Disclaimer: I don't own HP, GOT, or ASOIAF. Would have finished the last two properly if I had.
Edited by Bub3loka

23rd Day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

Daenerys Targaryen, Harrenhal

“Aegon and Daenerys Targaryen are one flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever!”

And now, Daenerys was a woman thrice wed, in this stuffy old sept nestled into Harrenhal’s enormous courtyard. A statue loomed from above at each of the six pillars, their cold faces staring down at her with judgment.

She raised her chin higher. Why would the Blood of the Dragon answer to gods, let alone men?

Alas, wedding rites had to be observed properly. Each of her councillors had been adamant, insisting that the union be held before the Seven, for she needed to respect the gods here, or at least make a display of it, if she were to become a queen in more than just name.

It was but a dull affair, hastily arranged in a handful of days to shore up the guise of legitimacy and merge the two royal councils. Yet there were no deaths or bloody feuds, only endless prattling, wafting, and listening to the insincere or fearful well-wishes of the hastily arrived ladies, lords, knights, and septons. Worse, they all looked at her with either suspicion or fright, as if she would leap forth, turn into a dragon, and burn them alive.

“They call you Aerys with teats amongst the smallfolk, Your Grace,” Varys had supplied, voice dripping with regret. “Even the knights and the noblemen have fallen for such vile slander, listening to whispers late at night around their campfires. I can suppress the rumours, of course, but….”

He raised his hands helplessly.

“They do not know my aunt,” said Aegon, giving her an encouraging smile. “A display of queenly dignity shall quell such wretched hearsay in time.”

Daenerys was surprised, but not angered. If anything, her father’s terrible reputation was worse than Ser Barristan had claimed. Viserys’s words of Valyrian glory still burned in her mind, yet they had been lies all along. The return of the House of the Dragon was even half as welcome as he had claimed. Yet… why did they love Aegon so much more?

Was he prettier?

Softer?

Kinder?

He had fought battles and killed men and women here, and his army had plundered villages and raided manses and holdfasts, yet they welcomed him with none of the suspicion. Was it all because of her sire in the end?

It was a bitter draught to swallow.

Even the dull ceremony did nothing to uplift her spirit. At least Aegon was pleasing to the eye. Whether he was truly her nephew or some other pretender no longer mattered.

He was the Blood of the Dragon, or he would have failed to mount Viserion.

Those lofty claims about being raised from birth to lead and rule rang true enough, for he handled other Lords with practised ease. He spoke of the histories of their houses, of ancient feuds and half-forgotten blood ties, of bannermen Daenerys had never even heard named. It galled her how easily he charmed them—lords, knights, and even her own counsellors—those who had once professed undying loyalty to her.

Envy burned within her breast. While she and her brother had fled across the Narrow Sea, escaping from the Usurper's hired knives, he had grown up swaddled in silks, safe, with tutors to teach him and masters-at-arms to hone his skill. It was unfair—monstrously unfair.

Yet beneath the resentment stirred a strange relief. Aegon was no Hizdahr zo Loraq. He spoke of justice and mercy, of ruling well and wisely. Admirable notions, if somewhat naïve. *'Let him bear that burden,'* she thought bitterly. Let him soothe the smallfolk with his honeyed words, let him charm the lords who smile as they sharpen their knives.

Her weariness was bone-deep, a mixture of bitterness and exhaustion. She had grown sick of false allies, of men who professed their loyalty to her face and plotted her ruin behind her back. Why should she not taste the sweet fruits of queenship, without bleeding herself dry for the sake of thankless curs who would sell her for a handful of gold?

Why wouldn't she taste the sweet fruit of the queenship without toiling like a slave for some thankless lying mongrels who would see her dead if the opportunity arose?

But tonight, even the crown meant nothing. Queenship was stripped from her as easily as her gown. *Bedding,* they called it—a savage custom for a savage land.

Laughter and ribald jests filled the air as eager hands tore at her silks. Rough fingers grazed bare skin; a few took liberties, groping where they dared. Daenerys clenched her jaw and endured, preparing to face her third husband.

24th Day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

Aegon was not a better lover than Daario. Her so-called nephew was eager but inexperienced, and there was little pleasure in their lovemaking.

That spark that Daenerys had eagerly anticipated when lying with someone of her blood was… not there. Aegon did not lack passion, but the coupling felt lacking to her. Unfulfilling in a way that words failed to express.

Even Hizdahr zo Loraq had been a better lover; his hands were bold and experienced despite the coldness of his kisses.

It was a disappointment, but Daenerys was used to disappointments.

She did not wed Aegon for pleasure but for duty and a crown. She wed him for his blood, the thing that allowed him to master a dragon. Surely enough, he was just as eager to rule, eager to fight, and far more experienced there than in carnal matters.

The morning after the bedding, Aegon was already summoning his council.

Daenerys, however, was faced with something new, foreign.

Boredom.

Where once her days were delegated to juggling councillors, advisors, and sworn swords, and listening to endless prattle about logistics or coin, those burdens now rested on Aegon's shoulders. Her husband wore the crown and bore its weight gladly, while she, the queen, was left with little more than the duties of the hearth: to bear heirs, to oversee her household, and to instruct her ladies.

But no heir stirred within her womb, and there could be no household nor ladies-in-waiting to command when the royal court was forever on the move with the war host.

So it was that Daenerys Targaryen sat idle, staring up at the pale ceiling above her bed. The beams and boards were carved from *weirwood*—the sacred tree of the First Men, white as bone and just as eerie. Harrenhal was full of the stuff, its walls and rafters lined with the ghostly timber. Strange, she thought, that the men of the North should pray to trees. Yet she had seen stranger things east of the Narrow Sea.

She rolled onto her side, her silver hair spilling like silk across the pillow. The chamber was vast, far too vast for one woman. A room for giants, ten yards by ten, with little within it but a bed fit for a king, a table, and a chest or two. The silence grew suffocating. Here, in this blackened fortress her forebear had once charred to ruin, Daenerys felt herself out of place. She had not belonged in the shadowed halls of Dragonstone, nor in the gleaming pyramids of Meereen, nor even upon the boundless plains of the Dothraki Sea.

All those places had to mean something and yet… she felt like a stranger.

Why could it never compare to that lemon tree in the sun and the red door?

She could plant a thousand lemon trees and paint every door in Westeros red, yet none would ever be *that* door. None would ever be *home.*

A weary sigh escaped her lips. She reached for the small bell at her bedside and gave it a single ring. Moments later, a dozen handmaidens swept into the room. Not one face was familiar. They were girls of high birth, proud and proper, with high chins and smooth hands that had never known true toil. Daenerys studied them with quiet detachment, feeling suddenly more alone than ever amidst their polite curtsies and simpering smiles.

They tittered coquetishly as they fluttered around the room, gossiping about one knight or lord or the other.

A frown tugged at her lips as the women started fussing around her choice of garments and combing her hair.

“Where is Missandei?” Daenerys demanded. “And Irri? Jhiqui?”

