic loop is a technique used to knit with one long circular needle rather than with the little double pointed needles like this. Magic loop is what the lady next to Roose on the plane would have been doing.

In my head, I’ve decided that Sansa is a yarn snob and that she uses Addi Turbos, which are really awesome, albeit expensive German knitting needles made out of nickel plated steel. I don’t know if you can kill someone with them. All I know is that they are my favorites and I am hoping Santa brings me some more for Christmas.
Brienne starts to buckle under the complexity of Jaime and Cersei’s relationships. As her stay in Roose Bolton’s basement continues, Sansa has to do some fast talking to stay on his good side. Their conversation goes in unexpected directions for her and she learns where Roose draws the ethical line. Cersei and Stannis try to achieve closure. The cavalry is on its way, but is blocked by corrupt officials and bad weather until Ned suggests an alternative route.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Knee deep in instruction plans for her second semester classes, Brienne jumped when she realized Stannis was standing in her doorway. “You have got to stop doing that.”

He was puzzled.

“Knock or clear your throat or something, please. You can’t just stand there. It’s very disturbing.”

“I did knock. You didn’t hear me.”

“Oh.” She turned away from the monitor. She was trying to figure out how she was going to build in interactivity into an 80-person class for the next semester and it was not going well.

“Sansa isn’t here.”

Brienne thought this should be obvious. Her office was the size of a large broom closet.

“She was supposed to work today,” he clarified.

“Didn’t she call in?”

Stannis shook his head.

That didn’t sound like Sansa. She was normally very reliable. “Did you try calling her?”

“I don’t have her number and neither Stark nor Shae is here.”

Brienne wondered why he couldn’t have just sent her an email. She flipped through her contacts, found Sansa’s number, and scribbled it down on a piece of paper for him.

He took it and thanked her. Still he stood in her office. “Does Lannister talk about Cersei at all?”

Brienne sighed. Not this again. “I really don’t feel comfortable discussing it with you.” The things Jaime told her were in confidence. At some point, he would probably need to reach some sort of closure with his sister, but it would have to be his decision, not hers.
“She wants to speak to you. Would you be willing to come by my house to do so?”

No, Brienne thought. No, no, no. “I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“Why not?”

Brienne stared at him. “Because she loathes me? Every time I’ve seen her, she’s been hateful.” And Jaime would see it as a major betrayal. He would never forgive her.

“I would ensure she was polite.”

Brienne shook her head. “This situation with them is very complicated. I don’t think my seeing her would make it any simpler.” What was she saying? Everyone in the immediate vicinity of Jaime and Cersei had been sucked into this insane emotional maelstrom. Simplicity had fled the building.

Stannis didn’t care for her answer. “She is confused. I believe it would help if she could speak to you.”

“Her confusion is not my problem,” Brienne told him.

“No, I suppose it’s not.” He turned and abruptly left the room.

Brienne was left staring at a monitor filled with text that no longer seemed to make sense.

* * *

After their convivial if disturbing chats, Sansa had been hoping that she’d started to establish some sort of rapport with her captor. That flickered and died when Dr. Bolton sat down opposite her after she’d finished eating the sandwich he’d brought her and he’d retied her arms to the chair very tightly.

“Whose idea was the ScanQuest PageCounterPro 3?”

“One of the catalogers made it up.”

He just gazed at her narrowly.

“Dr. Bolton, it wasn’t personal on my part, you know. They flagged your account. It’s what they told me to say.”

“And the time in the basement?”

“I was down there working on Lemon Cakes business.”

“And yet somehow the librarian upstairs psychically knew that I had materials in my satchel.” His eyes glittered like two chips of ice.

Sansa debated. “I was there with Tywin Lannister. The really tall man?”

“I know who Tywin Lannister is.”

“He’s kind of intimidating. We got in the conference room and he said something snide about the books in your bag,” Sansa lied.

Tip-In clearly didn’t believe her. “Why would he care?”
“He hates Dad,” Sansa said very simply. This was true. “I don’t know why. He doesn’t think Dad should be the director.” This was also true; she knew so from overhearing her parents’ discussions. “He said something about how everything was too lax at the library. So I felt like I had to call up there. I’m sorry. It’s just a job. I needed the money and working in the library is less gross than doing food service.”

He was still staring at her.

“Uh, Dr. Bolton, may I ask you something?” She didn’t wait. “Why are you so interested in leeches? I noticed you check out a lot of books about them. Are you writing an article?”

It was as if a switch flicked on. His eyes returned to normal and he began to speak quite eloquently about leeches. He had evidently read widely on the subject because he went on for what seemed like ages.

Sansa listened as if her life depended upon it, which she thought might very well be the case.

He finally finished.

“I didn’t know any of that,” she told him truthfully. Could he get any creepier? This was the question she kept asking herself and the answer was always a resounding “yes.”

“I enjoy these conversations,” he commented. “I don’t expect you do, though.”

Sansa cocked her head at him. “I appreciate how considerate you’ve been. And you haven’t tried to feel me up or anything. Littlefinger would be all over me.”

“To hear him tell it, you two share a deep understanding. Baelish seems to think you have a relationship.”

Sansa recoiled. “He’s telling people I’m dating him?”

“He didn’t go into specifics. I doubt he confides in very many people,” Tip-In reassured her.

It occurred to Sansa that perhaps she would have been better off letting him think she and Petyr were an item. He might be more willing to let her survive.

“What is it about him you dislike so much?”

“He’s just . . . I know he’s a friend of yours, Dr. Bolton, but—”

“No, he’s not. He is an associate. I am not friends with him.”

That didn’t seem to bode well for Littlefinger. Perhaps what she’d said was all right after all. “You really want to know?”

He looked at her expectantly.

“Littlefinger is a perv. He’s always there, you know? He’s been sniffing around me since I was fifteen, but he’s not even a dedicated perv. He goes after Mum and Aunt Lysa too. Actually, he succeeded with Aunt Lysa. It’s just gross.”

“He lacks self-restraint,” Dr. Bolton said with irritation. ”I warned him his pursuit of you was bringing the wrong kind of attention.”

“I hate his voice,” Sansa blurted out.
“What’s wrong with his voice?”

“He sounds like a poor man’s Christian Bale.” Seeing this meant nothing to Dr. Bolton, she went on, “You know, like in *Batman*? It’s affected.” Should she tell him he had a nice voice? No, he would just think she was sucking up.

He laughed. “Tell me something, is it all men or just him?”

“What?”

“You live with the Tyrell girl.”

“Yes,” Sansa acknowledged. He already knew about Margaery. He’d read some of her texts aloud to her. There was no point in lying.

“And you dated the President’s son, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, he was a shit, though.”

Tip-In waited.

Sansa composed her thoughts. “Joffrey looked great on paper. I mean, he’s really cute. He’s from a prominent family. His father was friends with my dad. It all should have been perfect. It was fine at first. His mother even acted nice to me. It seemed like it was what I was supposed to want.”

Dr. Bolton leaned forward. He seemed struck by what she was saying.

“But he’s uh not . . .” She stopped. She was about to say that Joffrey wasn’t normal, but she wasn’t sure how to explain this to a man who was about as abnormal as they came. “It’s like what you were saying about self-control,” she finally settled on. “Joffrey doesn’t have any.”

Her captor nodded.

She had to give him points for being a good listener. It was clear that Dr. Bolton was paying very careful attention to every word she said. “He’s also, uh, I guess, I would say he’s cunning, but he’s not very intelligent.”

“He wrote me a very good paper on the Faith Militant. He made some very astute arguments as I recall.”

“Thank you.”

“Hmm?”

“He made me write it for him.”

Dr. Bolton was greatly displeased by this revelation. He said more than a few things about academic dishonesty. He lectured her for longer than Dr. Karstark had. What she had done, he told her, was wrong, ethically and legally wrong. He told her she was very lucky that she hadn’t been expelled.

Considering that he had her tied to a chair and was probably going to kill her, Sansa didn’t feel too badly about what she’d done, but she acted like she was very sorry. “That was what ended it, you know. I didn’t mind helping him study. I figured that was what a good girlfriend was supposed to do. But the paper was . . . I guess it was the final indicator that he wasn’t good enough for me.” The final indicator had been him having one of his “friends” smack her around, but for all Sansa
knew, Dr. Bolton might approve of the abuse. “I heard a couple of your lectures, you know. They were really interesting. Joffrey taped them.”

There was that frown again. “That is expressly forbidden; it’s in my syllabus.”

“Well, that’s Joffrey,” Sansa said bitterly. “Tell him he can’t do something and he wants to do it. That’s probably why he’s at the Wall now.”

“He is at the Wall because he didn’t pay careful enough attention to his surroundings.” Her captor explained the nature of Joffrey’s sexual offenses as if he were pointing out that the sky was blue.

Sansa tried not to retch. That could have been her. The girl had survived, but was going to be dealing with the ordeal her whole life. If Sansa got out of this, she was going to email Jon and ask him to beat the shit out of Joffrey. No, she thought. She would go up to the Wall and she would beat the shit out of Joffrey.

“Closed-circuit television,” Tip-In said in disgust. “One needs to be aware of witnesses, sentient or otherwise. Another lesson my bastard has never learned.” As he looked at Sansa, his face returned to its usual pleasant mask. “Forgive me, I’m digressing. Do go on.”

“No, it’s all right,” Sansa managed. “That was pretty much it about Joffrey. He was the last and the worst of my boyfriends.”

“Then you met the Tyrell girl?”

“Well, I knew her from before,” Sansa explained. “She dated him after me. It didn’t last very long. We got involved after.” She didn’t want to talk about Margaery with him.

“Do you identify as a lesbian or as bisexual?”

Sansa felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. Her composure left her. Thus far he hadn’t actually done anything to her other than creep her out. What if he raped her? What if—

“I’m sorry if that’s too personal a question.”

The freaky thing was she thought he meant it. He really was apologizing. “No, it’s okay.” If she ever got out of here, she was going to need therapy. She really didn’t want to talk about her sexuality with him at all, but she’d already opened that door so she might as well go through it. “I’m bisexual.”

Tip-In didn’t say anything.

She had no idea what she could do if he tried anything. He could still keep her tied up. He was definitely stronger than her. He took every precaution when he did untie her. He would be on his guard even if she appeared to welcome his advances should he make any. “What about you? I guess with three wives, you’re heterosexual?” She took a page from his book and made it sound like she was asking him if he liked wallpaper or paint.

“I prefer women.” Dr. Bolton got up. He took the plate. “Ramsay is like you.”

The idea that she shared anything in common with his son was appalling. Sansa really thought she could go centuries without hearing more about Ramsay.

He glanced at his watch. “We shall have to continue this next time.”
“Okay.”

When he left her in the darkness, she finally breathed a sigh of relief. Sooner or later someone had to notice she was gone. They had to find her. As with the other times, the relief was very quickly replaced by panic; she hated being alone in the dark.

She was trying not to cry when she heard him unlocking the door.

He turned on the lights and came down bearing a tuner, a CD player, and a disc changer. He hooked everything up at the bar and inserted some discs. “To help you pass the time.”

“Oh, thank you.” Was it music? He didn’t seem like the type. She wondered wildly what he listened to. She thought he was about the same age as her parents. What would he be into? AC/DC? Supertramp? ABBA? Billy Joel? Air Supply?

Tip-In pressed the play button and headed back up the stairs.

Her captor had considerately left her with a six disc audio book on the history of the use of leeches.

Sansa sat in the dark thinking bitterly that not only was she going to need years of therapy, she was going to need decades of it.

* * *

It couldn’t be this easy, Cersei thought. One day her life was in shards, the next everything seemed repairable. Father was being positively reasonable.

She would begin her classes at Rosby at the start of the second semester.

Now she found herself worrying about other things, or rather other people.

Melisandre had not been near the house, but still she worried about her. She was at the library with Stannis every day of the work week. What if she decided she wanted him again?

She thought about Jaime too. It seemed hopeless. No matter how many texts she sent him begging him to talk to her, he stayed away. If he would just forgive her, she thought, maybe then she could move forward. But if he wouldn’t even talk to her, how could that happen? Cersei had tried reaching out to Brienne, but the woman was unwilling to speak to her.

Stannis merely shook his head. “I asked, woman. She said no.”

They were alone in the house. Tyrion had taken Myrcella and Tommen out to the movies. Asha and Davos had gone somewhere, out for a drive to the coast, she thought they said. They assured her they would be back later.

Cersei hugged herself.

Stannis interpreted this as a sign she was cold and put another log on the fire.

“Did you see Melisandre today?” It was out before she could stop herself.

He turned. “Of course, I saw her. We work in the same building.” He poked at the fire and then joined her on the sofa.

“Is Sansa still working for you?”
Stannis gave her a quizzical glance. “Yes. But she wasn’t in today or the day before. I phoned and left a message, but she never returned the call.”

“Why would you call?”

“She was scheduled and she did not show up; it’s not like her. Shae swears she is one of the most reliable students she’s ever had. We are trying to get through the backlog.” He picked up his whiskey. “Tyrion said you’re jealous of her. Why?”

She was going to kill Tyrion. “I am not jealous of Sansa Stark.”

“She’s scarcely older than Shireen. You have no cause to worry.”

Cersei was about to point out that a woman of twenty one was very different from a girl of sixteen, when it occurred to her that it was probably not wise to highlight the distinction.

He took a sip of his drink and set it back down on the coffee table. “It is over with Melisandre. She has made that very clear.”

“What if she decides you’re a god again?”

“Azor Ahai and he is not a god,” he corrected. “I do not care for inconstancy. I have a child. I cannot live my life on Melisandre’s whims.”

She thought about this.

“Are you jealous of Davos and Asha too?”

“No, of course not.” They were different. “I don’t want us to stop being with them.” She stared at the flames in the fireplace.

“Good. I don’t either.”

“Are you over Melisandre?”

“Are you over Jaime?”

She didn’t reply right away. Finally she said, “It looks like he’s done with me.”

“Then we are in the same position,” he pointed out. He awkwardly extended his arm around her shoulder.

Cersei hadn’t thought about it in that manner. She snuggled up against him. “We’ll get over them together.”

* * *

Ned held his phone away from his ear and looked at it in disbelief. “They won’t do anything?” He was trying to leave Winterfell, but the roads were still closed because of the blizzard. The planes were grounded.