The question hung in the air as they all halted. None of the pale Westerosi maidens dared meet her eyes. It was a girl with a heart-shaped face and hair the colour of sand who finally gathered the courage to speak.

“The head steward dismissed them last eve, Your Grace.”

Daenerys stilled. For a heartbeat, the only sound in the room was the faint crackle of the hearth. Then her jaw tightened, and the fury rose in her belly.

They dare play games with my own people?

“Bring me this head steward,” she said, her voice low and icy.

The maidens startled, exchanging frightened glances before scattering from the chamber as though driven by a lash. The door had barely stopped trembling from their flight when a plump, red-faced man waddled in, bowing so low his jowls quivered. Clad from head to toe in fine silks, the golden embroidery on his sleeves was too rich for a mere servant.

“Your Grace, you sent for me?” he simpered.

Daenerys rose slowly from her seat. “Are you the man who dismissed my handmaidens,” she asked, each word sharp, “only to replace them with a flock of clucking hens?”

The steward’s false smile faltered, and beads of sweat began to gather at his brow. “Your Grace, I—I merely acted in good faith,” he stammered, raising his hands. “Many fine ladies of noble birth—daughters, sisters, nieces of lords and knights—have petitioned to serve Your Grace and His Majesty. It is… an honour to attend upon the royal household.”

He risked a glance upward, his tone growing cautious. “Pardon me, Your Grace, but… a slave girl from Naath, and two Dothraki women—well, they can hardly compare to such distinguished maidens.”

Daenerys said nothing. She only looked at him—looked, until his words curdled in his throat and he began to tremble beneath the weight of her gaze.

“Get out of my sight,” she said at last. “Before I order Red Flea to skewer you where you stand. And send word to my handmaids—if they are not here before the hour turns, I’ll have your head. I will not look upon those tittering little chits again.”

The steward blanched, bowing so low his slick hair touched the floor. “Your wish is my command, Your Grace.”

He waddled out like a frightened hog, but that did little to appease her anger.

When the door opened again, Missandei entered, flanked by Irri and Jhiqui. Their faces were cautious, their steps unsure. The sight of them loosened something tight in Daenerys’s chest, though it shamed her to realise how far she had drifted from them since their arrival in Westeros. They no longer offered

counsel as they once had in Meereen or Vaes Dothrak—and perhaps that was for the best. What wisdom could they give her here, in this strange land so foreign to them?

“Did they mistreat you?” she demanded.

“No, Khaleesi,” said Irri, her tone more mocking than fearful. “The fat half-eunuch only said we were no good. He cannot fight or ride, cannot heal, and owns no slaves or sons, yet he struts as if he were a khal.”

Daenerys’s lips pressed thin. She wanted nothing more than to summon Grey Worm and Red Flea and have the steward dragged screaming to the yard and cane him until each and every one of his bones was broken. Yet she knew better. He was only one of many who bowed and smiled and whispered *Your Grace* to her face, then undermined her when she turned away. And it would not do to quarrel with Aegon—not on the day after their bedding.

Still, if her husband thought to strip her of her household, he was sorely mistaken.

Once, Daenerys had thought to take noble-born handmaidens from the Narrow Sea. The noble houses had been polite enough, yet none had offered their daughters. Now, moons later, she was glad of it. The sight of these proud Westerosi girls, all soft voices and painted lips, set her teeth on edge. Their curtsies were deep, their smiles practised—but in their eyes she saw it: fear, caution, and beyond it disdain, cold and veiled, for the foreign queen who had traded with slavers and ruled over freedmen and horse-lords.

She had seen far too often for her taste not to know it. It was the pride of their lineage and good name. She had seen the same pride of the Qartheen and the Ghiscari, thinking themselves above everything.

Jhiqui only snorted as she began to braid her queen’s silver hair. “The Sunset Lands have queer ways, Khaleesi. Their men are proud, and their women prouder. It is known.”

Daenerys let out a slow breath, allowing her anger to cool. “Only I may dismiss you,” she said at last. “Remember that. And from this day forward, each of you shall have two Unsullied at your side. One to guard and one to watch.”

Irri’s grin was fierce. “Very wise, Khaleesi.”

By the time her handmaids had finished their ministrations, Daenerys’s fury had softened, if not wholly faded. She broke her fast upon the local fare—bread too pale, meats too bland, and not a grain of spice to wake the tongue.

The hours stretched, Daenerys felt the gnawing ache of idleness again, and even idle chatter with her handmaidens no longer felt satisfactory. The castle of Harrenhal was grand, but half a ruin and an army camp. There was nothing to see, not after centuries of rule had seen the great fortress beggared and fallen into disrepair. Restlessness stirred beneath her skin—she felt less a queen and more a prized mare, kept well-groomed, yet penned within her stable.

“Clothe me,” she said at last, her voice edged with impatience. “I will take a stroll.”

At once, her handmaids moved to obey. They draped her in a gown of crimson silk and black cotton, the colours of her House, and fastened a soft ermine cloak about her shoulders.

Aegon would still be with his councillors, no doubt bent over maps and parchments, plotting the next turn of the war. Once, she had thought such councils tedious; now, even tedium seemed a mercy against the dullness of her chambers. So she went to him.

Grey Worm and Red Flea fell into step behind her as she left her quarters. It took near a quarter-hour of walking before they reached the audience chamber—a trek through endless, echoing halls and blackened stone. Even inside, they had failed to clean the soot from Balerion's fierce flames.

At the dark ironwood doors stood Rolly Duckfield in his white cloak. The young knight stiffened at her approach, uncertain whether to bar her or bow. Daenerys spared him the decision with a smile, not slowing her steps even for a heartbeat. The poor man flushed crimson and stepped aside at once, allowing her entry, while her Unsullied took their place beside him.

Six heads turned as she entered. Even Aegon looked startled, seated at the head of the long pale table. To his right sat Jon Connington, the Hand, rigid as ever; to his left, Ser Barristan, now Master of Laws. The old knight had been offered the white cloak again, she recalled, only to refuse it with a weary grace—*"I would shame the Kingsguard,"* he had said. *"My sword is sharp, but my strength and mind no longer match it."*

Archmaester Marwyn had taken the office of Grand Maester, his colourful chain dangling from his thick neck, now woven with precious gems. Tyrion and Varys flanked the lower end of the table, their positions unchanged under their new master.

Conversation ceased the instant she appeared. Connington's jaw tightened, a pulse twitching angrily at his temple. His dislike for her was no secret, though it amused her that the great Griffin Lord could be so easily ruffled.

It was Varys who broke the silence, his voice smooth as always. "Your Grace," he bowed, "we did not expect the pleasure of your company."

Daenerys crossed the room with unhurried steps and seated herself opposite her husband. "I wished to listen," she said, tone cool. "Perhaps I might lend my wisdom to this council of… learned men. A queen must not be ignorant of her realm's affairs, after all. Pay me no mind. Continue."