Cat sighed audibly. “The police detective claims they have an APB out on her, but since both Margaery and I have received texts from her . . .” she let her voice trail off. She sounded close to tears. “He’s not even in Missing Persons. I’m not sure how this happened, but they’ve assigned someone from Vice to be on the case.”
“WHAT?”

“Olenna Tyrell’s son found it out for us. He’s trying to use his influence, but so far it’s been slow going. The detective doesn’t seem to be taking us at all seriously. I don’t know what to do, Ned. I’ve called every relative the two of us have. Margaery has worked her way through all of their friends and all of Arya’s friends. Her grandmother has queried everyone at the library.”

Brandon caught his attention. The crawl on the TV news indicated the authorities had lifted the travel ban. He communicated this to Cat. “I’m leaving now.” He thought a moment. “Tywin Lannister.”

“What?”

“Call Tywin Lannister. Or have Arya do it. He’s got more clout than anyone we know put together. If anyone can get through to the authorities, he can.”

Cat made him promise to be careful driving. He hung up, shoved the little he had not already packed into his suitcase, and started for home.

* * *

Tyrion was startled to find Brienne sitting on the floor of the hallway outside his apartment. “How long have you been there?”

“Since 5:30.”

He glanced at his watch. It was almost 9:00.

“I buzzed all the doorbells like they do in the movies. It worked. Someone let me in.”

“Are you drunk?”

Brienne shook her head. “I think I need to be.”

Tyrion let her in and poured them both some wine.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” she said miserably.

“Olenna might be a better person—”

Brienne looked at him. “Tyrion, Olenna is great when I need to know what journal to publish in or if I need help buying work clothes. I like her. She’s been a mentor to me, but do you seriously expect me to go to her and talk to her about my boyfriend, who just ended an incestuous relationship of nearly three decades with his twin sister, who is now sleeping with two of our colleagues and my own ex-boyfriend?” She drank down her wine and poured more into the glass.

No, he reflected, perhaps this wasn’t the wisest course of action.

“I might have gone to Asha, but she’s one of the people having sex with Cersei. Even if he wasn’t consumed in this mess, I would never have talked to Stannis. I was almost desperate enough to go to Melisandre, but she probably would tell me I need to open my heart to R’hllor or something.”

Tyrion watched as Brienne drank again.

“Davos . . .” Brienne reached for the bottle.
He pulled it away. “Slow down.”

“I do one crazy, impulsive thing for the first time in my life by asking a man out on a date, and it turns out he’s a smuggler and now he’s also sleeping with my new boyfriend’s twin sister and two of my colleagues. There’s no one left, Tyrion. Who am I going to talk to? Varys? Petyr? Bronn?”

“Well, you might actually shock Varys. I’ve given up trying to. Petyr is too skeevy. Bronn . . .”

Tyrion thought she had a point.

“I can’t call my father. I can’t talk to any of my other friends; I can’t talk to Renly or Myranda. There’s no one else. I almost called your father, but—”

“Brienne, I need you to listen to me for once. My father likes you. If you needed help with something practical like doing your taxes or figuring out what funds to pick for your retirement plan, I would advise you to call him. He would be more than happy to assist you. If it involves money, power, or even brains, he is your man. But he does not do emotion. He just doesn’t. He is not an option in a situation like this. I’m going to call Jaime, okay?” He moved the wine bottle away from her again.

Brienne reached over and stopped him from getting up. “Not Jaime. I need to talk to someone and you’re it.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I would like to dedicate this chapter to my 19th Century English Novelists professor, who at the start of the semester informed us he would rather read that we had slaughtered our families, rendered them into sausage meat, and ate them, than learn that we had committed plagiarism or other crimes of academic dishonesty.
Sansa discovers there is a downside to trying to impress upon Roose Bolton the commonalities they share. Meanwhile Tyrion takes Jaime to task and the cavalry tries to work around the police in order to rescue Sansa. Roose discusses Sansa’s future with her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa awoke to see her captor setting up a portable television on a table by the wall to her right. He screwed in the cable. After hours of listening to an audio book about leeches, she devoutly prayed to the Mother Dr. Bolton wasn’t going to subject her to some Nature documentary about them.

“Good morning, Sansa,” he greeted her pleasantly.

It didn’t feel like morning. It felt like it was the middle of the night. “Already?”

“You slept very deeply. I’ll have your breakfast in a minute. How do pancakes sound?”

It sounded like she was staying at the Bed & Breakfast from the Seventh Hell and he was her demented host, but she smiled. “Great, thanks, Dr. Bolton. May I brush my teeth and wash after?”

“Certainly. I’ve found you something else to wear. I’m going to get you a more comfortable chair and I’ll reorient you as well. I know it can’t be pleasant staring at the same thing for hours on end.”

After breakfast, he allowed her into the bathroom. There was a blue day dress hanging on one of the hooks. It was clean and it looked like it had only been worn once or twice, but she thought it was probably ten or fifteen years old. The skirt was long and gauzy. She wondered uneasily whose it had been, one of the previous Mrs. Boltons probably. She put it on. There was no point in angering him and it was nice to have something fresh to wear.

Soon she found herself was sitting next to her captor watching On Demand episodes of Holmes Inspection. Tip-In appeared to be one of those people who disliked chatter during television, so she kept quiet. Every so often he asked a question. Only then did she speak.

“My third wife talked incessantly,” he commented as the credits rolled on the episode. “Even on her death bed, she wouldn’t be quiet.”

Sansa decided she had no need to know what had been the last Mrs. Bolton’s cause of death. She sincerely hoped she was not wearing the woman’s dress, but it seemed very likely. “I don’t like to talk much during a show,” she said equably.

“A car accident,” he told her.
“Oh, I’m sorry,” she told him automatically.

“I married her for her money.”

What was she supposed to say to that? Then it came to her. “Margaery has lots.”

He gave her an approving nod. As he queued up the next episode, he commented, “The dress suits you. It makes your eyes even bluer.”

Apparently they were staying firmly in creepy territory, but she smiled politely and thanked him. “It was considerate of you to go to the trouble of getting it for me.”

“It was no trouble. I still have all of Bethany’s clothes.”

“She was your third wife?”

Dr. Bolton shook his head. “Second. It would take several of you to fit anything of Walda’s.”

Sansa had to wonder that there were three women out there who had voluntarily married this freak.

“She died of a fever. Pneumonia.”

What made Tip-In so disturbing was how casual he sounded. She couldn’t tell if he was mournful or happy. It was like he was telling her about a vaguely interesting article he read in the paper about another country’s economic crisis.

She was about to ask another question, but the program was starting.

Sansa watched as Mike Holmes walked his way through a seemingly great house that had oodles of problems.

“The homeowner had an inspection,” Tip-In commented. He seemed pleased.

“Yeah, sometimes they do on this show. It’s no guarantee, I guess.” Sansa fell silent. How long had she been here? If she went by the number of meals he’d provided, she thought it had been a week, but her sense that Tip-In was a master of mindfuckery was borne out almost every five to ten minutes with his little anecdotes. People would have noticed if she’d been gone so long. She was behind on orders. Arya would be hunting for her on that score alone. Margaery would be looking for her. Even her parents, as flaky as they were, would be searching for her.

A crewmember pulled out some dodgy looking cables and several junction boxes. They were pointing out that the setup was an electrical fire waiting to happen.

Dr. Bolton chuckled.

Sansa couldn’t see how this was remotely funny.

He launched into an anecdote of how his bastard son had nearly electrocuted the babysitter when he was only seven. He seemed proud for once. Normally when Dr. Bolton talked about Ramsay he was irritated. Not by the things his son did, but because Ramsay didn’t listen.

Sansa was saved the necessity of figuring out what an appropriate reply could possibly be by his cell phone which vibrated repeatedly.

He glanced at the number on the phone. Dr. Bolton sighed and paused the program. “I’m afraid I have to take this. Excuse me, please?” He looked at her expectantly.
“Oh, of course.” What else did he think she could possibly say? As if she would tell him no, stay down here and let it go to voicemail?

She thought about screaming, but he was careful not to answer the phone while he was in the basement. She heard the door lock behind him. She sat there staring at the static image of overloaded junction boxes wondering how the fuck she was going to get out of this. Sansa was saying that word in her head a lot these days. She said it in her head again when she heard two sets of footsteps on the stairs. Tip-In was accompanied by Littlefinger.

“As you can see, Sansa is fine.”

Littlefinger seemed genuinely concerned for her and then baffled by the setup. “Bolton? What’s going on here?” He stared at the two chairs, then at the paused image of the junction boxes, and then back at Sansa.

“We were watching television.”

Sansa was gratified to see that Littlefinger seemed to find this as bizarre as she did. It was nice to have the extra validation that she was not going crazy. He approached her and knelt down in front of her, putting his hands on top of hers.

Tip-In was clearly irritated with his co-conspirator.

“Are you all right, sweetling?”

Sansa wasn’t sure what to say. She suddenly noticed that Tip-In had a length of cord between his hands. Then she saw a metallic gleam. Shit. He was twisting it around his wrists. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He must have taken them out of her bag. As much as she hated Petyr Baelish, she really didn’t think she could handle it if he got murdered in front of her with her pair of 47-inch Addi Turbo circular knitting needles.

* * *

Jaime stared at Brienne. “How much did you let her drink?”

“She had three glasses of wine in rapid succession.”

“And what else?”

Tyrion shrugged. “Just three glasses.”

“What did you use? Big Gulp containers?”

“They were just ordinary wine glasses. You’re the one with the inferior stemware,” Tyrion said defensively.

Jaime poked her in the shoulder. “Brienne? Wench, come on, wake up.”

Tyrion shook his head. “I tried that already. Can you get her to the guest room? I already texted Bronn. He’ll take her desk shift in the morning.”

“It took me dragging her to Casterly Rock for her to call in. A hangover is not going to keep her home.”

“Jaime, she’s a lightweight. She’s going to be miserable tomorrow. She’s not a Lannister; she doesn’t have our tolerance to alcohol. You probably need to work on that. Besides just think of the
thrill it will give Stannis and Bronn’s fan clubs.”

“What?”

“The unedited video of them with swords and armor went viral around Crownlands. You can’t move two feet in the library without tripping over some student who wants to gawk at Bronn or Stannis. If Bronn takes Brienne’s shift, it’ll be back-to-back librarian studliness at the reference desk.”

Sometimes Jaime understood why Tyrion annoyed Father so much. He poked at her again. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“She forbade it. You should be glad she came here. She was talking about going to Father for emotional support.”

“I’ll stay with her tonight.” Jaime thought it would be better for her to remain on the sofa. He got Brienne settled and preemptively removed her phone before returning to Tyrion. “All we need is for her to come to and drunk dial him.”

“It’s finally getting to her,” Tyrion told him as they sat in his kitchen. “I think you need to start exposing her to our saner relatives. Maybe take out to dinner with Uncle Kevan and Aunt Dorna.”

“Why did she come here? Why would she drink like this? Brienne is always so calm.”

“Jaime, I know it’s hard to understand, but normal people do not live like us.”

He shook his head. “Brienne told me everyone has some craziness in their family.”

“Yes, but usually you ease a person into the insanity. You dove into the deep end with her before you ever took her out on a date. You might want to do that, by the way.”

“Do what?”

“Take her on a date.”

“We have been dating,” Jaime protested. He had just taken her to dinner and a movie the other night.

Tyrion went on as if he hadn’t spoken, “Dragging a woman along while you chauffeur your children, who don’t know you’re their father, from your brother’s to your father’s because you want to avoid talking to your sister, who also happens to be your children’s mother, does not constitute a date, not even if you stop off for McDonald’s on the way. A date involves an invitation to a place or to an activity that the lady would enjoy and she is free to decline. Dating,” Tyrion said leaning forward, “usually happens before something known as a proposal. This is when you ask the lady to marry you. The lady is also free to say no to that too.”

Jaime groaned. “She talked a lot before she passed out, didn’t she?”

“Oh, yes.” Tyrion’s eyes gleamed.

“I’ll have you know I took her out the other night to a screening at Crownlands of the extended version of The Two Towers, which I happen to know is her favorite movie. We went out to a dinner at some restaurant her friend Myranda told me she liked.”

Tyrion smirked.
“You knew this?”

“It was too much fun not to rub your ineptitude in.”

Jaime looked at his brother sourly.

“Besides, it sounds like you need all the help you can get.”

* * *

Sansa kept her voice neutral, which was very hard as it hit her that Dr. Bolton must have ripped the needles out from her shawl. 293 stitches, she thought bitterly, 293 fucking stitches and weeks of painstaking work. “I’m fine,” she told Littlefinger.

Tip-In smirked at her.

Littlefinger rose abruptly.

The circular needles vanished into Dr. Bolton's pocket. “You’ve seen her. She’s unharmed. Now don’t you think you should get out of here, Baelish?”

“I’m taking her with me. I should never have let you persuade me otherwise.”

Sansa thought she would infinitely prefer being with Petyr Baelish even if he was a pervert. She was reasonably certain she could take him out. But she was equally sure that Tip-In wasn’t going to allow her out of his basement. She tried to release her resentment about the knitting. Getting out of here alive was more important than 293 fucking stitches.

“We can discuss it upstairs.” Dr. Bolton would not take no for an answer.

They were gone a long time. At some point, the screen unfroze. Sansa read the date and time on the cable menu. She had only been here three days. It was the middle of the night. She felt better. She’d filed a complaint against Petyr Baelish. Margaery knew it; her parents knew it. The authorities might even be following him. Margaery and her parents knew about Tip-In. Sooner or later they would come here. The screen went black. She composed herself.

Eventually Tip-In rejoined her. “Your admirer is very persistent.”

“I told you.”

He started the program up again.

“Did you do anything to him?” Sansa asked calmly.

Tip-In turned to her with an enigmatic smile. “I knew you would appreciate my little joke.”

If she ever got out of here, she would show him tensile strength. It wasn’t enough he had to terrorize her, kidnap her, tell her these sick stories, the creep had to go and rip out 293 stitches for a joke?

“Unfortunately, no, Baelish is still with us. He’s not outlived his usefulness yet. After all this is over, though, I may dispose of him. He’s growing too erratic.”

She nodded. Mike Holmes was now grimly pointing out a plumbing problem of seemingly epic proportions.
“You know,” he remarked in a thoughtful voice, “We have a lot in common, you and I.”