Connington stiffly coughed into his gloved fist. But then, everything about the man was stiff—his posture, his words, even his sense of honour. "As I was saying," he said curtly, "the Kingslayer has fallen back to the Golden Tooth, gathering what scattered Westermen he could find. Crane and Rowan have bent the knee to Tommen Waters, bolstering his strength."

Her husband and his councillors looked ill at ease, as though her presence at their war table had unsettled the very air. Daenerys could not tell whether it was she who unnerved them or if they were still unaccustomed to the company of one another. Either way, the tension in the room was thick enough to taste, and yet the talk itself was as dull as she remembered.

Regret began to creep upon her.

As they droned on about supplies and grain stores, levy counts and forage routes, Daenerys lifted her hand to beckon a serving boy. "Wine," she said softly, and the lad hurried to fill her goblet. One sip was

enough to draw a faint grimace—the wine was dark, heavy, and bitter on the tongue. Westerosi vintners had none of the grace of Lys or Volantis.

Aegon's plan for the Riverlands was simple, perhaps too simple for her liking. The fortified castles that would not yield were to be taken by siege or by storm—a rush of men from below, while dragons bathed the ramparts in flames. The rest of the host would march westward toward the Golden Tooth to pin down the Lannister host.

"What of Highgarden?" Aegon asked at length, fingers drumming idly on the table. "Has the Reach bent the knee?"

Archmaester Marwyn shifted uneasily in his seat before producing a roll of parchment from his robes. "A raven came from Highgarden at dawn," he said. "Ser Garlan Tyrell rides to us to swear fealty in his brother's stead."

Daenerys arched a brow. "And why does this… Willas Tyrell not come himself?"

Her question met only silence and a visible tightening of Jon Connington's jaw.

Tyrion was the one who answered, his tone wry. "Lord Tyrell's been crippled since childhood," he said, swirling his wine lazily. "A tourney mishap where his horse fell on his leg. That leg never recovered and keeps him from travelling far—or so the tale goes."

Daenerys sipped again, letting the bitter taste sit on her tongue as she studied the faces around the table.

"It matters little," Aegon said after a pause. "The Reach has no strength left to oppose us. The Desolation of King's Landing broke their strength… and their ambition. Now that they will bend, only the Vale and the North remain detached. Any word from there?"

Ser Barristan stroked his beard thoughtfully. "No word from either, save what Lord Varys might share."

The Spider spread his hands in mock apology. "None from the North, save tales of snow and cold," he said with a faint smile. "As for the Vale—Lord Arryn spends his days drinking, rutting with his maids, and calling hunts and feasts. He seems quite content to sit out any fighting, just like Lysa Arryn and her sickly boy did."

"Wastrel," Connington muttered, his voice sharp with scorn. "Say what you will of Jon Arryn's treachery—he was a lord and a true knight. The boy is neither."

Tyrion chuckled into his cup. "A wastrel bends the knee faster than a warrior, my good Hand. One does not draw steel against dragons when one is too drunk to stand. If His Grace were to fly to the Eyrie, I daresay the Vale would remember its old oaths swiftly enough. It wouldn't be the first time an Arryn bowed before the might of the dragons."

Aegon's expression did not change. His violet eyes lingered on the dwarf, cool and unreadable. "Are you suggesting," he said at last, his voice mild but laced with iron, "that I fly to the Eyrie as an envoy?"

“The cold should have driven the Valemen down into the Gates of the Moon and the lowlands, yet—yes, Your Grace. A display of unshakable power of the dragons might see proud heads bow and stiffer knees to bend.”

Aegon’s brows furrowed as silence hung heavy.

“Can these Valemen be trusted?” Daenerys asked. “What if they set some trap for Aegon in their halls, when he comes alone and unguarded?”

“The Arryns are no Freys,” Connington sniffed. “For once, the Imp speaks true. Storm’s End lies broken, and to reach out to the Lords of the Vale would show mercy and magnanimity. Prudence would call to open parley with the North as well—give the Stark bastard a chance to bend the knee.”

He spat the last word with great reluctance. Whether his distaste sprang from an old loathing of the Starks, or from some private pique against bastards, Daenerys could not tell.

Tyrion sipped, one mismatched eye glinting. “Prudent indeed, Lord Hand,” he drawled. “Fighting through cold wasteland is a poor bargain. The North saw snow in summer, and I dread to imagine how fierce the chill is now. Last I remember, the winds there would shave the flesh from a man’s bones. And… late autumn turns to winter quicker than any lord can muster men.”

Nobody spoke further, hesitation written over the faces of all the men here. Even Varys and Ser Barristan. A ruler must be swift and decisive; a dragon doubly so. Why was Aegon hesitating so?

“Let me be the one to do it,” Daenerys said at last, her voice edged with steel. She met her husband’s gaze head-on. “I will take wing with Drogon. I will fly to the Eyrie, then to Winterfell. I will make Arryn and Stark bend the knee.”

Aegon rubbed his face with a weary hand, his fingers pinching the bridge of his nose as if to stop a sour thought from rising. “Wrangling lords is no easy thing,” he answered. “They are stubborn folk, and twice as proud—especially those of the great Houses. Do you truly mean it?”

“I do,” she replied. ‘*If you dally so, I shall do what must be done myself.’*

Ser Barristan stirred, his voice thick with alarm. “Your Grace, this is folly. You would be far from the host, alone and unprotected. A queen alone is a prize some men would risk kingdoms to seize. There’s no need to tempt fate, if you are taken hostage or worse…”

Daenerys’s smile was thin. “What fool would dare lay a hand on me with Drogon by my side?”

“Perhaps none,” Barristan allowed, though doubt lingered in his words. “Arryn may be honourable, as those of the line of the Falcon always are, for the lord of the Eyrie must be no less to rule. But honour does not make one wise, nor does it make one safe. As for Jon Snow, he cast aside his black cloak and his vows. An oath-breaker once might see him hesitate less to break another.”

“It is not without peril,” Connington said, his voice rough as gravel. “There are those who would take it for an insult, sending a woman to treat in matters of war and honour.”

“Not just a common woman,” Daenerys replied, lifting her chin, “but a queen, and a dragonrider besides—the first in nearly two hundred years. Let them look upon me and my dragon and weigh their chances. Was that not the plan?”

Archmaester Marwyn inclined his head, while Tyrion's half-smiling face remained unreadable behind his goblet of wine.

"Ned Stark's bastard is no fool," the Imp drawled, rolling each word on his tongue. "Even when the North stood whole and unbroken by war, it could never hope to match dragonfire. Torrhen Stark bent the knee without a battle when Aegon the Conqueror loosed his beasts upon the world."

"You speak well, Lord Tyrion, but the question remains," Marwyn said in his low, rumbling voice as his gaze flicked to Varys in the shadows. "Can an oathbreaker be trusted to honour the rites of guest right and safe passage?"

Tyrion gave a careless shrug. "If he were a savage, the North would never have crowned him. Whatever else he may be, Jon Snow holds the loyalty of the Northern Lords—a proud and quarrelsome breed. That alone should speak of his character louder than any hearsay."

"It matters not," Daenerys said, waving away their concerns. "I'm willing to try. The realm is fractured, divided for far too long. The longer it remains so, the more each lord will cling to any scrap of land and power, and the harder it will be to bind them again beneath one rule."

Aegon Targaryen said nothing for a time, his violet eyes fixed on the painted table before him. At last, he looked to his Hand. "Lord Connington. I would hear your thoughts on the matter."

Connington gave a long, hard look at the map of Westeros strewn across the table.

"If we had Balerion the Black Dread, none of this would matter," he said, voice tight. "Armies, walls, and cities, all would burn before him. But Drogon and Viserion are still young—their scales too thin, their fire not yet hot enough to melt stone. The Vale and the North have never been taken by swords alone. To send Her Grace is a perilous thing… yet if she succeeds, it will save us a lot of grief."

Daenerys regarded him with a flicker of surprise. For once, his words held no bitterness.

"Success is always sweet," Tyrion murmured, the corners of his mouth twitching with faint amusement. "Besides, precautions may be taken. House Targaryen bears no quarrel with the young falcon of the Vale or his line, so it need not be personal. And if Ned Stark's bastard were to reclaim his home… well, Snow is no killer of envoys, nor would he break guest right."

"Yet…" Varys' thin hands twisted together, purple eyes heavy with worry. "The old laws, the sacred laws… they have been broken too often of late. Nothing is certain anymore."

"Daenerys." Aegon's violet gaze rested on her, and she could read the unwillingness plainly in it. "Are you truly willing to risk such an undertaking?"

"I am," she said, rising to her feet, her voice steady.

If Visenya Targaryen could take a kingdom without bloodshed, so could she.

Who had the patience to linger for years in that cold, wet land, trudging through snow and mud while lords squabbled and soldiers died? It was better to end it swiftly with Drogon. The endless struggle, where blood ran like rivers and death stalked every field, had wearied her. She had grown tired of

running, chasing, scheming, and struggling; she had grown sick of men armoured in steel, of the clangour of swords and spears.

She longed for the warmth of peace and the careless freedom that came with it. The seasons came and went, but peace had to be won again. Be it with honeyed words and threats or with fire and blood.

“Very well.” Aegon inclined his head with a stiff, formal motion. “Then we shall set the matter in order… and attend to the details.”

26th Day of the 8th Moon, 303 AC

The Lord of Highgarden

Willas, heart heavy, hobbled over to his solar for another meeting with his grandmother.

Would it be about Rowan and Crane again? Their defection to Lannister had been a painful blow, for their forces were one of the few completely intact after the Desolation of King’s Landing.

And House Tyrell was too weak to deal with them right now, especially since Casterly Rock backed them.

Yet failure to respond to the loss of two major bannermen made them look weak, laying the truth bare for all to see. Not that it would matter, for the Lion’s days were coming close to an end.

“Baelor is still looking for sailors for his new fleet,” Olenna Tyrell said, her usual scowl still plastered on her face. She had yet to shed her black mourning gown, and Willas suspected she would not change this attire until her last breath. “Your Uncle has gone mad with grief.”

As he neared fifty, the new Lord of the Hightower was far from being a boy, but that would never spare him from the Queen of Thorn’s sharp tongue.

“The Arbour and the Shield Isles have yet to be pried off the Ironmen’s grasp.” Willas rubbed his eyes. “I will send the men Garlan mustered to aid him. Have they finished counting the dead yet?”

Father above, being a lord was especially tiring in these trying times. It was all death and darkness, and Willas felt like mortal danger lurked behind every corner. Even victories brought no joy, especially when they left devastation and thousands of corpses in their wake.

“Mostly. Seventy thousand dead and rising by the day,” his grandmother rasped. “He plans to rid the world of that pirate menace for good. Pah, the Ironmen should have been pulled out root and stem centuries ago.”

Yet it was easier said than done. The Ironmen, for all of their cruelty, knew how to be clever and upon defeat, they always fled to their dreary islands to lick their wounds. In truth, they were nothing more than vultures—quick to flee against strong foes, and content to attack the weak and the dying. No trouble had come from the Iron Islands while the dragons soared in the skies freely. Even under the Hoares, who had tried to turn them into proper nobility, the Ironmen had continued their reaving ways.

With luck and determination, Baelor Hightower would see that scourge ended for good. With hundreds of warships from the Iron Fleet under his command, and countless more longboats and cogs, he could

muster a mighty fleet. Yet each boat needed sailors, captains, and rowers to man… something Oldtown lacked. With that, Willas had agreed to aid him.

Olenna let out a long, wheezing sigh. She looked smaller by the day, as if the weeks were shrinking her already shrivelled frame further. “Are you prepared, boy?”

“Prepared?”

“To be under the yoke of the dragons once more,” she murmured, her shoulders sagging. “The Targaryens were ever capricious and twice as greedy, but now they have their beasts again.”

“We will endure,” Willas stated with far more confidence than he felt. “We always have. I know how to keep my head low, grandmother. A few generations to solidify the Reach further and restore our influence. Growing Strong.”

They had been so close to the crown. Victory had been in their grasp, yet it all slipped away like water between their fingers.

No amount of scheming and negotiating helped when you no longer had a sister or a daughter to become a queen. Facing dragons was dangerous and often fatal—House Tyrell remembered the lessons learned at the Field of Fire. The very same lessons that had won them Highgarden and the vast lands of the Reach.

So they would bid their time until the dragons danced again. Perhaps not in this generation or the next, but they would eventually. The dragon's pride was as high as the sky, yet there was only one crown, only one throne, and sooner or later, one of the dragon kings would have more than one son. Perhaps the sons would get along, but could the same be said for their children and grandchildren?

Sooner or later, an ambitious man with a dragon and no crown to inherit would be born.

And once the dragons fell from the sky again, the Great Game could resume.

Yet… that was far off. Perhaps he would never live long enough to see it. Willas’s duty was the same: to solidify House Tyrell’s standing in the Reach no matter the cost. To lay a solid foundation for his successors to build upon again. The Desolation of King’s Landing had not only killed too many, but it had burned away the most loyal lords and knights, and with them, much of the influence House Tyrell had commanded.

His grandmother stirred.

“Yes, growing strong is all well and good,” her voice was so quiet he struggled to hear it. “But the time for growth has passed. Summer has turned, and autumn is dwindling—winter is coming, as Starks love to say. If the chill in my old bones is anything to go by, this one shall be bad.”

Willas uncorked his flask of Arbour gold and took a sip, but the sweetness brought him little comfort.

“You ought to move to warmer quarters, Grandmother,” he said softly.

She let out a derisive snort. “I’ve lived in those rooms for seventy years, boy. I shall not move now.”

He knew better than to argue with her on this. “So, what did you call me here for? Word from the North again?”

Olenna Tyrell huddled closer to the roaring hearth, staring at the flames with a hollow gaze.

“You can say so. It seems that the little doe survived in the snowy wilderness.”