Oh my fucking gods, she thought. But then Sansa remembered some of the movies she and Margaery had watched on Lifetime. There had been more than a few featuring women in peril. There were a couple movies she could remember where the girls had developed some kind of syndrome where they bonded with their captors. Tip-In seemed to think they had a bond. Maybe she could play on this. “Dr. Bolton?”

Tip-In paused the program.

“When he’s no longer useful, and you get rid of him, may I watch?”

He looked at her for a seeming eternity.

“Or not. Sorry, Dr. Bolton, I guess that was presumptuous of me. It’s just that I really don’t like him.”

“Call me Roose.”

* * *

Arya left her message on Mr. Lannister’s phone. She felt so helpless. The police officers who had been coming to the house were so slimy. They seemed a lot like Littlefinger to her.

Dad knew what was going on and was trying desperately to get home, but had run up against blizzards.

They’d contacted every family member they could think of who Sansa might possibly have gone to stay with.

Margaery had bitten all of her carefully manicured nails right off. She had called every single one of their friends. She had her grandmother phone every person from the library who might know where Sansa was.

No one seemed to know where she was or who she could be with.

The boys were angry and scared.

Robin kept on talking about how the “bad man” must have gotten her.

“It went to voicemail. The only other number I have is for the office and that goes to voicemail too. Should we wait till morning?”

Margaery couldn’t find his home number on the computer.

“No.” Mum looked up from the phone book. “Call Kevan. He’ll have it.”

* * *

They were watching a marathon of Property Brothers. Sansa had never been a big fan of the program and Roose wasn’t much impressed either. Unfortunately, because of this he talked to her more. And the more Roose relaxed and opened up to her, the scarier he became.

Sansa had stopped thinking of him as Tip-In. Tip-In was the man who typically loused up her day by showing up on her shift and required her to placate, fool, and deal with him for ten-to-fifteen minutes at a time. Roose was the man who had stalked her; was holding her captive; and enjoyed
killing people. She was very much in the company of Roose and it was taking everything she had to pretend he wasn’t scaring the shit out of her.

He held up a plate with blueberry scones from the coffeehouse. Roose seemed to think it was a shared little joke between them.

She shook her head with a forced smile. “I’m so full, but thanks.”

He put the plate back down. “Tell me something. Why didn’t you major in history?”

“Well, it’s my dad’s thing, I guess. I don’t know if he told you, but I was going to go to grad school for literature.”

Roose shook his head. “Graduate school is fine, but do you really want to spend the rest of your days analyzing the rhyming schemes of Valyrian poetry? History is so much richer, so much more interesting.”

Sansa hoped this meant she actually had a future that didn’t involve rotting beneath his floorboards. “Dr. Karstark doesn’t seem to think I’m any good at it.”

He was dismissive. “Rickard is a windbag. You have two years left?”

Sansa fervently prayed he wasn’t speaking literally. “One and a half.”

He hit the mute button. “Do you mind?”

“No, not at all,” she lied. She was so tired. He had stopped bringing her food all the time, making her think it was day or night, but they had been watching episodes of this stupid show for the past five hours. Didn’t he ever sleep?

Roose turned his body toward her. “How many credits do you have in history?”

Sansa counted on her fingers, which was made harder by the fact that her wrists were still tied to the chair arms. I’m in the second half of Westerosi Civ so that’s six. I took, uh, it was with Dr. Umber. I can’t remember the course number.”

“Medieval military history?”

“Yes.”

“I’m surprised.”

She didn’t know if that was a positive or negative thing. His specialty was medieval history so maybe he was pleased, but perhaps he didn’t like Dr. Umber. “It fit my schedule.”

“You say that often,” he told her.

Sansa was annoyed. The whole reason she was in this mess was because she hadn’t been able to get into the second half of Westerosi Civ until this semester. “The scheduling is really terrible here. I had to take some stupid course on Pentoshi monster films because it was the only thing that was open that didn’t conflict with anything else. Do you have any idea how lame those movies are?”

Roose laughed. “Are those the only history credits you have?”

“I took HIS 306 and HIS 455 too. So I must have fifteen credits. I was going to do a minor.”
“Are you done with your required courses?”

“I still have to take something in biology and a statistics class. My advisor said it would count for the math requirement.”

“You can take those over the Third semester.”

She tried to tell herself not to get excited. He wasn’t just going to let her go. “I’m already a junior. Isn’t it past the deadline to declare for history?”

“You forget I’m the Chair. I can waive it.”

Maybe it wasn’t this wasn’t another one of his little games. He really seemed to be sincere.

“What’s your GPA?”

“It was a 4.0.” Seeing the question in his eyes, she sighed. “Dr. Karstark. Even if I ace the last paper, the most he’ll give me is a B.”

Roose waved this away. “I’ll talk to Rickard. Even if he won’t be reasonable, one B shouldn’t matter too much. How do you do on standardized tests?”

Sansa did quite well on them generally, even on the math parts. School and all its attendant testing came easily to her.

“I thought so,” he said with quiet satisfaction. “You should have no difficulty with the graduate admission exams. Once you’re done here, you can apply to Winterfell for grad school. It’s the best program in Westeros for medieval history. You told me once you were interested in the legends of the Nightfort. You could easily work them into a dissertation, from an historical perspective of course. You won’t have any trouble getting accepted into the program.”

Sansa leaned back. He certainly sounded like he was serious, but Roose wasn’t a stupid man. Aside from what she’d overheard in the history department building, he’d made all sorts of incriminating confessions while holding her prisoner. How could he possibly let her go?

“Don’t you like the idea?”

Shit, there were the dead eyes again. “It’s a lot to take in. I’m not used to—” She tried to sound coherent. “I’ve had at least five appointments with my advisor over the last two years and left there every time feeling totally unsure—and in like five minutes, you’ve laid my future all out.”

Roose relaxed. He leaned in closer to her. “Didn’t your parents help you with any of this?”

“They used to. It was a lot easier before. Dad’s commuting back and forth for the library degree so much. And there’s the new job. I think they’ve been focusing on everyone else.”

“What about your mother?”

“She took on an extra class, I think, for a colleague who went on leave. There was stuff with Arya and Aunt Lysa. Plus, I’m not living at home anymore.”

“It’s only going to get harder, I’m afraid.”

“Why?”

“I expect Catelyn is going to have her hands full after Baelish kills Ned.” He frowned. “Where are
Sansa stared as the realtor twin steered a couple through what looked like a crack house. Fuck, fuck, fuck. “This is one of the earlier episodes, I think. The potential houses were usually pretty nasty.” Stay as cold and dead as he is, she told herself. “Men should not have facial hair like that,” Sansa commented as the twins faced the homeowners. Dad had to be okay; he had to.

Roose stroked his clean-shaven chin.

“May I ask you something?” She wanted to ask about her father, but she knew instinctively that would be a very bad idea; he would probably tell her in detail what they were going to do to him, and expect her to express approval of how clever their plan was.

“Of course.”

“Littlefinger wants to be the library director, right? What are you getting out of this deal?”

“Money.”

“That’s it?”

“Academia doesn’t pay terribly well,” he said with a shrug. “I’ve had to make take on other jobs. Like you with your Lemon Cakes enterprise.”

Sansa really didn’t see how murdering a person was comparable to selling a knitting bag. “I didn’t realize Littlefinger was wealthy.”

“He has some sidelines of his own. I believe he runs an escort business. I’ll be glad when I’m done dealing with him. The first house looks like it would be a better option, don’t you think?”

Sansa felt nauseous. “He’s a pimp?”

“I don’t really know the details. I’m afraid I can’t always choose the people I work with, Sansa. The opportunities are often limited.”

She could sense him waiting for a response. “I never thought about it that way before. It must be really frustrating for you.”

“It can be.”

Fuck, he was giving her that soulful look again, the one that meant he thought she really understood him. “I bet they pick the other house. The homeowners don’t seem too bright.”

“By the time you’re starting grad school, there’s going to be a vacancy at Winterfell.” He was watching the screen again too.

“How can you know—oh.” Roose was not the sort of man to wait for opportunities, she realized. He made things happen.

“We all go to the same annual meetings,” Roose told her as a half-smile played on his lips. “Academics like to enjoy themselves. They get careless. An accident should be very easy to arrange. Wyman Manderly is a very competent scholar, but he’s not at all discriminating about what he eats. I think poison will be the simplest way. I prefer using knives, they’re so much more satisfying, but it’s not advisable to have too many questions asked.”

Sansa kept her eyes and her brain focused on the TV. Sure enough, they picked the second house.
“You’ll be accepted into the program. I’ll get his position and I can finally go back home. I’m from the North originally, you know, just like you.” Roose extended his arm across the chair backs so that he was touching her shoulder. “We’ll have to be discreet until you get your doctorate, but it won’t be a problem. Not for us.” With his free hand, he turned her face toward his. “Would you like that?”

“... uh... I think so?” Was there a giant neon sign above her head that said “Freak magnet: Specializing in attracting creepy middle-aged men?”

“We’ll take it slowly,” he promised. He caressed her cheek with his thumb. “You have the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you,” she managed.

“You can keep on with the Tyrell girl for now. Perhaps she’d like to go to Winterfell as well.”

Sansa felt her jaw drop. “Uh, like with us? In a threesome or something?” She tried and failed at keeping the horror off her face. “I don’t—”

“No, no,” he reassured her “I meant that you could continue to enjoy her. I expect we will always have some appetites that we’ll have to sate separately,” he allowed. “I’m not a jealous man. Besides, as you said earlier, she’s wealthy. Judging by her messages to you, she seems to be besotted. I’m sure she’d want to leave you well provided for in the case of an accident.”

FUCK.

“No more writing other people’s papers, though,” he told her sternly. “I mean it.”

She nodded. “It won’t happen again, Roose; I promise.”

“Who else knows that you did that?” Roose tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“Just Joffrey.” She forced herself not to shiver as he stroked her hair.

“You said your brother serves in the Night’s Watch,” he said after a moment. “It wouldn’t be amiss for you to visit him. No one would question it.”

Sansa wasn’t sure where he was going with this. Was he going to kill Jon too? “It might seem a little random if I just showed up there.”

“We’ll need to plan the trip very thoroughly,” he assured her. “It pays to take precautions. I believe the Baratheon boy got five years so we have time.”

Not Jon. Joffrey. “I’m not following you. Joffrey isn’t going to name me a beneficiary in an insurance policy or anything.”

“He’s a witness, Sansa. He knows you wrote his paper. That kind of mistake can destroy one’s academic career. Besides it can’t always be about business. I thought he might be a good first kill for you. There’s no harm with a little fun now and then.” He caressed her shoulder through the fabric of the dress. “Speaking of which, students sometimes attend the WHA meetings,” he said thoughtfully. “The next one is in Asshai.”

“I’ve always wanted to go there,” she lied, trying not to retch as she leaned back onto his arm.
While the facial hair on the Property Brothers' twins has calmed down, when the show first started airing, it was pretty gnarly.

Thanks go out to Crossingwinter who gave me a sense of how Sansa would react if someone ripped off her lacework from her needles even while under the threat of death. I like to think it was in laceweight yarn too (like working with cobwebs and a bitch once it's ripped out).

I'll update the next chapter on Thursday.
Stark Raving Mad

Chapter Summary

In which Tywin uses his influence and resources to help rescue Sansa; Brienne and Jaime reach an understanding; Stannis learns that his insistence on proper grammar can be a weakness; and Sansa draws inspiration from Lifetime Original Movies to deal with Roose Bolton.

* * *

Whatever his faults were as a parent and a person, Tywin Lannister was admirable in a crisis. He not only listened to Arya and then to Cat, he arrived within the hour bringing several burly men who served as security for him. Phone calls were made to high-ranking officials. Things got done. Additional detectives arrived, detectives who were now taking the case very seriously.

From the things Arya and the boys were overhearing, it sounded like whoever the first set of policemen were, they were not held in high esteem by these new ones. Arya reported she heard the phrases “internal affairs” and “they’re dirty” muttered an awful lot.

“We will find Sansa,” Tywin Lannister assured the Starks and Margaery.

Arya didn’t know why they were wasting time. It had to be Littlefinger. He had a history of bothering Sansa. Even after Dad had given him a warning, he couldn’t seem to leave her alone.

Margaery was convinced it was Roose Bolton. Sansa had last been seen in the offices of the history department.

Police officers were dispatched to the residences of both.

They waited a seeming eternity.

Petyr Baelish let them search his house quite readily. He had nothing to hide, he declared. He claimed to be deeply concerned for Sansa’s welfare. If searching his home would help, it was theirs to search.

Roose Bolton was not so accommodating. According to the detective now assigned to the case, Dr. Bolton declined to allow the police in his home. He had rights and there was nothing linking the girl to him. He wanted to see a warrant before they set foot in his house. The detective was working on getting one, but it was going to take some time.

Shortly after their visit, Roose called Catelyn.

“I can’t begin to imagine what you are going through, Catelyn.”

“If you have her, by the old gods and the new I will—”

“Of course, I don’t have her. Why would I have your daughter? I consider Ned to be a personal friend. I’m hurt that you would even think such a thing of me.” He was eloquent. “This business about me following Sansa was a misunderstanding. I cleared it up with the police at the time. I
would have apologized to Sansa myself for frightening her, but I thought it might upset her more.”

Catelyn didn’t say anything.

“I tried to contact Ned several times, but every time I phoned he was away or busy.”

Catelyn had never cared for Roose Bolton. There was something off about him. She had always put it down to some sort of mild social dysfunction. Also, he was a northerner and northerners were not usually emotionally demonstrative. Ned said he was a sound scholar. He was a good lecturer, but those qualities didn’t make him someone she wanted to know well. Her encounters with him were brief and few: the occasional reception, sometimes a dinner, the odd holiday party. She and Ned were in separate fields. They didn’t always go to the same functions so she’d never given Roose Bolton a great deal of thought before Sansa had walked into the kitchen saying he’d followed her.

“Is there anything I can do? Do you need help with flyers or search parties?”

She glared into the phone.

“Could she be with friends?”

“We’ve tried all her friends.”

“I know only too well how overextended and stressed students can become. Perhaps she went off for a break somewhere.”

She thought about Olenna Tyrell’s comments. She did not like Olenna, but the woman struck her as being a very shrewd judge of character. Olenna believed Sansa’s story. She had said something was wrong with Roose.

“I will let you know if we need anything from you,” Catelyn said stiffly and hung up the phone. It struck her as odd that Petyr hadn’t called. She remembered what Sansa had said about Petyr and Roose’s conversation at the coffee shop. She stared at the receiver after the call was over. “It’s him,” she told them. “He has her.”

“How can you be sure? It’s possible Baelish has her stashed somewhere,” Tywin suggested.

“No, it’s Roose. I know it. Petyr must be involved, but it’s Roose who has her. She’s my child. I know it.”

Tywin looked at her for a long time. He turned to the large man with the hideous facial scarring.

“Clegane, you know what to do.”

The two security guards left without another word.

* * *

Brienne tried to groan, but her lips felt like they were stuck together.

“Wench?”

Her back ached too. She forced herself to sit up. If the light streaming in through Tyrion’s windows was anything to go by, she had spent another night on his beautiful but incredibly uncomfortable leather couch.

“I’ll get you some water and some Tylenol.”
She wanted a new head. Hers felt like it was about to fall off. “What time is it?”

“10:30.”

“I have to be at work.”

“Tyrion arranged for Bronn to cover your shift.”

Brienne washed the Tylenol down with water. She would still need to call in. “Why are you here?”

“He called me after you passed out.”

“I passed out?”

“Flat on the table,” Jaime told her. “I am trying. I thought you liked going to see The Two Towers. You told me it was your favorite movie and Myranda said you liked The Crescent Moon.”

Brienne shielded her eyes from the blinding light from the windows. “I had a good time, Jaime. That wasn’t why I came here. Can you do something about the sun?”

He fiddled with the blinds. “Better?”

“Oh gods yes.” She gulped the water down. “It was just—I felt so—it’s so complicated.”

Jaime sat down next to her. “Too complicated to stick it out?”

She saw the worry etched on his face. “No. I was just overwhelmed at it all.”

“I saw the therapist yesterday,” he ventured.

“Oh?” Her mouth felt unbelievably foul. She could not understand for the life of her how most of her co-workers and friends drank so much if they felt like this in the morning.

“He asked me to tell him what brought me to see him. I think I shocked him.” Jaime’s mouth twitched. “For all I know I’ve driven him to drink too. After I took up most of the hour explaining the, forgive me, clusterfuck, that is my life, he suggested I should probably go slowly with you.”

Brienne couldn’t help it; she laughed. And then she groaned because the sound was so loud. “Slow sounds like a wise plan.”

“So where do we go from here?”

“First I die”

“It’s that bad?”

“My head feels like it’s going to explode.”

Jaime extended his hand to her. “If there is one thing, I know how to handle, it’s a hangover. Come on, wench.” He helped her to her feet. “What happens after you rejoin the living?”

“We date.”

“I can handle that.”

“Then we try for normalcy.”
“That might be harder.”

* * *

Stannis and Renly were on the third box and they still hadn’t finished sorting out the mess of all of Robert’s illegitimate children.

“What did he have against condoms?” Renly wondered aloud.

He made his younger brother no answer, but as Stannis sorted through the doctor’s bills for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases and payoffs to the various mothers, he had to admit it was an excellent question.

“Speaking of condoms, I hope you’re using them.”

Stannis ignored Renly. “From what Cersei said, her father paid off a number of the women. I’ll have to speak with Tywin Lannister so we have a clear picture of the situation.” Robert’s will specifically named Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen, but Stannis didn’t want to be blindsided with a lawsuit.

“I mean it, Stannis. You are, right?”

Stannis fixed Renly with a look.

“You and your partners should all be tested.”

He declined to reply. He did not know how Renly had learned of his relationships, but he was not about to endure a lecture on the use of prophylactics from his little brother.

“Sexually transmitted diseases aren’t something you should mess around with.”

He yearned to correct Renly’s sentence, but Stannis suspected this was a deliberate trap in which his brother meant to force him to discuss his sexual partners.

“It was one thing when you were just with Selyse; I always wondered if Shireen was conceived with a petrie dish and a turkey baster. But now you appear to be having actual sex and with rather more than the usual number of partners. If it were with less people . . .”

Stannis twitched. Fewer people, he thought silently. Fewer not less. He willed his lips not to move.

“You need to be prepared or who knows what the situation will come to.”

His brother knew him all too well.

“And you need to know how to properly use condoms.” When Stannis didn’t answer, Renly went on, “I got that wrong, didn’t I? How should I have said it?”

The split infinitive was too much to bear. “Damn you. Who told you?”

Renly smirked at him. “Tyrion made an oblique reference or three. I’m not stupid, Stannis. I have eyes.”

“I have never judged you for your relationships or your orientation. I’ll thank you to afford me the same courtesy.”

“I’m not judging you, Stannis. I’m just . . . surprised. If this keeps up, people are going to point to
me as the most conventional Baratheon brother.”

“Have you told anyone? Loras?”

Renly shook his head. “I thought Tyrion was mistaken. It wasn’t until I came over here that I realized he was right.”

“I would prefer this remain a private matter. There are the children to consider.”

“I won’t say anything, Stannis, but they’re teenagers. If they don’t know yet, they’ll figure it out soon enough.” Renly set down the file folder. “Are you happy? This doesn’t seem like you.”

Stannis removed his reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “You didn’t say anything when I was with Melisandre and Asha.”

“I didn’t know about them at the time. Asha . . . is a little surprising at first, but she seems good for you. Tyrion tells me Davos is a smuggler? And Cersei—you and she always seemed to despise each other.”

He was going to have to have a discussion with Tyrion about discretion.

“Cressen thinks you’ve gone off the deep end. Although he seems to think you’re still involved with this Melisandre.”

“It’s over between us. She’s convinced Azor Ahai is someone else.” He realized Renly had no idea to what he was referring. It would be unwise to bring up Melisandre and her strange beliefs with his brother. “Melisandre is not in the picture,” Stannis said with finality. “I assure you, I know how to use prophylactics correctly and I employ them as is necessary. We have nearly six more boxes to look through.”

“Stannis, I—”

He reached for the next folder. “I am happy, Renly. Leave it at that.”

* * *

Roose knelt before her the way Littlefinger had, holding her hands in his. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to move you,” he told her.

That must mean people were looking for her. But if he moved her, the chances of her being found would be lessened. “May I ask why?”

“It won’t be for long, Sansa. I’ll try and make sure you’re comfortable.” He didn’t seem happy. “I’ll be back shortly.”

All she could do was nod. She figured it was okay to show a little fear. “Will we be able to talk like we have been, Roose?”

Roose shook his head. “Not for a while, sweetling.”

Fuck. “Um, please don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re not leaving me with your son, are you? It’s just you said he didn’t have a lot of self-control.”

He was quick to reassure her. “No. He was reevaluated last year and they ruled against his appeal. Ramsay’s still in the institution. I have someone else who will keep you safe.”
“Littlefinger?”

“No, and I have made it very clear that you’re to be well treated, Sansa. This person knows enough not to hurt what’s mine.”

She didn’t like the way he claimed her as his, but she supposed being seen as his possession was in her immediate best interests. If he moved her, it also meant that she wouldn’t have to worry about his attentions to her for a while. Despite his promises to go slow, now that Roose thought she was his girlfriend, he was more touchy than pervy Petyr.

Sansa thanked him. She wasn’t sure where he meant to stash her and she was sure it wasn’t going to be any better, but she didn’t know what else to do or say. She debated lying and trying to persuade him that since she was with him now, none of this was necessary.

As usual, he was ahead of her. “It’s better this way, Sansa. You’re new to this; you’re a remarkably self-contained young woman, but sentiment can sometimes get in the way. Once Baelish dispatches your father, we can reevaluate the situation.”

“All right.”

“I have to get some things together for the trip. Would it relax you to have the television on?”

The only thing that would relax her, Sansa thought, was about a quart of Valium and his head on a spike. “Okay, that would be great, thanks.” She didn’t think she could stand to see another home improvement program. “Could I watch Mad Men?”

Roose didn’t seem to approve. “Really?”

“It’s the clothes,” she explained slowly. “The costume designer really knows what she’s doing.” The man joked about his son trying to kill babysitters and flaying people alive; how could he possibly object to Mad Men?

Roose relented and obligingly found an episode for her On Demand. He kissed her on the forehead and went upstairs, turning off the lights as he closed and locked the door behind him.

She was watching a cigarette-smoking, negligee-clad Betty Draper shoot at a neighbor’s pigeons, when someone down bashed the basement door. Lights came on.

“She’s down here!”

Sansa recognized one of the men as the security guard from Casterly Rock Enterprises. Sandor. Yes, Arya had called him Sandor. The other man was a stranger to her. “He’s coming back,” she warned them. “Please you have to hurry.”

“It’s all right, little bird; we’ll get you out of here.”

Little bird? Was he joking? “My name is Sansa. Not little dove, not sweetling, not fucking little bird, okay? Why is so hard to say my name? Sansa,” she repeated.

“Okay,” he said a little taken aback. “Sansa.” Sandor cut through her bonds and he helped her to her feet.

She heard a gunshot.

Sansa whipped her head around. Roose was standing on the staircase. The other man who had
arrived with Sandor was on the floor. There was a lot of blood.

Roose pointed the gun at Sandor. His eyes were like ice.

She was never going to get out of here. He was never going to trust her again. Unless... Sansa did the first thing she could think of. She ripped the CD player off the wet bar and bashed Sandor over the head with it. He fell with a sickening thud to the floor.

“Seven hells,” she breathed.

Roose seemed as surprised as she was, but he collected himself almost immediately. He calmly stepped over the body of the man he’d shot and came up to her.

Sansa was shaking. It didn’t help when the remainder of his stereo equipment fell off the wet bar onto the floor.

“The first one always takes you like that,” he said approvingly.

“The first what?”

“The first kill.”

“He’s dead?” Fuck, she thought. She’d killed him?

Roose reached down and felt for a pulse. “No.” He frowned.

“Oh. I thought—” He’s not dead, she told herself. This was a good thing. “Are they... are they cops?” It seemed a logical thing to ask. It would probably be disastrous to let him know she knew Sandor.

He removed Sandor’s wallet. “Casterly Rock Enterprises,” he read. “Unfortunate, but not insurmountable.”

Mr. Lannister must have sent them. “I’m sorry. I should have let you shoot him. Shit, I broke your CD player and your tuner too. I just—”

Roose stood up. He put his hands on her waist. “It’s all right, sweetling. You have nothing to apologize for.” He pulled her to him and kissed her fiercely.

She forced herself to kiss him back with equal fervor. There was tongue, but she could vomit later.

“Here.” He handed her the gun. “Finish him off.”

She stared at the gun for what seemed like ages. “Is the safety on?” She wasn’t sure what a safety actually was, but she’d heard it mentioned in movies.

Roose shook his head.

“Show me how to check the ammunition, please.”

“It’s loaded. I assure you.”

“Please.” She remembered how the heroine on the Lifetime movie had smiled. It was a sick, slightly deranged smile, but since that was how he looked half the time, she figured he would like it. She tried to mimic the expression. “I want to do this properly, Roose.”
Roose gave her another approving stare. He came up behind her, put his arms around her, and showed her that there were bullets in the gun.

Could they be blanks? She couldn’t control the shiver she felt as he ran his fingers down the sides of her arms. “Can I make him suffer first?”

His breath quickened. “All right, once in the leg, but then you’ll have to finish him. I don’t want him coming to. We’ll have to dispose of the bodies. Janos was coming to get you, although that isn’t necessary any longer.”

Sansa nodded. She didn’t know who Janos was. There was no time to ask.

Roose continued talking in a low voice into her ear. “We’ll get rid of the evidence and then we’ll plan a way for you to contact your friends so they stop looking for you. You’ll tell them you’ve been overwhelmed and that you need a break. You’ll have to stay with me till Baelish kills Ned, though. I still don’t think you’re ready.”

“Whatever you think is best.” Her father was alive. She could still get out of this.

He turned her head to him with his hand and kissed her hard on the mouth again. “I knew I was right about you. We’re the same, you and I.” Roose stood behind her. “Hold it with both hands, sweetling.”

She hoped Sandor would live to forgive her. She aimed at what she prayed was the fleshy part of his thigh and fired. The recoil from the gun took her by surprise and had it not for Roose holding onto her, she thought she would have fallen. Blood flowed. Shit, there was a lot of blood. She had her answer. These were live bullets.

“Now the heart, Sansa.”

“I know I should know this, but uh, where is . . .”

“On the left.”

She gave him a blank look. “I didn’t do so well at biology in high school,” she lied.

He moved toward Sandor and pointed. “There.” He stood to the side, watching her, his eyes glinting like icy diamonds.

Sansa raised the gun and rapidly shot the four remaining bullets into Roose, right where he’d indicated the heart was. She watched as he gasped and fell. “We are not the same, you fucking whack job.”

* * *
It Takes a Village

Chapter Summary

Sansa’s friends and family try to help her adjust after her ordeal. Ned and Tywin come to terms with each other. Tyrion finds out his father is not quite the villain he thought. Stannis suggests a new direction for Sansa.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Olenna pulled up the driveway to the Stark’s house. She had received a slew of voicemails from Margaery ranging from panicked to elated to worried. They couldn’t find Sansa. Sansa had been rescued; she was safe; it was not a good situation. She begged her grandmother to meet her at the Starks. She wasn’t sure what kind of help Sansa was going to need once the police released her.

A dark-haired girl flung open the door. “Oh, I thought you were Mum with Sansa.”

This, Olenna deduced, must be Arya. She introduced herself and was taken into the living room where she found Tywin sitting in a faded leather armchair. He was surrounded by the younger Stark children and Lysa’s son, watching of all things, Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

One of the younger boys paused the program while introductions were made.

“Dad’s trying to get home, but the snow was pretty bad the last time we heard from him. Mr. Lannister is here until everyone gets back,” Arya explained.

Lysa’s son remembered her. He asked a great many questions about “the bad man.”

“Sansa took him out, Robin,” Arya told the boy with satisfaction. “He can’t hurt anyone ever again.”

“Now we just have to worry about Littlefinger,” the youngest Stark child pronounced. “But we can totally take him down again if we have to.”

This led to a confusing narrative that left Olenna astonished and half amused.

“It was Margaery’s idea,” Bran informed her, “But the rest of it was us.”

Tywin was appalled.

Olenna thought it was a pity that Ned didn’t seem to have the same moral flexibility as his children. He would make a much better library director if he did.