It took him a few moments to realise who she was referring to.

“Shireen Baratheon?” Willas rubbed his face. “What does she matter? Aye, she might be the last trueborn Baratheon, but she has no lands, castles, swords, or commanders to her name, for Stannis lost all of it.”

“Yes, her stubborn father squandered it all in his quest for the throne. But it seems she has managed to find some charm to go by.”

“Are we talking about the same girl?” Willas murmured. “Charm in the daughter of Stannis Baratheon and Selyse Florent? That sad, ugly child with a face scarred by greyscale?”

“The very same,” the Queen of Thorns said, shuffling uneasily. “Yet somehow, she managed to charm Ned Stark’s bastard into a marriage.”

Willas blinked, startled. Yet this was no jest—his grandmother’s face was set in deadly earnest. “What?” he managed.

“You heard me, boy,” she said, eyes narrowing. “Did your ears fall off?”

“Why would anyone marry Shireen Baratheon?” He simply… couldn’t understand. It made no sense. “There’s nothing to be gained. Not beauty, not influence, lands, or powers, only trouble and woe! Even marrying some smallfolk woman like Duncan the Small would have been better.”

His grandmother just shrugged.

“I know not. It has been years since the girl was seen in the South. Perhaps the ugly duckling has grown into a beautiful swan? Or perhaps Jon Snow has grown as foolish as his father, brother, and uncle.”

“Does it matter?” Willas asked, exhaling slowly. “Perhaps it’s a ruse, and the Stark bastard married some girl with black hair and blue eyes and claimed her to be a Baratheon. Chances are Stannis’s daughter met a grisly end in the cold snows long ago. It might even work—she rarely appeared in public, and scarcely survived from those few who had seen her face.”

“Perhaps,” said Olenna, her tone giving nothing away. “A clever little scheme, I’ll grant you that—fit work for a bastard’s wits. But such low cunning would unravel soon enough, once some soul who truly knows Shireen Baratheon laid eyes upon her. But the whole realm knows of her greyscale, which cannot be faked.”

“Ah, but years have passed since then,” Willas said, smiling despite himself. “She’s near a woman grown now, and any change in her face could be laid at the feet of time and youth. The blossom rarely mirrors the bud.” He almost felt a stir of admiration for such cunning—*almost.* But in truth, Stark mattered little. What little remained of the wolves of the North was spent, and their fangers were broken. Even the greatest commander could not win a victory without a host.”

Willas chuckled despite himself. “What I would know is how you came by tidings from the North at all. We scarcely knew what passed there even before the war.”

“One of my baseborn nephews found his way to Oldtown,” said Olenna, her eyes glinting. “Clever boy, Cleyton. Became an acolyte to the maester of Goldgrass, and my generosity has borne fruit at last. Remember this, Willas—one must sow early if one hopes for a hearty harvest later. Some seeds wither in the cold, but others will grow strong and ripe when the season turns.”

Her nose wrinkled, as if she caught some unpleasant scent. “It was no easy feat, mind you. Took him near five moons to reach that frozen wasteland. The war has made those dour Northmen more tight-fisted with their trust than ever.”

And the sea, Willas thought, had grown cruel with reavers before the Crow’s Eye finally choked on his own mad ambition.

“Or perhaps Eddard Stark’s bastard is not half so dim as we take him for,” he said dryly. “Perhaps he set watchers upon the maesters. Not that it matters. I doubt you summoned me here for trifles.”

“Indeed not.” Olenna’s voice turned sharp, her lips pressed thin. “This is but the first course. I have found a *clue*.”

Willas started, too suddenly for his crippled leg’s liking. Pain lanced through him, and a sharp hiss ripped from his throat.

“Careful, Willas,” his grandmother wheezed at a rare moment of concern.

“I’m fine,” he muttered, reaching for his flask. The Qartheen dreamwine was sweet and strange on the tongue, but it dulled the pain without clouding his thoughts, unlike the poppy’s milk. The maesters warned him against it—too much, they said, could ruin a man in other ways—but pain was its own sort of poison.

“Foolish boy,” Olenna sighed, shaking her head. “Still pretending to be strong.” Her gaze sharpened again. “But listen well. I’ve found something—someone. A man-at-arms from House Hunt… one who fled King’s Landing just before the Great Desolation.”

Willas leaned forward, slow and careful this time, his curiosity overcoming the ache in his leg.

“And what does he have to say?”

“He spoke of slaughter,” she whispered. “A bloody clash between Lord Randyll Tarly and the Faith Militant. Word is, young Dickon Tarly was beaten to death by the sparrows, and the Red Huntsman lost his wits with grief.”

Willas frowned. “I can well imagine Tarly’s temper breaking at the sight of his son’s corpse, but it rings false. Why would the Faith raise hands against a pious heir of the Reach? You have oft said that gossip and half-truths are not worth a penny.”

“Indeed. But where there’s smoke, fire seldom hides far. None can guess what madness festers in the minds of zealots.” She sighed and, with disdain, tossed another roll of parchment into the flames. It

curled and blackened until nothing more than ash remained. “Still, I am inclined to agree with you. It makes little sense. The High Sparrow was a pious man, not cruel or blindly foolish, and this served the Faith or the Seven no purpose.”

Willas bit back a curse. He had turned this riddle over in his mind for moons, chasing shadows until he was near mad himself. The Destruction of King’s Landing had been a tragedy such as Westeros had never seen, a wound upon the land—and minds of many—that could not heal. Many had begrudgingly accepted it all and moved on, but not House Tyrell. They had lost too much to let it go.

The Reach would not rest until a culprit was found, if such a creature even existed. They wanted vengeance.

Cersei Lannister had pointed her golden finger at Aegon and the Faith Militant. Aegon, in turn, laid the blame back upon the sparrows. Both sought to wash their hands clean in the blood of others. A neat game, Willas thought—blame the dead, destroy what remains of the Faith, and weaken its hold while it lacks a High Septon to lead it.

Yet neither could offer up any proof beyond their own words.

Willas had spent many a night staring at the darkness, turning it all over in his mind. Riots, blood running in the street. The pieces would not fit. Nothing made sense.

Unless the truth lay elsewhere.

Faith. What if it wasn’t the sparrows?

“What if…” he murmured, his voice barely more than a whisper, “someone wanted the fight itself? What if this was never about guilt or revenge or faith, but about chaos—turning Tarly, who commanded twenty thousand swords and the Faith against one another, crippling King’s Landing from within?”

Olenna Tyrell stilled. Slowly, she looked up from the fire, her sharp eyes narrowing to slits.

“Continue,” she demanded. “Do you suspect Cersei?”

“Tommen’s mother would indeed have all the reason to stir such trouble,” he agreed. “Yet her fangs had all been long pulled off, and she was like a fish on the chopping block before the Faith. And besides, this lacks her signature touch. Subtlety was never one of her vices.”

She gave a curt nod. “This indeed lacks the finesse of a lady, even one as foolish and vain as Cersei. She lost as much as we did in that green inferno, if not more.”