Tywin was tapping his fingers impatiently.

“We’re watching Buffy,” Arya said. “Mr. Lannister picked it.”

“Did he?” Olenna was amused to see that the episode on the television was “Band Candy.” She
settled in next to Arya and Robin and gave her full attention to the screen. Periodically she heard Tywin making noises of disgust.

Tywin appeared to be singularly unimpressed by the emergence of Ripper.

“Such a handsome man,” Olenna said happily.

“He’s okay, even if he is on the old side,” Arya commented.

“Hmph.”

The younger children made it through two episodes before finally giving up and heading to bed. Tywin carried Robin upstairs. While he was gone, Olenna chatted with Arya. Ned didn’t talk much about his children, but she had heard things from Margaery and quite a lot from Tywin.

They abandoned the travails of Buffy and her classmates for the kitchen and coffee. She asked Arya about her business ventures.

“I really want to start and run a bunch of martial arts studios,” Arya explained to Olenna. “But I’ll need capital to do that.”

“Hence the knitting bag business?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. It’s not why we started Lemon Cakes, but it’s my ultimate goal. Margaery and I have some other ideas, but Mr. Lannister said we need to slow down and work on the ones we have.”

Olenna smiled at him as he sat with them at the table. “You’re fortunate to have such a mentor in Mr. Lannister.”

They heard another car.

“It’s Dad,” Arya cried excitedly. “Look at the snow on the car.”

Eddard Stark was too focused on Sansa to notice either Tywin or Olenna at first. After he had been apprised of Sansa’s fate, it took everything the three of them had to force him to sit down and wait with them.

“She’s with your wife,” Olenna persuaded him. “She’s been with the police for most of today. Your wife and Margaery took her to the hospital—just to make sure she’s unharmed. The best thing you can do is to be here for your daughter when they bring her home.”

Arya got her father a mug.

“You should be in bed, young lady.”

“Not until I see Sansa.”

They sat around the kitchen table waiting.

“Well, now we know who was stirring up the faculty,” Olenna pronounced. “And what really happened to the last three directors.”

“We know what happened to Arryn,” Tywin objected. “We’re speculating about Chelsted and Rossart.”
Arya snuggled up against her father.

“Bolton had to be referring to Lieutenant Janos Slynt,” Ned intuited. “It explains Slynt’s insistence on pronouncing all the incidents to be accidents. I still don’t understand why they attacked Tyrion, though.”

Tywin considered. “What about the patron driven acquisition pilot?”

“Petyr could have derailed that easily enough without committing bodily harm.” Olenna wiped her fingers on a napkin.

They sat in silence for a while.

“Seven hells,” Ned said suddenly. “Baelish was surprised. He thought that book he told me about would be in the B’s because of the cataloging in publication data.”

“What’s that?” Arya asked with a yawn.

“Most books arrive already partially coded,” Ned explained. “But Petyr didn’t factor in Stannis and his predilection for detail. He assumed Stannis would just use the CIP data and classify the book in the BLs.”

“Petyr must have tampered with censors for that row. Instead, Stannis cataloged the book for the DAs. Tyrion’s accident was meant for you.”

Arya tried to follow, but repeated explanations only made her yawn more.

Ned helped his daughter upstairs to bed.

While he was gone, Tywin expressed doubts as to a prosecutor being able to make this argument intelligible to a jury.

“I expect they can find enough evidence between Sansa’s statement and whatever they find in Roose Bolton’s house. Which reminds me.”

“What?”

“I told you,” Olenna said smugly. “I told you and you wouldn’t believe me.”

“You said no one at the library was causing dissension. That wasn’t exactly true.”

“You thought it was Ned.”

Tywin poured himself more coffee. “Very well, you were right. It wasn’t Stark. I trust that makes you happy.”

“You owe him an apology.”

Ned rejoined them before Tywin could answer. “The authorities had better get their hands on Baelish before I do. If I see him first, I’ll wring his neck,” he promised.

“You’ll have to get in line.” A weary but relieved Catelyn Tully stepped into the kitchen with Sansa and Margaery.

Aside from a violent reaction whenever anyone addressed her by any term of endearment, Sansa appeared to be unharmed. “Sandor is going to be okay, the nurse said,” she told Tywin. “I wanted
to tell him how sorry I was for shooting him and hitting him over the head, but Mum said I could see him tomorrow. I don’t know about the other guy.”

“They will receive the best possible care,” Tywin assured her.

“I can’t believe you’re such a badass,” Margaery said with admiration. “But now we’re going to go home and you’re going to let me spoil you.”

“Tomorrow.” Catelyn rubbed her eyes. “You can go back to the apartment tomorrow. Tonight the both of you stay here.”

“Fine,” Margaery agreed. “Tomorrow the pampering starts: no work, no school, no Lemon Cakes. We’ll eat ice cream and watch TV. There’s a marathon of *House Hunters* and we can—”

Sansa’s reaction was as severe as when her father had called her “sweetling.” “NO HGTV EVER! AND NO LIFETIME!”

“We will watch whatever you want,” Margaery promised weakly. “We’ll do whatever you want.”

“Tomorrow,” Sansa began slowly. “I want to go to the hospital to make sure those poor men are all right. Then I want to buy a gun and I need to learn how to use it, like properly.”

“Hon—Sansa, no one is going to hurt you again.”

The Sansa Stark who turned to face her father was not anyone Olenna recognized. “That’s fuck—bloody right. Nobody is ever going to hurt me again. Where can I learn to use a gun?”

No one answered her.

Olenna saw the looks of alarm on the girl’s parents’ faces. Margaery seemed taken aback as well.

“You’re both librarians. Where can I learn to use a gun?”

“I believe my son learnt in the military,” Tywin finally volunteered.

Olenna shot him a “what are you doing?” look, but he ignored her.

“I can make inquiries for you.” He tapped out a note to himself on his phone.

“And then I want to see a therapist.”

This was a much more palatable idea to everyone.

It seemed an appropriate time to leave. Tywin waited for Olenna to make her goodbyes to her granddaughter. “Olenna? Are you ready? I’ll drive you home.”

“I have my own car.”

He offered her his arm. “I can bring you back here in the morning to collect it.”

She could see Margaery wearily taking it in. Olenna doubted anyone else here would realize the import of the gesture. The Starks were focused on their daughter. It was the closest thing to a public acknowledgement of their relationship he had ever made. If he was willing to do this here in the house of a man he disliked, she was willing to bet he’d be willing to do so again to a larger audience. She took his arm.
One month later

Ned heard Robin chattering away to someone at the front door. “Robin, we talked about this.” Until the authorities found Petyr Baelish and put his miserable hide in prison where he belonged, the Starks were taking no chances.

“But it’s the mean man!”

Tywin Lannister stared at Robin without favor.

“Robin, in the first place, this is Mr. Lannister. He deserves your respect. Secondly, what did we tell you about answering the door?”

Robin mumbled apologies before running off.

Ned gestured for Tywin to come in. “He’s not a—he didn’t mean it as an insult, I don’t think.”

“I am aware I am earlier than expected. I wonder, is there somewhere we could speak privately?”

Ned was surprised, but he led Tywin into his study. “I never thanked you for helping to coordinate the rescue efforts for Sansa.”

“Sansa rescued herself.”

She had. Ned was proud of her. “Still, I owe you a debt.”

“You saved Tyrion’s life. I never thanked you either.”

Having this man in his home or in his daughters’ lives would never feel normal, but here he was. “I told Arya and Sansa that if you want to have your meetings with them at Casterly Rock Enterprises or elsewhere, they can. Our kitchen is probably not that well suited to your purposes.”

“It’s a paradise compared to that wretched library,” Tywin said with feeling. “Although I suppose I should be grateful we never had to endure Study Room 6. From what Sansa told us, safe use of the place practically requires regular injections of broad spectrum antibiotics.”

“Our new security guard makes regular rounds now. It’s no longer an issue.”

Tywin nodded. “I owe you an apology. I was wrong about you and your staff causing dissension with the faculty. I am sorry.” It was evident every word was sticking in his throat.

Ned found it no easier to get the words out himself. “Thank you, and I was wrong about your motives in helping Arya.” So they were even, Ned supposed.

“Might I ask you a personal favor?”

Ned saw a spasm of something that might be considered pain cross the older man’s face. Tywin Lannister probably seldom needed to ask for favors, least of all from someone he did not particularly care for. Ned thought of all the things Tywin was still helping Sansa with. “Yes, of course.”

Tywin inhaled. “It concerns my son.”
Tyrion really didn’t know what to say.

Dr. Stark seemed embarrassed. “I am not supposed to show you this.” He pushed a letter toward Tyrion. “You didn’t see it.” He got up and went to his window.

Tyrion reached for the paper and read the letter Brienne had written as chair of the search committee. It was a very complimentary document. They were interested in his ideas, his research interests, and his potential. Brienne wrote about his presentation in glowing terms. Someone had whitened out the names of his competition, but from the language it was clear that no one had even come close to him. Finally he turned the letter over and pushed it back towards Dr. Stark. “Why?”

“I thought you would be a spy for your father. We’d already butted heads about a number of things.”

“Did my father know about this letter?”

Dr. Stark shook his head. “I was about to send up my own recommendation to the Provost’s Office when Robert called wanting to know who we were picking. Shortly thereafter I heard from him again. I gather Tywin brought pressure to bear on Robert, who strongly urged me to hire you. The letter I finally sent concurred with the search committee’s recommendation.”

Tyrion sat back in his chair and absorbed all this. “Why are you showing me this now?”

“I didn’t show you anything.” Dr. Stark took the letter and put it in a drawer. “If it weren’t for your father’s help, my daughter might be buried in Roose Bolton’s basement right now.” He rubbed his temples. “Or she might have been forced to become—I don’t even know what he envisioned and I’m not sure I want to. The things Sansa’s been telling us—” He shuddered.

“Stannis always did say he was an abomination. How is she doing? She hasn’t been by in weeks.” He had seen Sansa once or twice, but always at a distance. Jaime was teaching her to shoot, he knew. According to Cersei, Sansa was spending a great deal of time with Davos and Asha learning other skills. “Some things,” was how Cersei referred to these lessons.

Dr. Stark gave him a weary look. “She said she needed a break from all things library, especially with Petyr Baelish still at large. I don’t think she’ll be working here again. Given some time, she’ll be all right. Sansa is . . . Sansa is very strong. She looks like a fragile piece of china, but there’s a core of Valyrian steel underneath.”

“My father asked you to show me the letter, didn’t he?”

“You’re a good librarian, Tyrion. Leave it at that.”

* * *

Three Months Later

* * *

“Jaime?”

He obligingly paused Firefly for Brienne.
“I invited your father over to brunch tomorrow.”

Jaime flopped down onto the pillows. “Wench, you’re killing me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s just a meal.” Brienne propped herself up on her side. “He wants to spend time with you.”

“I have to take Sansa to the shooting range,” Jaime tried.

“That’s why it’s brunch and not breakfast.”

He wondered if he could get Sansa to stay longer at the range tomorrow. The answer was probably yes, but she was an unsettling young woman these days. It wasn’t just the black nail polish or even the fact that she’d taken to shooting like she’d been born with a .38 in her hand. No, it was the way she looked at one of the other customers at the range when he dared to hit on her. Or possibly it was Sansa’s reaction when the barista at Starbucks messed up her coffee.

“She’s on the list now,” Bronn commented when Sansa’s name came up one evening at the apartment while they watched more episodes of yet another Star Trek spinoff.

“The list of what?” Tyrion inquired.

“The list of people you do not fuck with ever.”

No, he’d be back in time, Jaime decided.

“This is nice,” Brienne said, shaking him out of his reverie.

“What?”

Brienne gestured vaguely. “This. Us. It feels right. You’re the first person it’s ever felt right with. The moments in between.”

Jaime turned off the television and set the remote on the nightstand. “Normalcy?” he asked hopefully.

“We’re getting there.”

“The moments during are nice too,” he suggested as he reached for her.

* * *

Sansa knew she was freaking everyone out. Most of the time she couldn’t bring herself to care, but she didn’t want to worry the people who mattered.

“We’re just concerned, hon—Sansa,” her mother said. “Ten locks?”

Margaery was nodding vigorously. “It takes me a half hour to open the door. Could we cut them down to seven?”

Sandor had told her that there were heads of state who probably had less stringent security procedures. Sansa thought a bit. Her therapist had suggested there was a line when precaution turned into paranoia. “Six,” she consented, doing Margaery one better. “But I get to choose which ones.”

Margaery wasn’t done. “I want equal say in who can come to the apartment. It’s not fair that you
can just bring in people from the docks and I can’t have my cousins here without your express approval.”

Sansa twitched. “Davos and Sandor are my friends.”

“And Elinor and Megga aren’t mine?”

Sansa supposed she had a point. “Maybe we could revise the procedures. I’m feeling a lot more secure now that I know how to defend myself. I would feel a lot better if I could—”

Margaery and Mum were united in this. No guns, they both agreed.

“Ahem.”

Everyone turned to look at Arya.

“You have to go easier on Cersei. She’s been talking about quitting. We need her for Helmets & Halberds.”

Again Margaery was nodding. “She’s a natural at the Fairs. Our profits go up when she’s selling for us.”

“And she’s got good ideas about marketing. Also,” Arya consulted a legal pad. “If we’re going to hire Shireen, you have to cut back on the swearing and maybe some of your rules or Mr. Baratheon won’t let her work for us.”

At the mention of her rules, Sansa turned to stone. “They are my fucking rules.” She knew the profanity made her mother uncomfortable. It made everyone uncomfortable. Sansa didn’t care. It was the only way people paid attention to her. When she swore, everyone backed down.

Arya, however, wasn’t everyone. “It’s our fucking business, not just yours,” she retorted.

“You are both my daughters and neither of you will use that word in front of me or your father again.”

Sansa didn’t put up with much these days, but even she hadn’t found a way to defeat what she and Arya called “the voice” that both of their parents could still employ so well. “Sorry, Mum,” she managed.

“I was just using it for effect.” But when her mother used “the look,” Arya mumbled an apology as well.

“Could you take a look at the rules again? Maybe you could pare them down?”

The combination of Mum, Margaery, and Arya looking at her so hopefully was too much for Sansa. “All right, I’ll think about it.”

“Good, because ten single-typed pages of stuff we can and can’t do is way too much,” Arya told her.

Sansa promised to look at them. “I have some news. I got on the team.”

Mum looked alarmed. “What team?”

Margaery sighed. “Roller derby.”
Tywin stared balefully at the jelly glasses sitting on his son’s kitchen table.

Brienne knew she should have known Jaime was up to something when he offered to set the table. She opened a cupboard to show him the shelves full of stemware. “We went to Macy’s.” She persuaded Jaime it was a small enough thing to do.

“Then what are those doing here? Seven hells, he has more of these?” He picked up the glass with Velma on it. “Is this from the same puerile program?”

“They’re kind of a joke between us now. We only use them for breakfast. I’ll get you something without a cartoon character on it.” She removed a plain tumbler from the cupboard and put the Scooby jelly glass back up on the shelf.

“When is Jaime expected?”

She glanced at the clock. “He’ll be back soon. He took Sansa to target practice. He was just going to stop at the bakery and bring back some pastries.” She poured him some coffee and they went into the living room.

He looked around the room and ground his teeth. “I told that boy to buy a house.”

“He’s not a boy, Mr. Lannister.”

“Precisely.”

Brienne cradled her coffee mug in her hands. “We’ll get there. We need to work some things out. I should probably warn you that when we do buy a house, I don’t think it’s going to be anything like the ones Mrs. Redwyne was taking us to see.”

“Jaime is a Lannister. He has a position to maintain,” he explained to her patiently. “When he regains his senses and proposes to you, you will understand this better. If it’s money—”

“That’s very generous of you, but it has nothing to do with money. When we get married—”

“He asked you?” Tywin looked suspiciously at her bare left hand.

“He told me actually.”

Tywin was taken aback. “He did what?”

“It was the last day we went out with realtor. He told me we were going to be married. I asked if I got any say in the matter and he told me no.”

“That was months ago. Why wasn’t I informed?”

“Because this is something he and I have to hash out. I’m only telling you as a courtesy. It isn’t for public consumption. I haven’t even talked to my own father about it yet.” Tyrion knew, but she didn’t think it was wise to share this with Tywin. “We’re not formally engaged, but—”

Tywin considered her. “You are a young woman, Ms Tarth.”

“Brienne.”

“You’re a young woman, Brienne, and I suspect that you think you have all the time in the world. I
once thought as you do until the gods proved me very wrong.”

She put the coffee mug down on a coaster on the table. From what Jaime had told her, she knew even an oblique reference to his late wife was a rare thing. “Mr. Lannister—”

“If you are to be my daughter-in-law, you should call me Tywin.”

“Tywin,” Gods, that felt weird to say, she thought. “He has some rather serious issues he has to deal with first.”

“Is she interfering? If she is, I will take steps.”

“Cersei stopped calling about a month ago.”

“Good. Is he still seeing that quack he picked out of the phonebook?”

Only the fact that she knew he meant well was keeping her from losing her temper. “Does it really matter how we found a doctor? I had Myranda check out his credentials. Jaime seems to like him and I think the therapy is helping.” She could tell none of this was sitting well with Tywin. “We’re looking at apartments if that makes you feel any better.” It clearly did. His expression was suddenly less ferocious. “We talked about my moving in to this place, but I can’t stay here; the commute is too long for me and it’s too—”

He snorted. “That is why I wanted him to buy a house. This apartment is scarcely fit for college students.”

“You’ve never seen my apartment have you?”

He gave her a sharp look.

Brienne decided there was no reason he needed to know that she was the one responsible for finding Jaime the two new jelly glasses with Velma and Daphne on them. “Don’t worry so much, Tywin. We’re going to get where you want us to go; we just need to do it our way.”

* * *

Stannis inspected the bedroom that Sansa and her business partners used as a workspace while Cersei busily packed boxes and affixed shipping labels to them. “Why are these books arranged like this?”

“Because they’re my fucking books and I’ll put them on my fucking shelves any fucking way I want.”

Everyone else froze.

“I was merely curious,” Stannis said mildly.

“Oh.” Sansa looked abashed. She pointed to various sections of the book case. “Crochet, embroidery, knitting, and sewing.”

“And then alphabetical by author’s last name?”

“Well, mostly.” She showed him how she had subdivided the sections in certain instances.

Stannis glanced at Asha, who now considered Sansa thoughtfully. “And these other cabinets and containers?”
Sansa seemed surprised by his interest, but she opened drawers, doors, and boxes for him showing him how her materials were organized. Finally she showed him her yarn. “It’s by weight and then color.”

He inspected the neatly printed cards on the tops of each boxes. “So you know what everything contains?”

“Exactly.” Sansa showed him the database she’d created for the inventory and for the clients.

It was all very impressive. “And you do all of this out of your apartment?”

“The Lemon Cakes side is done here. For now Helmets & Halberds operates out of Pod and Gendry’s, but once Aunt Lysa and Robin move into their own place again, we’re moving both businesses into my parents’ garage. There’s an apartment above and it’s all going to be for us.” Sansa led him into the living room. “But it won’t be for about three more months.”

“We would want Shireen for about ten hours a week,” Margaery said.

Stannis accepted the document she handed to him.

“These are Sansa’s . . . rules,” Margaery explained.

He had heard about this first from Davos and Asha, and most recently from Cersei. It was shorter than he’d been led to believe. While the others helped Cersei load her car with the boxes for shipping, he read through it. It was a three-page document not including the appendix where Sansa listed alphabetically impermissible television programming.

“I’m going to go with Cersei, Stannis. I’ll catch up with you tonight, okay?” Asha didn’t wait for his assent.

After they left, Margaery and Sansa sat opposite of him.

He consulted the document one last time.

“Do you have any questions?” Margaery asked him with a very bright smile.

“I don’t believe Shireen would have any trouble keeping to these,” Stannis told her. “As far as I know, she is uninterested in home improvement. I don’t think she likes scones. She does like pancakes, but I can explain to her that she should not discuss them in your presence.”

Sansa seemed embarrassed and Margaery’s expression of engaged interest grew forced.

“She is always very respectful. I don’t believe she would address you by any term of endearment.”

“But?” Margaery suggested.

“I am concerned with your use of profanity, however. Asha refrains from using it when she’s with the children.”

“My therapist and I are working on it,” Sansa assured him. “It comes out when I’m stressed, but I can try not to swear in front of her.”

“Then I will bring her by and you may put your offer to her.” Stannis set the rules on the coffee table. “I wonder if I could bring up an unrelated subject, Sansa.”

She shrugged. “Sure.”
He leaned forward. “Have you ever considered becoming a cataloger?”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

The "rules" will get greater explanation in the next chapter.
Learn the Words

Chapter Summary

Into the first of the two day move of the Helmets & Halberds and Lemon Cakes businesses, Arya's workforce mutinies against her. Cersei, Stannis, Davos, and Asha discuss anvils (no, I'm not making that up). As the launch party begins, Jaime and Cersei achieve closure and Jaime learns about Sansa's rules. And Tywin learns an important lesson.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Three months later

* * *

The traitors ripped the clipboard out of Arya’s hands sometime in the evening of Day One of the big move. She didn’t know who had it now; she had been too busy trying to beat off the combined efforts of her siblings to hold her down.

“We are done for the night,” Gendry told her.

Arya’s protests were drowned by the sounds of the clapping coming from various parts of the Stark house. “Fine. Okay. Let me up.”

“It’s a trap,” someone called.

“Pod, what are you doing under the dining room table?” Gendry demanded.

“Hiding.” There was a pause. “I may just live out the rest of my life here. I think I broke my back.”

Today had been all Helmets & Halberds. The products were heavy and awkward. The tools were worse. Even with all of the help they had, it had been draining and slow going. “Rickon, if you don’t get off me—"

Rickon and Robin mercifully let her free.

“We still have to get set up and then there’s Lemon Cakes to move and—owwwwwww!”

“Told you. She’s like the Energizer Bunny. If you had any sense you would come under the table with me. There’s lots of room.”

Arya thought her cousin and two younger brothers were enjoying themselves way too much. “GET OFF ME!”

“It’s 9:30, Arya. It’s late. We’re all tired. We’ve been going since 6:00 this morning. No, don’t let her get up yet,” Gendry instructed the boys. “I’m going to make a call. Don’t fall for her tricks.”
“What tricks?” Robin asked Rickon.

“She does martial arts stuff, but if we sit on her like this, she can’t do anything.”

Arya’s voice went flat. “Oh, there’s a lot I can do if I don’t care about killing you lot.” She began detailing all the ways in which she could injure and maim them. The threats were working too. Bran and Rickon were eyeing her uneasily and she felt Robin shifting off of her legs. Then she saw Dad and Mum peering down at her.

“It was the only way we could get her to stop,” Bran told them.

Her father held the clipboard. “Get off of your sister now. One, two—thank you. Bed. NOW.”

Arya stood up and reached for it, but Dad was shaking his head. He gave it to Mum.

Gendry came back into the room. “Pod and I are going back to our apartment to sleep in our own beds. We will get here early and we will get our side set up. I talked to Cersei. She is going to coordinate the move out of Sansa and Margaery’s apartment.”

“But there’s the party and we have so much to—”

Mum shook her head. “And it will get done—tomorrow.”

“Mr. Lannister would understand.”

Mum shrugged. “You can tell him all about it tomorrow. But I think he’d agree with Gendry. You’ll get more done, faster if everyone has a good night’s sleep.”

Arya watched her workforce vanishing. Mr. Lannister said there were drawbacks to working with family, but she was pretty sure that this was not what he was he was talking about. None of his relatives, not even Kevan, would dare wrestle him to the ground to stop him, let alone sit on him.

“Sit down, Arya.”

She crossed her arms across her chest. “Yes, Dad.”

“I know when you first decided you wanted to go into business as a career, I had my doubts. Both of us had our doubts.”

Mum set the clipboard down on the table.

Arya’s fingers twitched.

“Not yet. Listen to your father.”

“But we’ve seen how you’ve taken this on and you’re very impressive. At times, you’re a little . . . scary in how driven you are, but—”

“What we’re saying is that we’re proud of you,” Mum finished.

Arya stopped reaching for the clipboard.

“We are, but—”

Here it came, she thought.
“A good manager knows her limits and she knows her employees’ limits,” Dad said.

“Oh.”

“I nearly got decapitated when some of your merchandise came out of the box while I was driving it over here, and that was in the morning when everyone was fresh.”

“But—”

“It might be a good idea not to entrust Rickon with the life-threatening items.”

Mum put her hand on Arya’s. “Tomorrow everyone will help out. We will get everything done; we promise. But now you need to go to sleep.”

Arya supposed they had a point.

Both her parents slid the clipboard over to her.

She went up to her room. Arya did as they requested and got into bed. There was no harm in looking at what needed to be done tomorrow. The guys had to get the tools set up in case they needed to do demos of how they made stuff. They needed to mount all the products. Lemon Cakes was half done upstairs but there was still so much over at Sansa and Margaery’s apartment. Then there were the party preparations. And then . . . Her eyelids felt heavy, but she clutched her clipboard like a talisman even as she fell fast asleep.

* * *

“What were you lifting today? Anvils?” Asha asked in disgust. Both of the men were exhausted and neither was particularly interested in doing anything more than collapsing.

“Aye.” Davos groaned.

“Seriously?”

Cersei massaged his back. She nodded at Asha. While she had not been forced to lift anything nearly so heavy, it had been a very long day. She knew neither Stannis nor Davos was in any shape to do much more than sit. She felt just as tired as they were, but it was nice to sit in front of the fire and to try and relax.

“An actual anvil? Like what Wile E. Coyote tries to drop on the Road Runner? That kind of anvil?”

Stannis tried and failed to reach for his whiskey. “Woman, do we need to draw you a picture? Yes, an actual anvil. You’ll see it tomorrow.”

Asha handed him his drink. “Damn.”

“I don’t think it was wise to let the youngest Stark lad seal the boxes.”

From the way Stannis snorted, he was in full agreement. Then he looked at Cersei. “You’re awfully quiet.”

Cersei paused in rubbing Davos’ shoulders and took a sip of her wine. “I’m tired too. And there is a lot to do tomorrow.” Since Sansa had her bout in the afternoon, it would be mostly on her shoulders to coordinate the move and get everything set up. “Sansa said she invited Brienne and . . . Jaime.”

“I can be there,” Asha offered. “There will be other roller derby bouts.”
“Stark’s little tyrant of a daughter has already roped me into helping you tomorrow,” Stannis informed her.

“As long as those lads don’t have any more anvils,” Davos shuddered before continuing, “I can be there too.”

Cersei appreciated their offers, but this was something she would need to handle by herself.

“Are you sure you’re ready for it?”

Cersei set down her wine. “No, but I think I have to try. Besides,” she said as returned her attentions to Davos. “Sansa would be disappointed if you two missed her bout.” She tried to speak lightly, but she knew she wasn’t fooling any of them. They knew her too well.

“Well,” Stannis commented. “I will be nearby if you need me. I may need to rip the Stark girl’s precious clipboard out of her hands in order to beat her over the head with it, but I will be there.”

* * *

Jaime stood awkwardly watching his sister direct Stannis. They had met at odd times over the past few months, never for very long and never alone. His therapist seemed to believe he was ready to try talking to her. This was probably not what he had mind, but Jaime didn’t think having some official “we need closure” discussion was ever going to work—not for him and not for Cersei.

“No, the shipping materials belong in the cupboard over there, please. Everything is labeled.”

Stannis grunted assent and obliged.

“If anyone told me a year ago that you would be voluntarily working for Sansa Stark out of her father’s garage apartment and happily living with Stannis Baratheon, I would have thought they were out of their minds.” Technically she didn’t just work for Sansa; she worked for the partners of both business ventures. It was bizarre to him nonetheless.

Cersei shrugged. “I would have thought the same, but here I am.”

“Is he always so obedient?”

“He is an adult,” Cersei responded sharply. “Robert would have dumped the box on the floor and shouted at me. You would have joked and laughed, and then dumped the box on the floor. I can depend on Stannis. He is solid. He is reliable. He is—”

“—boring,” Jaime finished. He regretted the words as soon as he said them. The therapist had warned him about repeating patterns. It wasn’t true in any case.

Cersei didn’t reply immediately. “Not to me, he’s not. I haven’t said anything about your—about Brienne.”

“Brienne is twice the—” And there he went again.