“What if the perpetrator didn’t want to help Cersei or the Faith… but weaken our position?” He drained the last of his dreamwine and stared at the bottom of his cup. “Yes, Dickon Tarly’s murder is suspicious. But what if it’s just a means to an end? A means to sow discord, to keep House Tyrell from tightening its hold over the Iron Throne.”

“And whom do you suspect, then?”

A wry smile curved his lips. “Everyone. Yet if I were to name one, I’d say the Spider. Varys has his webs in every corner, and I cannot tell what he truly seeks.”

Olenna snorted. “No. The eunuch is far too clever for crude mischief. Lies, whispers, and long games are his weapons. His goal was plain enough—placing that so-called Blackfyre boy upon the throne. Still…” She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a rasp. “Varys told me something once, back in King’s Landing. I thought little of it at the time, but now…”

Willas raised a brow. “What was it?”

“That Littlefinger is the second most devious man in the Seven Kingdoms,” she said with a dry wheeze. “And doubtless, the eunuch thought himself the first.”

Willas gave a quiet scoff. “Petyr Baelish? He’s a jumped-up coin counter with no steel in his spine. A servant. A man like that can’t do much, no matter how tall the castle they hand him.”

Olenna’s face darkened.

“Too lowborn to be dangerous,” she echoed softly, almost to herself. “That’s what Eddard Stark thought too—right before Baelish put a knife to his neck and sold him out to Cersei.” She let out a humourless chuckle. “A harmless upstart, with no banners to call and little swords to wield. Yet this same lowborn trickster rose to Lord of Harrenhal, Master of Coin, Protector of the Vale… and he had his fingers in the pie when we saw to the death of that vile boy-king.”

Joffrey Waters’ fall had been their finest scheme, one that had crippled Lannister power in more ways than one—but even then, Willas knew: without Petyr Baelish, it might never have come to pass.

They had known Littlefinger for what he was—a schemer born of nothing but ambition.

It was like he was a practised hand with the cloak, dagger, and poison…

“He seems suspicious,” Willas begrudgingly agreed. “Yet the whoremonger fell the hardest after the Desolation. All the positions he clawed up for himself have gone up in smoke.”

“There’s an old saying on the Arbour—men scheme, but the gods laugh.” The Queen of Thorns looked… almost furious. “Think, boy. What do you suppose would have come to pass had there been no wildfire sleeping beneath the city? What if young Robert Arryn had not taken ill and died?”

After Dickon Tarly’s death, the clash between the Faith and the Reach would have spilt far more blood from the banks of the Honeywine to the Blackwater Bay. House Tyrell would be right in the middle of it all, dragged into the slog. Their hold on the crown would doubtlessly falter; King’s Landing would be too divided to muster any strong response to the looming threat of Aegon in the Stormlands.

The war would bleed them all—the Reach, the Westerlands, the Crownlands, and even the Stormlands, while the Vale remained fresh—

“That bastard,” Willas hissed as realisation sank in.

“Even bastards are not as cunning,” Olenna said tightly. “This is a serpent of the most cunning sort. He sent Sansa Stark north, didn’t he? With guile and a little fortune, he could see the Riverlands, the Vale, and the North bound beneath one banner again. A host of hardened killers from the Trident and the snows, thirsting for vengeance—backed by the full, untouched might of the Vale.”

The silence was deafening. Willas opened his mouth to dismiss it, but the words struggled to leave his tongue.

Why did his grandmother sound so… convincing?

1st Day of the 9th Moon, 303 AC

The Red Eagle, the Riverlands

To the east, pink had begun to bleed in the darkness. A fitting herald for another bloody dawn.

“The cunt has grown careless,” Lord Blackwood whispered. “He’s sent scouts but twice in five days, and keeps fewer than a dozen watchmen. And now—no palisade, no trenches, not even a ring of wagons. The fool lies sleeping in the open, begging for death.”

Tytos Blackwood’s hair had gone to ash, the last dark strands lost after the Red Wedding. The warm brown eyes Patrek once remembered were gone as well; now they were cold, flat stones that seemed to drink the firelight and give nothing back. War had hollowed the Riverlords, and the Red Wedding had gutted what remained. Even his once-proud beard was gone—shaved clean when he’d sworn before gods and men not to let it grow again until no living man bore the name Frey.

“And we shall grant his desire,” Patrek said, drawing his reins tight. “The Freys are all an arrogant lot, and this one more so than most. Perhaps he thinks himself untouchable for his paltry retinue of red cloaks.”

“It matters little,” Blackwood replied, his expression unflinching. “The Others will not have him—more’s the pity—but he’ll find his kin waiting for him in the Seven Hells before the hour has passed.”

At his signal, the horns sounded, the harsh, deep rumble startling the nearby birds. The Riverlords spurred their mounts, lances couched, and thundered down upon the sleeping camp. The Frey sentries stirred, too few and too slow, their cries lost beneath the pounding of hooves. Dawn’s first light broke over the chaos—men scrambling for swords, stumbling half-clad from their tents into death.

Patrek lowered his lance and drove it home, the point bursting through the chest of a man-at-arms still struggling to buckle his breastplate. The shaft splintered with a sharp crack, the shock jarring up his arm. He cast it aside, drew his sword, and cut down another before the man could raise his shield. Steel bit flesh; blood sprayed hot across his gauntlet.

He moved through them like a storm, cutting, slashing, trampling. Men died on their knees, on their bellies, reaching for weapons that were not there. His blade found a young man’s neck, and the head rolled free into the mud. The boy’s eyes—sea-green, bright with fear—met his for an instant before they dulled.

Once, such a sight would have turned his stomach. Once, the smell of blood and spilt guts and death would have driven him to retch. But those days were gone. Now there was only the rhythm of

killing—the ringing of steel, the thudding of hooves, and the hot blood of another man's life upon his plate.

The red cloaks of Lannister were said to be the finest-trained knights and men-at-arms in all Westeros, yet neither drill nor discipline could save them from a careless commander and the folly of unpreparedness. What use was steel and skill to men half-asleep in night garments, their swords hanging useless at their sides?

The battle was over before it truly began. In minutes, the ground was littered with corpses, the sickly scent of blood and fear hanging in the cold morning air. A few fleeing men were cut down by lances in pursuit; none would escape.

It was the fifth band Patrek had ambushed, the third time he had ridden beside Lord Blackwood. Their alliance had been simple and born of necessity, forged when they struck Hosteen Frey's small company together.

Most of the surviving Freys had turned upon one another, wasting the strength Old Walder had spent decades to preserve. The thrice-cursed weasels had at last reaped the ruin they had sown so greedily.

The Crossing itself lay lordless, defended by only a handful of Frey knights and men-at-arms. It mattered little. Patrek's heart was hollow. Even the richest vintages of the Reach tasted of ash. Women's embraces offered no warmth, hawking was a thrill no longer, the clamour of battle a dull echo rather than a fire in his chest.

His friends were dead, or worse. His father had been slain within the walls of Seaguard itself, paying the price for refusing tribute to the ravening Freys.