She interrupted him, “Jaime, I can’t do this anymore. You’re happy with her. I’m happy with Stannis and my situation. Let’s leave it at that.”

Her situation which still included Stannis, Asha, and Davos, he thought. She was right, though. They couldn’t do this anymore. It was too toxic and too destructive.

“What is that?” He pointed to a sheet printed on light pink paper mounted exactly in the center of
the bulletin board:

Rule #1: NO HGTV
Rule #1a: NO discussion of anything about or airing on HGTV past or present
Rule #1b: NO discussion of home improvement programs of any kind
Rule #2: NO Lifetime airing or discussion of women in peril movies from Lifetime*
Rule #3: Do NOT call Sansa anything but “Sansa”**
Rule #4: NO blueberry scones
Rule #5: NO Pancakes
Rule #6: NO Miller High Life

I fucking mean every fucking single fucking one of these fucking rules.
(Mum and Dad, I’m sorry about the profanity but it’s the only way anyone listens)

Sansa Stark

*See appendix for acceptable programming from Lifetime
**My derby name is only for use at or in relation to roller derby

“Those are Sansa’s rules. She almost put me in a headlock once when I forgot and called her ‘little dove.’ I haven’t called her anything but ‘Sansa’ since.”

“Pancakes? Blueberry scones? Miller High Life?”

Cersei shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve learned not to ask unless she volunteers. If it’s crossed out, it’s a good sign. The list used to be much longer. Didn’t she share it with you?”

“I just did what Father asked me: I took her to target practice; I taught her to shoot; I took her home. She didn’t like to talk, or at least not to me.” The excursions had been mostly silent ones aside from the times they talked about using guns. Jaime watched as Cersei taped pieces of paper over Sansa’s declaration of intent.

“She said it was fine if I covered up the profanity for the party,” Cersei explained. “I have to finish getting things ready.” She started to move away and then she looked back, “I really am happy, Jaime. Happier than I’ve been in a very long time. I know you are too.” She disappeared into the next room.

Jaime nodded. He focused his attention to the bulletin board. There wasn’t a lot that was of interest, but he wanted to regain his composure. After he had read everything from the schedules to flyers for textile businesses, he much more calmly consulted the list of acceptable Lifetime programming. He hadn’t heard of any of these shows. “Dance Moms?”

Brienne came up to him. “No reality TV. You promised me.” She spoke lightly, but her eyes were full of concern. She glanced through the door toward Cersei, who was unpacking what seemed to be the last box.

“But—” He pointed to the list. “Dance Moms? That sounds quite intriguing. Do the Moms dance? Or are they—oh, all right, wench. Have it your way.” He smiled at her reassuringly.

She relaxed a little. “Come and see the Helmets & Halberds part.”

People were starting to arrive now. He saw Uncle Kevan and Aunt Dorna stepping out of their car.

Jaime followed her downstairs into the garage bay set aside as the studio. As with the upstairs, everything was neatly organized and labeled.
Neither Gendry nor Pod wanted him anywhere near the swords. “I was thinking of taking some lessons,” he protested.

“Great,” Arya told him. “Once you can use one without tripping over your feet, we would love to have your business.”

Jaime looked at Brienne.

“Sword lessons, yes. Dance Moms, no.”

* * *

Olenna wished Tywin would let her drive. He was positively scary right now. His jaw was clenched so tight she wondered if he would ever be able to unclench it. It had been a trying afternoon. She would freely admit this to him if he ever calmed down long enough to ask her. Her head ached. The noise at the rink was astonishing. Myrcella and Shireen, who were normally quiet, well-behaved girls shrieked so loudly and so repeatedly that she thought her eardrums would shatter. Tommen’s cheers were not quite so highly pitched, but Tywin clearly thought his enthusiasm for roller derby was out of place.

From the backseat the three teenagers chattered away excitedly.

“That was so cool!”

“Sansa was amazing!”

“I heard someone say she was their best jammer.”

“Do you think Mother would let me try out?”

“I already asked Daddy and he said no. It’s so unfair.”

Tommen was poking around on his phone. “I think you just have to be eighteen. See it says so in the rules. That’s not so far away.”

He pulled into the Starks’ driveway. The teenagers piled out of the car almost before he braked so excited were they. He sat there fuming.

“Tywin,” Olenna began.

“Do not tell me to calm down. My eldest son is living in an apartment where all the living room furniture is on casters. My daughter is cohabiting with a convicted felon, a woman whose every other word is ‘fuck,’ and a—”

“—Stannis.” Olenna knew it would be best to just let him rant. He would calm down after he got it out of his system, but he wasn’t being entirely fair. Frankly as odd as it was, she thought Cersei’s relationship with Stannis was probably the most functional one his daughter had ever enjoyed. “Brienne said it was because they like to lie on the floor and the wheels make it easier for them to move the furniture out of the way. Don’t look at me like that. I don’t think she meant it like that. I mean they literally lie on the floor, side by side.”

“Tyrion,” Tywin threw up his hands. “He’s been quiet which no doubt means he’s fallen in love with another gold-digging stripper or a cocktail waitress or a whore.”

Olenna debated saying something. Shae, as far as she knew, had been the one to end the
relationship with Tyrion. If she had done anything dubious in her early days, she was a respectable, 
tax-paying member of society now. Rumor around the library currently pinned Tyrion with Alys 
Karstark. The worst thing she could say about Alys was that her father was a bombastic fool. 
Olenna started to speak but Tywin was like a juggernaut.

“Joffrey is serving a sentence with the Night’s Watch for brutally attacking a girl. And now my 
granddaughter is conspiring to see how she can become a ‘Crownlands Cutie’. Tommen—”

“—is a little odd, but he’ll grow out of it. If you haven’t noticed, the process is already starting, and 
for that you need to thank Asha and Davos.”

Tywin whipped his head around to glare at her.

“I don’t think Myrcella openly speculating on the likelihood of Cersei giving her permission to try 
out constitutes a conspiracy. They’re just excited.” She couldn’t fault him for being upset about 
Joffrey. It would be better for everyone and for society as a whole, if the psychopath simply fell off 
of the Wall, but lumping Myrcella and Tommen in with him was hardly rational.

“My family,” he said bitterly.

“If it would make you feel better, I can talk about the many inadequacies of my children and my 
grandchildren.” She did understand his frustrations. Her son was eating himself into an early grave. 
Her daughter was on her third marriage. Her beloved Margaery, who she had so carefully guided, 
was bound and determined to stay with Sansa. No matter what arguments she or her parents made 
to her, Margaery was adamant. She was not merely interested in having fun and then in settling 
down with some approved, prominent husband. She had nearly lost Sansa. It was Sansa she wanted 
and Sansa she was going to have. When it came time for children, they had options. “I’m fairly 
certain every parent in Westeros could do the same. You cannot always have your way.”

“Have you been talking to Arya?” he demanded.

Olenna shook her head. “Not recently, why?”

“She said much the same thing the other day.” He stared out the driver’s side window for a 
moment. “Those boys—Gendry and Podrick—refused to take my advice about something.”

“And you retreated into yourself like an angry turtle?”

“Olenna, I am not in the mood—yes—all right, fine, I did. Arya told me I was being rude. She said 
I could not always have my own way, and then she said this was something she had learnt in the 
second grade.”

She must not laugh. He would never forgive her if she did. “What did you do?”

“I apologized, of course. The girl gave me no choice.”

She reached over and patted his hand.

“I was bested—by a child.”

“I don’t think she holds you in any less esteem. She’s so excited to see you she’s bounding up to 
the car like a golden retriever.”

* * *
Chapter End Notes

For those of you who missed it, I wrote a little New Year's story set in this 'verse. Two of the vignettes take place about a year before Game of Stacks started and two of them would take place sometime in the middle of Chapter 38. Here is the link.
Chapter Summary

As the party continues, Tyrion learns a few things from Sansa and faces Tywin. Jaime gains reassurance. Stannis discovers he has charisma. Ned and Olenna discuss the future of the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library, and at long last, Petyr Baelish meets his destiny.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Tyrion apologized to Sansa for missing her bout. “Your sister showed me some of the photos and some footage from the live feed. You’re very impressive.” She was also pretty damn scary if the video footage was to be believed. The fishnets and the tiny skirt aside, she gave him the impression she was capable of crushing him into the ground if he made one wrong move.

She smiled proudly. “Thanks.”

He noticed his father’s security guard eyeing him suspiciously. “Your friend doesn’t like me much.”

Sansa turned around and gestured for the man to come over. “Sandor, do you know Tyrion?”

“We’ve met.” Tyrion held out a hand which Sandor didn’t take.

“Tyrion is one of my friends from the library. He’s cool.”

Sandor nodded and then went back to the corner.

“He’s very protective of me, which is kind of surprising considering I bashed him over the head and then shot him.”

Tyrion absorbed this. He knew very little about what happened to Sansa. The papers had been surprisingly sparse in their coverage of her in the case. “So he’s like a giant Rottweiler?”

“Sure, I guess. He’s a great guy. I think he freaks Margaery out a little.”

“I can’t say that I blame her.”

Sansa drew herself up. “He’s my friend.”

He decided to change the subject. “Why is ‘Cat-a-Brawler’ your derby name? Is it all right for me to ask about the meaning behind it?”

“I’m going to library school,” she explained. “I’m going to be a cataloger.” She set down her drink. “I know,” she said seeing his expression. “It surprised me too. Stannis is the one who saw it. He and Cersei have been great.”
“Cersei? My sister?”

“I know, right? She was a raging bitch to me when I dated Joffrey. We’re not friends really, but I think we understand each other now.”

“Stannis?” he prompted.

“I was hanging out with Davos and Asha a lot. They have experience that I was looking for, you know, with self-defense stuff and other kinds of fighting. They were the ones who suggested we hire Cersei. Stannis saw how I had things organized for the business. He said I was a born cataloger.” Sansa smiled. “He and Asha have been talking to me about my options. I like the control in cataloging; I wouldn’t have to work with the public, or at least not much. All those languages I had to learn for my literature degree will come in handy now. And I think it’s going to be a good fit, so I’m going to the Citadel. Margaery is going there too so that works out; she delayed grad school for me, you know. She didn’t want to leave me.” She took a sip of her drink. “Oh, I met your girlfriend. She seems really nice.”

Tyrion saw Alys chatting with Bronn and Ros. She had been amiable so far about keeping their relationship quiet, but lately there had been signs that she was growing restive. When he tried to explain about his father, she scoffed. Rickard Karstark was going to hate him for simply daring to date his little girl; Alys swore she was more than willing to brave Tywin Lannister’s disapproval.

“It’s going to be tough on the business when we leave. We can Skype in for meetings, but I don’t think I’m going to have as much time for the production end. That’s why we’re counting on Cersei. She has lots of ideas. But we won’t have her forever. At some point she’s going to go work for Mr. Lannister and we’ll lose her, not that I can complain. He’s been awesome.”

“My father?”

Sansa nodded. “If Mr. Lannister hadn’t been there, Dad would be dead. Margaery would be on her way to being dead and I’d still be tied to a chair watching Love It or List It with that whack job. Mr. Lannister helped with the police. He sent Sandor and Arys. He helped keep the press away. He helped with so much.” She waved at one of her fellow players. “You know, I used to be so scared of your father before.”

“I’m still scared of him,” Tyrion told her.

“After Roose Bolton, there’s very little that frightens me these days. Not that I recommend being held captive by a killer as a way to get over your fears.”

Father was standing in a corner. He didn’t seem to be in the best of tempers. Tyrion looked at Sansa. Then he looked at Alys. “Excuse me.”

Sansa smiled and went back to Margaery.

Tyrion walked over to his father.

“I’m not in the mood for your nonsense, Tyrion.”

Tyrion held his ground. “Thank you.”

His father cocked an eyebrow at him. “For?”

“For helping me get the job at the library.”
“Hmph. Are you still seeing that Lorathi whore?”

Tyrion felt the familiar sense of anger and humiliation rising, but then he remembered what Jaime told him. Patterns: this was their problem. They did the same things over and over and it kept leading to the same destructive results. “Shae isn’t a whore. She is here today with her boyfriend, so I’ll thank you not to use that word in relation to her.”

“I will use any word I choose.”

“I’ll sic Sansa on you. She’s very attached to Shae.”

His father blinked.

“We both know she could take you.”

Tyrion watched his father’s gaze shift over to Sansa, who indeed looked like she could probably best pretty much any man, woman, or child at this party. “As a matter of fact,” Tyrion plowed on. “I am seeing someone. Her name is Alys Karstark.” He indicated where she was standing.

His father looked narrowly at Alys. He had a good memory for faces and it was apparent he recognized her quickly. “The barmaid who was interested in Stannis? Are you mad?”

“Quite possibly,” Tyrion agreed. “Alys is a professor’s daughter. She just received her graduate degree in mathematics. She is over her infatuation with Stannis, not that she would have stood a chance now that Cersei has her hooks in him.”

His father said nothing, but his eyes shifted to Alys again and Tyrion thought he was reassessing her.

“She wants to meet you. If at all possible, I would like you to give her the benefit of the doubt and for you to be civil to her.”

“Are you serious about this girl?”

“Yes.” Tyrion took a deep breath. “If it helps at all, she doesn’t drink; has already lined up a promising job; plans to buy a house; wants children; and has much better stemware than me.”

His father choked out something that sounded like it might be a laugh.

Tyrion caught her eye and she started to come over to them. “She does, however, like Scooby-Doo.”

* * *

Jaime moved away from the swords the moment he saw Uncle Stafford and his re-enactor buddies descending. He made himself and Brienne plates and as they planned, joined her in a quiet corner. “I got us a mix of things. The two youngest Stark children were eating entire plates of the potato salad so I took extra of that and Asha told me to make sure we tried the pretzel Jell-O.”

“Pretzel Jell-O?”

“I have no idea. I took some to be polite.” Potlucks were rather a new experience for Jaime. He wondered how Father was faring.

They ate in silence for a few minutes.
Brienne elbowed him. “Oh my gods.”

“What?” Jaime observed her contorting her face in an expression of ecstasy he’d only seen when they were in bed together.

In response, she leaned over and started eating his helping of the pretzel Jell-O.

He held his plate away and tried some. “Oh, that is very nice.”

“Get us more.” Brienne eyed the people milling near the table. “Before it’s gone. I’ll hold your plate.”