The sins of that house were many, and Patrek would see each accounted for, no matter the cost.

He was now the Lord of Seaguard, head of House Mallister, yet the title brought him no joy. What were honours and glory when there were no friends to share them, no worthy liege to serve faithfully?

Since his father's death, he had adopted a new sigil. The Mallister eagle had turned crimson upon his surcoat, set against a field of pure white, a symbol of his resolve. Whispers followed him now: *the Red Eagle*.

Once he might have felt pride in such a name, but now… he felt nothing at all.

"Any more weasels left?" Patrek asked, dragging the edge of his blade across a blue surcoat to wipe the blood away.

The Blackwood and Mallister men had fallen upon the corpses like a flock of carrions. Experienced hands stripped away everything of value. Horses, gold, arms, armour, boots—only the corpses would be left behind to rot in the cold.

"Wendel Frey," Tytos said coldly. "The weasel is said to be rallying the Naylands of Hag's Mire."

“Doubtlessly to claim what is *rightfully* his. Ah, another lord-to-be of the Crossing,” Patrek hissed. “The thirteenth one in less than a year now. Anyone else?”

Tytos’s mouth twisted. “Genna Lannister’s grandsons linger in Riverrun. That plump lioness is like a mother hen, refusing to let her weasel chicks go.”

Patrek’s jaw tightened. Only a handful of Freys remained before his father could rest in peace. Yet Riverrun was no easy picking. Even emptied of half its garrison by that fool Emmon, the castle still lay protected on all sides by running water. Storming it would not be a matter of numbers; even with all the Blackwood and Mallister men at his back, it could not be taken by force alone.

But perhaps he did not need to, for the Freys and Lannisters had made countless other enemies.

“Do you think the Targaryen boy will spare them?” Patrek asked.

When word of Jaime Lannister’s defeat reached him, he feasted for two days, the food plundered from the Frey lands tasting almost sweet.

“Would that I could peer into the mind of kings,” Tytos let out a long sigh. “Alas, I’m afraid you must deal with Wendel Frey without my aid.”

“Why?” Patrek’s fingers tensed on the hilt of his sword. “Had your fill of blood and vengeance?”

The Blackwood lord balled his gloved fist and stared at it, disappointment written across his weary old face.

“Honour demands more,” he said at last, voice thick with grief, “but other troubles have come calling. My scouts down the Red Fork bring word this very morning—Jonos Bracken, that turncloak, has sworn himself to Aegon. I do not doubt he will try again to sack Raventree Hall and slaughter my family, hiding behind some clever pretence.”

Patrek bit the inside of his cheek. He had not expected the good old Bracken-Blackwood feud to rear its ugly head, not now. And yet… he shouldn’t have been surprised. It was said that kings and lords would come and go in the Riverlands, but one thing was eternal—the feud between the horse and the raven-tree, which had continued for millennia without fail.

“What will you do?” Patrek asked, stretching as his men went about their grim work. Heads were severed and mounted on spikes around the camp, a warning to any fool bold enough to support House Frey. “Rush to grovel at the dragon’s feet, begging for mercy?”

Tytos’ shoulders sagged. “Do I even have a choice?”

“There’s always a choice,” the young lord said, his tone firm as iron. “You may not like it, but it stands before you all the same. Ride north—join the Young Wolf’s heir. Even were the dragons to muster half a hundred thousand swords, their host would shatter like a rotten egg upon stone before the walls of Moat Cailin.”

Whispers of the Bolton downfall had spread like a summer fire—thin and wavering at first, but growing thicker with every retelling. Each tale was stranger than the last, yet they all agreed on one point: Jon Snow now held Winterfell, and the lords of the North had bent the knee once more to the line of Stark.

“What of Daenerys’ dragons?” asked Tytos, his voice taut with unease. “If the tales are true, and those beasts have returned to Westeros…”

Patrek gave a derisive snort. “Aye, and I saw a snark in the Clearspring woods not three days past. Old wives’ chatter, nothing more. Take your kin and make your way north, as Manderly did—and leave your quarrel with the Brackens buried where it belongs.”

Truth be told, Patrek Mallister was weary to the bone. Weary of the fighting, of the endless bending of knees and swearing of hollow oaths to every would-be king or conqueror who marched through the Riverlands demanding fealty or gold. His soul ached for rest, and there were moments—gods help him—when he was half-tempted to follow his own counsel and flee north, leaving this ruin behind.

But vengeance burned too hot within him to let go. It gnawed at him day and night, a fire in his gut that nothing but Frey blood could quench. He had sworn before gods and men that he would send every Frey to the Seven Hells, and he would not rest until his oath was fulfilled—or death took him first.

“What of my son, Hoster?” Lord Tytos Blackwood asked heavily. “He’s held hostage in Casterly Rock. How am I to cross the Twins when those Frey curs would as soon slit my throat as let me pass? And even if I did… would the Snow boy welcome me and mine, after the Starks cast us out from the North so many years ago?”

Patrek snorted. “Was it not your house that flew the direwolf’s banner longer than any other? The last to yield when the Young Wolf fell? Tell me, does anyone still recall the cause of your exile? The Starks have long since made peace with every ancient foe they once fought. A bad feud would have seen you dead instead of banished, so fret not. I have ships enough at Seagard. You and yours could sail north before the moon turns, avoiding the Green Fork.”

Tytos had three other sons with him, and one hostage’s loss might be a price worth paying. The old lord knew it as well as he, though he clung to that frail thread of hope like a drowning man to driftwood.

“There’s no promise the North would be kinder,” Blackwood said, uncertainty clouding his face. “It’s a hard, cold land, if not nearly as ravaged as the Riverlands. If I go, I’ll lose all my forebears built here, leaving it to the mercy of strangers. I may be leaping from the frying pan straight into the fire.”

“A cold fire, at least,” Patrek said with a tired smile. “Come now, my lord. You know how it is in these times—choices are scarce, and none of them good. They say the Young Wolf’s half-brother is a hard man, but I’ve yet to hear that he’s cruel. Whatever road you take, may it lead you to better fortune than mine.”

Tytos inclined his head, voice thick. “It has been an honour to fight beside you, Patrek Mallister. If the gods are just, we’ll meet again in gentler days. And if not… may your vengeance find its mark.”

Patrek’s mouth twitched, neither smile nor frown. “It will,” he said softly.

2nd Day of the 9th Moon, 303 AC

Sansa Stark, Winterfell

She grudgingly admitted Shireen made for a fine queen. Even when she tried, Sansa couldn't bring herself to dislike the dutiful girl. She was far cleverer than she looked, too.

By tradition, queen consorts could keep their House's name.

Yet Shireen had taken up the Stark name to sever any claims or connections to House Baratheon. A bold display of resolve. Though Sansa thought the young maiden had no love left for the family that had raised her.

Jon and Shireen made a striking pair, though they were stiff and awkward in public, their movements measured and careful. Many maidens had nursed quiet heartbreak, their dreams of queenship dashed against the reality of the girl from Dragonstone now at the side of the King in the North. Yet Jon's eyes never strayed from his wife.

It was difficult, after all, to compete with a dragon.

Since the wedding, her brother and his new wife had ridden together upon their dragons each morning, scales of blue and purple glittering like gemstones in the sky. Smaller displays of intimacy were no less constant: a hand brushing a cheek, a shared glance, a smile that seemed to light the hall. Shireen even looked beautiful when she smiled, and Sansa could not deny the sting of envy—even as she crushed it ruthlessly.

"Ugh, how did you keep all those fools from asking you to dance?" Arya had demanded the morning after the wedding, mouth twisted into a frown.

"I politely told them I had promised my first dance to my brother," Sansa replied, her tone careful. None would dare press for a turn before the King, no matter how badly they wished to court her.

"But he never asked you to dance. You cheated!" Arya's eyes widened in outrage and sudden realisation. "Did you bribe Umber to call for the bedding before the dance?"

"No," Sansa said, laughing. "That was all Greatjon drinking too freely. Why, did you mind Torrhen asking you for a twirl?"

Jon's squire appeared particularly taken with Arya and was the only one brave enough to approach the *poisonous* Freysbane. Even Myrcella had been asked out by Lord Umber's shy young son, a whole head taller than she was despite a year's difference.

"I don't like some boy staring at me as if he were a lovesick girl," Arya muttered, shuddering. "And kicking him away did nothing. I nearly broke my toe on his shin. Who wears armour to a wedding feast?!"

"What's so bad about Torrhen?" Sansa asked, stifling a smile. "He seems solemn, dutiful… Jon has only praise for his new squire."

"I don't like him," Arya said stubbornly, her chin jutting.

Perhaps it was because she had no taste for being thrashed in the yard. Though only half a year younger than Arya, Torrhen stood half a head taller, shoulders thrice as broad. She could not best him in sparring,

and the failure gnawed at her pride. It was childish, Sansa thought, for Torrhen bore no trace of arrogance. Were he ever so inclined, Jon would have surely knocked it out of him.

Winterfell was calm; most bannermen finally returned to their holds to prepare for the looming threat beyond the Wall. The looming threat of foes of myth and legend worried many, but not to the point of panic. The Wall stood strong, and Jon had mastered dragons. But a greater part played her brother's iron confidence. He carried himself with such surety that his presence alone made men stand straighter and women feel their hearts at ease.

Envoys were on their way from Casterly Rock at Cersei Lannister's command. Their purpose had not been stated outright, but Sansa suspected it was twofold: to confirm that Myrcella was truly at Winterfell and to spy, ever eager to sow discord and stir trouble where they could.

Once, such news would have sent a shiver down her spine. Now? Her brother would not suffer trickery, disrespect, or defiance. Sansa was certain of it.

For the first time in years, she was at peace. Her days were quiet, dull even, lacking the fevered excitement of courtly intrigues, yet she loved it. She embroidered, she tailored, and she watched the world unfold around her without fear.

To her quiet astonishment, she had unwittingly set a trend at court. Lords and ladies had noticed that the king wore only garments made by her hand. Many tried to imitate Jon's simple, martial attire—garments both well-made and practical, without the ostentation so common in southern courts. Shireen's own garb echoed that simplicity, save for the golden crown that rested lightly upon her head and the necklace hidden beneath her gown.

One snowy afternoon, Shireen joined Sansa at her embroidery. The young queen's hands were clumsy, but she was determined to make something worthy for Jon, even under Sansa's careful guidance.

Yet today, her heart was elsewhere. Her fingers moved slowly, the needle passing through thread and cloth.

"Anything wrong?" Sansa asked.

"I don't know," Shireen said, a sigh escaping her lips. "Everything is so… well. So quiet, so safe, yet I cannot shake the feeling at the back of my mind…"

"The feeling that this is a dream? Or that all might go to the Seven Hells?"

"Either… or both, perhaps?" Shireen admitted, her voice uncertain. "I don't know."

"Do not worry," Sansa said gently. "Whatever comes, you are not alone. Jon… he is ready. He will face whatever danger, whatever foe as they dare come."

She had seen things. Even after the bloody Battle for Winterfell, Sansa had borne witness to far more than she wished.

Not merely the cruelty of men, nor the endless tragedy of war.

Worse still were the foul, dark things that haunted her memory, making her skin crawl and her heart shrink. The world seemed to have drained of joy and warmth and colour, a grey and harrowing shadow of itself. Yet those terrors turned to ash beneath her brother's fist, vanquished with laughable ease.

The knowledge of such primal darkness made Sansa feel small, insignificant in ways even the dragons could not. Yet, as long as Jon was here, she had no fear. She would have wagered her life that, should the very sky fall, her brother would find some way to prop it up again.

One more shared her certainty—Shireen Stark. The girl gazed at Jon as though he had hung the stars in the sky, and was enamoured as any maiden could be. It was a rare and tender thing to see such joy amidst these grim times.

Yet now Shireen frowned at the half-finished dark leggings in her hands.

"Do you know what he does in that room of his?" she asked. "Not even the servants are allowed entry, and I dare not intrude."

"Sorcery, probably," Sansa said, a small laugh escaping her lips. "Every time Jon disappears and does not wish to be found, it must mean he's at some sort of magic."

Shireen leaned close, her voice barely above a whisper. "So… you know of his powers?"

After a heartbeat's hesitation, the princess chose honesty. "I know he dabbles in sorcery. The what and the how escape me—perhaps he enchants objects, perhaps he practices some craft beyond my understanding. But if you ask him, I am certain Jon will explain to his wife."

"Magic is supposed to be dangerous…" Shireen murmured, uncertainty clouding her scarred face.

Sansa felt as though she were listening to herself all over again. "So are swords and maces, to those unskilled in their use," she said softly. "You have no cause to fear my brother, nor his magic."

"I just—" Shireen rubbed at her face, frustration and worry mingling in her voice. "I cannot help but worry… but I do not wish to burden him. The crown weighs heavily, and I feel Jon carries it all alone."

The young queen stood there, looking impossibly small beneath the golden wreath atop her head.

Sansa looked at her good sister. *Truly* looked at her so hard and for so long that it made Shireen fidget.

She was just a child on the cusp of womanhood, yet… she was far more prepared than anyone else. Her words carried true affection and concern—genuine care, unlike the calculated politeness of most Northern maidens. She had never longed for the crown. Yet… perhaps it suited her the best, for she *wanted* to shoulder the burden now that it was atop her head.

"Since he was a boy," Sansa said, "Jon has always been solemn, keeping much to himself. Do not fear to reach out to him. Aid him where you may, counsel him where it is needed, and support him as any loyal wife ought. You are no longer merely Shireen but the Queen of the North, and the wife of my brother."

Shireen straightened, nodding solemnly, and Sansa could not help but think of a younger Jon in that posture—quiet and earnest.

She chuckled softly. Gods, they were a match made in heaven.