“Not likely, wench.” He secured an extra helping for the both of them and ended up having an enlightening conversation with Shireen. “Stannis made it,” he explained to Brienne when he got back.

“Stannis makes Jell-O?”

Jaime shrugged. “Shireen said this pretzel concoction is her favorite and her father prepares it for special occasions. I think I am going to give up on being surprised by the things Stannis does or why he has such a mysterious appeal to half the women in this city.”

Brienne finished chewing. “Is this about Cersei?”

“Not really.” Jaime tried some of the potato salad, which was rather good he had to admit. He swallowed. “I mean, look at him, five minutes ago he was boring Catelyn Tully with the difference between further and farther. But now he’s picked up that sword and suddenly she’s looking at him with more than polite interest.”

“I think Dr. Stark’s marriage is safe. Sooner or later he’ll put down the sword, and he’ll just be Stannis again.”

“Wench. Not you too.”

Brienne leaned over and snuck another forkful of his baked beans. “I think it’s his take-no-prisoners expression when he’s wielding weapons. Plus, now I know he can cook.”

“From what Tommen says about the food at his house, this must be a fluke. You cannot survive on pretzel Jell-O alone.”

“His stance is very good.”

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Jaime couldn’t help but notice how several other women were admiring the “stance” of Stannis Baratheon. Even Margaery and Sansa, who as far as he understood it were very much a couple, seemed struck.

And then Stannis handed the sword over to Pod.

It was like a switch had been flipped. The women all went back to chitchatting with other people. Catelyn Tully gave herself a little shake and took away her youngest sons’ meals of potato salad. She now seemed to be concentrating on having them ingesting some actual vegetables and protein. The attention Stannis had been attracting was not lost on Cersei or Asha, but he noticed that once Stannis was divested of his weapon, they were the ones still staring at Stannis.

Oh, gods, no, now Stannis was lifting up a shield.
But Brienne’s blue eyes were focused on the boy. “See, how Pod is standing?” She pointed out a few things. “If you’d been moving like he is, you never would have fallen on your arse during the video shoot.”

“I was serious about taking those lessons in sword fighting.” He watched as Pod and Gendry sparred for the benefit of Stafford and his deep-pocketed friends. “It looks like fun. It would be something we could do together. Syrio said it’s a lot of work, though.”

“Syrio said ‘it’s a lot of work?’”

“No,” he admitted. “He couchèd it in a series of epigrams, but I think that was the essence. He agreed to teach me, though.” Syrio’s language had grown markedly clearer when it came to discussing fees. “I wonder how long it would take before I was skilled enough to take you on.”

Brienne gazed at him evenly. “I love you whether or not you can use a sword, Jaime.”

He wanted to kiss her right then and there and then what she was implying hit him. “Are you saying that I don’t have it in me, wench? Yes, I think you are.”

Her lips twitched.

“With or without the sword?”

“With or without the sword.”

* * *

Stannis felt Davos put his hand on his shoulder.

“If you don’t stop using those weapons, I won’t be held responsible for my actions. And judging by the way Cersei and Asha are staring at you, I’m not alone.”

Stannis blinked. “The little Stark girl asked if I would help with the demonstrations.” Demanded was perhaps the more accurate term, but it was important to Cersei that these businesses succeed, so he’d obliged.

“She’s a determined one. Three times she’s cornered me about appearing in their next video shoot.”

“Oh?” Stannis unlaced the bracers and set them on the table.

Davos leaned up against the wall of the garage. “I told her I don’t mind helping, but I won’t be filmed. Marya’s finally all right with our relationships. I don’t want to jeopardize it by her somehow seeing footage of me dressed up in costume swinging an axe at a college freshman.”

Davos nudged him. “She doesn’t give up, that little girl.”

Arya came over to them. She looked at them sweetly. “I wanted to thank you for helping us out. We couldn’t have finished if it wasn’t for you.”

Stannis wasn’t certain if she was speaking solely to him. “Thank you. We knew how important this was to Cersei and to you.”

“We’re going to be doing another shoot in a few months.” Arya smiled almost shyly. “Would you consider being in this one too?”

“Watch yourself,” Davos muttered.
“We both would be happy to participate.”

“We would?” Davos was alarmed. “I never said—”

Stannis ignored Davos. “We will need to see the releases ahead of time.” He watched as Arya’s little girl lost mask slipped. “And we will require written assurances regarding the dissemination of any footage, raw or edited.”

She made a face, took a breath, and seemed to be thinking.

“Attack number two,” Davos said under his breath.

Whatever her next move was going to be, Stannis never knew. Sansa signaled for her to go and help with something.

“I don’t understand why she is so determined to secure our participation.”

“It’s your face the girl wants to have on their little film. I think she views me as part of the package so to speak.”

“Why?”

“Oh.” Davos chuckled. “You don’t know.”

Stannis’s confusion deepened. He tried several times, but could get nothing enlightening out of Davos.

It grew worse when Asha and Cersei finally joined them. Davos filled them in on what had just passed. Asha outright laughed and even Cersei was smiling.

“We should maybe see about buying some stuff for ourselves.” Asha grabbed one of the price sheets.

Stannis stared at her. “Woman, what possible use would we have for armor?”

“Not the full kit,” Davos assured him. “Just a few pieces.”

“I’d love a sword myself,” Asha commented. “But they could get dangerous if we weren’t careful.”

He didn’t understand any of this.

“Seven hells, she’s coming back for another pass,” Davos muttered.

Arya was bearing down on them.

Whatever she was intending, Asha had other ideas. “So how come you only want men to be your fighters?” Asha easily hefted a sword.

“I didn’t have any volunteers. They all want to be ladies of the court.”

Stannis couldn’t help but notice how at home with the broad sword Asha appeared to be.

“Seriously?” Asha rolled her eyes. “Do they fucking think that—don’t give me that look, Davos—she’s a grown woman. She’s heard the word before. She’s probably already—all right, all right.” Asha put the sword back on the table. “I should have my official letter about my tenure by then so I
will be in your video, kid. So will Cersei, but we want to be warriors, not ‘ladies of the fucking court.’”

“We do?” Cersei was taken aback.

“We do.” Asha fixed Arya with a firm gaze. “And we will kick ass. But the deal is you stop stalking Stannis.”

“But he’s—”

Asha cut Arya off. “We know. He’s fucking hot when he picks up one of these or he puts on the leather armor, but we will be fucking hotter.”

Stannis tried to come to terms with the concept of his ‘hotness’ and failed.

“Do we have a deal?”

They did, although it was clear Arya wasn’t entirely happy, but she shook hands on it and mercifully left them alone.

“I know what I want for my name day.” Asha pointed to the sword. “Can you imagine me with that baby at the reference desk?”

Stannis could. It was not a displeasing image.

“Why did you volunteer me to be a knight?” Cersei demanded a little desperately.

He wrenched his mind away from the fantasy of Asha taking on the problem patrons with weaponry.

“Father is going to have a fit. I won’t know what I’m doing. This is—”

“Woman, you can do anything you set your mind to.”

The three of them froze.

“To which you set your mind,” Asha corrected, a slow smile spreading across her face.

She would never let him live it down. No, they would never let him live it down. Unless . . .

“Whatever.”

* * *

Ned leaned up against a wall silently watching the guests. The party was in full swing. He knew Cat was still worried about Sansa. For a while, it had been touch and go. She’d been like a wildling of the middle ages. But now he thought, his daughter seemed to finally be coming back to herself.

Olenna came up next to him. “I heard we have approval for the new staff lines.”

“Three of them,” Ned said. “But I’m sure you knew that already.”

“Of course.”

“I tried for four.”

Olenna frowned. “The fourth being . . .”
“Head of Reference.” He saw her eyes narrow. “I want to make you Associate Director.”

“No.”

Ned expressed surprise. He wasn’t a fool. He knew damn well that she and Varys merely tolerated him. They had been working around him quite efficiently from the day he started.

“I plan on retiring in five years and I like being Head of Reference.”

“There would be more money.”

“I have no need of it. Varys would be a much better choice. We wouldn’t need to replace him either. His current duties could be folded into the position.”

He thought about it. “All right. I should warn you that I told the Provost I want to step down. He’s asked me to stay on for another year. I consented, but after that . . .”

“You want to go back to teaching.”

“Yes.” Ned was beginning to feel more comfortable in the job, but it was neither what he enjoyed nor where he excelled. He missed the classroom. He missed teaching. He missed his writing.

She nodded.

Obviously it wasn’t a surprise to her. “It will give us time to groom Stannis for the position.”

“Stannis?!?”

He knew he was savoring her surprise a bit too much.

“Stannis? We need someone who is flexible. You are practically a Yoga master compared with Stannis.” But she grew thoughtful. “He has improved a great deal. We have Cersei to thank for it, I suppose.”

Ned hadn’t really thought about what had wrought the change in Stannis.

“Haven’t you noticed how he’s improved? Don’t think that’s not her influence. I still don’t want him teaching, but he would handle the administrative parts well enough.” Olenna cast an eye on the librarians milling about the buffet table. “I think we’ll work through Asha. She seems to be able to get through to Cersei.” She waited. “Well? What do you think?”

“It was my idea in the first place,” he reminded her. “In any case, does my opinion really matter?”

Olenna seemed surprised. “I wouldn’t ask you if I didn’t want an answer. You’re not a bad director, you know. You’ve come a long way since you started. Varys and I would work with you if you want to stay on.”

He thought she meant what she said. “Thank you for that, but I want to go back to doing what I was meant to do. Frankly, my stomach is not strong enough for librarianship.” Ned saw Stannis talking with Kevan. “I think he would be good at the job.”

“We can talk more about it on Monday.”

“Where is Varys anyway? I know Sansa invited him.”

Olenna sipped at her wine. “He’s taking care of something that needed to be done a long time ago.”
The ground upon which the Aegon Targaryen Memorial Library stood was riddled with tunnels and passageways. Most of these had been blocked up over the years. A few were merely . . . forgotten.

It was out of one of these that Petyr Baelish emerged. For a man who had been on the run for over six months, he was remarkably unscathed. His schemes had practically demanded that he secure a safe hiding place just in case. True, he hadn’t expected to be in it for quite so long, but it had served him well enough.

His hidey-hole wasn’t luxurious to be sure, but he had the basic comforts. What he had not set by, he was able to augment in other ways. Students were sloppy, careless creatures. They routinely walked away from their bags, leaving food, electronics, and money out in the open, just begging to be taken.

He freely admitted he would be happy never to see a Clif bar or a container of ramen ever again, but he’d be living a much more comfortable life in one of the Free Cities very soon.

It had been child’s play to use their phones to place false leads in the beginning. He no longer bothered. The police kept up with the pursuit, but with each passing day, the trail had grown colder. Petyr had known that if he just sat tight, they would start moving on to other fresher, newer crimes.

He still had, well, call them “friends” in various circles: campus security officers who looked the other way; vice cops who took bribes; businessmen who preferred the company of fresh young college girls to hardened whores. It wasn’t going to be very difficult to make his way out of Westeros.

He was sorry about the loss of Sansa. He thought about her often. In his dreams, she was so beautiful, so innocent, and so very ready for him and him alone. Perhaps Bolton had been right after all. He had made his interest apparent to her too soon and scared her off.

The articles and reports said little about what Sansa Stark had gone through with Roose Bolton. That surprised him. He would have thought the media outlets would have eaten up her story with a spoon. Beautiful young girl held prisoner by a deranged killer: it was the stuff of which TV movies were made.

His one regret was going to see her. If he had just stayed away from Bolton’s or somehow managed to get Bolton to release her into his care, the authorities would have nothing on him. He could have won Sansa over with a little time and a little attention.

Petyr shook these thoughts off. It was done. He had very few pieces on the board left. The time had come to go elsewhere and play another game.

He looked at himself in the mirror he had stolen from one of the rooms where Varys kept the surplus furniture. The man who looked back at him was a stranger: light brown hair, clean shaven features, brown eyes. Hair dye, a razor, and colored contacts had done the job. There was very little to take. A satchel with a fresh change of clothing, plenty of cash, and forged identification was all he really required. Everything else could be obtained at his destination or along the way.

The tunnel he required was on the other side of the basement. It would lead him to freedom. He walked quietly and quickly. The lighting flickered on and off as he moved but there was very little he could do about it. He was used to it in any case. More importantly, Campus Security was used
to it. They no longer rushed over at every report of lights at odd hours of the night. The sensors malfunctioned. Everyone knew it. He walked across the main aisle and into darkness. The lights here did not turn on. A piece of luck, he supposed.

He was halfway down the row when he heard the noises. Wheels he thought or perhaps something being pushed. He froze where he was and flattened himself against the stacks. Then he heard the beeps. Three of them. The shelves in front of him began to move. He could barely see them but the sounds were unmistakable. He should know. He and Bolton had rigged these sensors how many times now?

Petyr nudged his foot against the tape at the bottom of the shelves. The shelves continued to compress. He ran now.

“I’m afraid that isn’t going to work.”

He heard Varys’ apologetic words just as he tripped over a rolling step stool. Petyr got up and began to run the other way. He fell over another stool. “Varys, I have money. You can have it all,” he rasped.

“But I don’t want your money, Petyr.”

“Who are you working for? I can double whatever they’re paying you. Triple it even. Who do you serve?”

The shelves kept moving inexorably toward him.

“I serve the library, Petyr. Someone must.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Pretzel Jell-O is a delightful concoction of a pretzel crust, a layer of cream cheese, and then strawberries in strawberry jell-o. I thought it was a good potluck choice for Stannis to bring. It seems weird and it is awesome. Much like Stannis.

Late addition: Roller Derby Sansa courtesy of the amazing Lady of Tarth!
This is a bittersweet experience for me, writing these notes for the final chapter. I've lived with this story for months, first in the planning and writing of it, and then in the posting.

I need to thank a couple of people: Vana for encouraging me even before she had any idea what my writing would be like and for continuing to provide moral support and virtual hand-holding throughout; Deisegal for her amazing illustrations; Lady of Tarth for creating Roller Derby Sansa for me; tafkar, who has become a friend and who also has been there when I needed encouragement; and last, but not least, to all of the commentators here. I thought this was finished when I started posting and you quickly made me realize when and where I needed to add something. You have helped make this a much better story and reading your responses became something to which I looked forward every update.
Thank you all so much for sticking it out with me, even when there were some cracky
bumps in the road.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!