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

1st Day of the 12th Moon, 303 AC

Arianne Martell, Winterfell

Drey was healing—more like sleeping—in his quarters, and Arianne and her kin had huddled around the hearth.

It wasn't that Winterfell's Guest House was poorly built, but that the cold was too fierce. The sprawling wooden building was far from the height of luxury, yet Arianne found it almost endearingly cosy, with thick wooden walls and carved drawings of beasts on every surface not covered by white plaster. She was never more glad that the Northmen's 'sense' of comfort and luxury included heavy, woollen covers, plenty of fur-lined garments and beddings.

"Anything else, m'ladies?"

"Leave us." Arianne waved the maid away, and the homely woman did a clumsy curtsy and hastily excused herself after leaving the firewood basket by the roaring hearth. The four women remained silent until the footsteps dwindled in the distance. "These attempts at spying are quite sloppy."

"Only the ones we do find," Sarella's quiet reply chilled her veins.

After another minute of awkward silence, her cousin could no longer hold it in.

"What of Obara or old man Manfrey?" Tyene asked, her blue eyes swimming with worry. "They were with Aegon…"

"I can no more ask the Northern King than you can," Nymeria hissed, her face twisted in an odd grimace torn between paleness and worry.

"It's all my fault." Arianne sighed, slumping into her chair. "Sarella?"

"I inspected the crown. It is no fake, an intricate circlet of real dragonsteel inlaid with rubies, matching the description of the books with uncanny precision." In contrast to them, her book-loving cousin was calm. Or at least she *seemed* calm, but her fingers twitched, betraying her fretful heart. But Arianne was still struggling to come to terms with the sheer gall of putting the Conqueror's crown on display as a mere trophy—even House Martell had kept it secret.

Sarella sipped on her wine and continued absentmindedly, "Even Blackfyre was real—it was cleanly rammed into the granite slab, something only possible with dragonsteel. But I don't think our presence here had any hand in the Targaryens' demise."

It stung. Not the potential death of her cousin as much as the dismissal. Jon Stark had not even spared them a second glance, as if Arianne were no better than a kitchen scullion. Her doubts about Aegon's identity? Useless. The man was dead, and his claims had died with him.

Tyene drained her cup of Dornish red in one breath. Her eyelids drooped, and the shadows underneath her eyes looked particularly dark. Her cousin was tired—they all were. Sleep was hard to come by after meeting the terrifying behemoth last night. Never had Arianne felt so small, so insignificant when the dragon towered over them like a mountain in the dark, its mere breath sending gusts of scalding wind.

Its presence would haunt her dreams for years to come.

“The heads alone were bigger than a cave bear,” Tyene muttered. “You can’t fake that. Well, at least the pretender is dead.”

The memory returned, clear and cold as ice—two blue pools of rage and fury, dark and no less freezing than the snow outside. The malice that made her heart leap in her throat finally made Arianne realise her mistake. This was not a wolf’s den—it was a dragon’s nest.

Now she understood why the Forty of Valyria had fancied themselves gods. With such creatures, who could gainsay them? But the Forty were but a memory, and now House Stark ruled the skies.

“The Northmen won’t let me past the gates,” said Nymeria. Her violet eyes met Arianne’s with quiet accusation. “Not even to Wintertown. They say the king will want words with us, and none will leave before.”

And the king wasn’t even here.

Now, they were hostages in truth. Sansa Stark had found her courage with her brother’s presence, and Arianne felt foolish for being deceived by her innocent facade. Her dismissive behaviour had not changed either, for every request for an audience had been denied. Even the fat merman had proven slippery, dismissing them with, *‘Princess Sansa has important matters to attend to.’*

“Do we know when the king will return?” Arianne asked.

“Five days,” Tyene whispered, exhaustion seeping through her voice. “Or a moon. Or longer. No one tells us anything, and only the gods know how long this war with grumkins and snarks will last.”

It sounded mad. Dead things rising to walk the world again. Creatures of ice, inhuman and terrible, with a hatred for all things warm and eerie powers. But it could not be a simple tale, or Jon Stark would not have rushed to the Wall so swiftly, without any rest.

“Even if they let us leave, we couldn’t,” Nymeria added, voice tight. “It hasn’t stopped snowing. The servants here clean the courtyards, but who cleans the snow outside? The roads are all buried. Ten feet of snow, maybe more. Nothing out there but endless white hills and tree-tops.”

“I warned you,” Sarella said, her gaze full of pity.

“How was I to know he had a dragon?” Arianne snapped. “That beast is no hatchling. It must be four years grown, at least! The size of Daenerys’s mount, near enough.”

Her cousins just stared blankly at her, not offering any retort. She felt terrible, then; they wouldn’t be stuck in the dragon’s lair if not for her whims—aside from Sarella, who wanted to be here.

It didn’t matter anymore. Jon Stark’s brief appearance had changed *everything*.

Before a dragon, being Dorne's heiress meant little. Even being considered the Pretender's cousin was not worth any protection, but the opposite, seeing how his head was on display like a trophy before the Great Hall.

Being at someone else's mercy made Arianne feel skittish. It was a jarring feeling, as if the shadow of the executioner's axe hung above her head, and she never knew if it would swing down or remain still. The Northmen were not particularly bloodthirsty, yet they clearly held no love for Dornishmen either. In fact, they seemed to favour the Lannister delegation more because of the scarred Myrcella Waters.

Out of everything, she regretted the cold the most.

Until the last moon, 'cold' meant rainy for Arianne. Perhaps damp and cloudy and windy. She knew of colder places, where the chill turned water to ice. Yet these were mere… words, unable to capture the all-consuming chill that crept through your garments and seeped into your skin, to your flesh and bones.

At times like this, courtesies were the only shield they had. Courtesies and the fact that Dorne had never made trouble for the North, even if that was because the two kingdoms were on the opposite side of Westeros, separated by thousands of miles.

The feeling of helplessness grated on her very soul. But was she truly helpless?

A wise woman, and beautiful besides, was never without weapons. Her heart beat faster. She began to smile.

"This might not be such a bad thing," Arianne said aloud. "Jon Stark will inevitably meet me when he returns."

Tyene tilted her head. "You mean to seduce a married man this time?"

"The Northmen are said to be an honourable lot," Sarella added evenly, but there was a hint of disapproval in her tone—always the prude in matters of the heart. "They keep to their vows. And no vows are as sacred as those of marriage."

"Even honourable men have appetites," the princess replied coolly. "His father did. How else do you think Jon Snow was born?"

"He was born the same year as Robb Stark," Sarella said, frowning. "Maybe it was before Lord Eddard wed his lady. No vows broken."

"Maybe," Tyene rasped, but her eyes were bright with mischief. "But if his wife is the daughter of Stannis Baratheon, she must be plain. How could a scarred little thing hope to hold his eye?"

"Even if she were as ugly as the Stranger, would it matter?" Sarella's voice sharpened. "Would you lie with a man who may have killed our eldest sister? Or Uncle Manfrey?"

"We don't know they're dead," Arianne replied, voice softening. "Perhaps they fell in battle. If Stark bore us ill will, their heads would be on display along with Aegon and Daenerys."

"He *was* handsome last night," Nymeria said, almost wistfully. "And I heard the lion maid failed to turn his head, for all her tries. Perhaps he's a hopeless romantic."

“A romantic?” Arianne chuckled, amused. “And what does a lesser lioness of Casterly Rock like Cerella know of seduction? She’s still saving herself for her husband, no doubt. Well, it costs nothing to try.”

“I’ve never lain with a king before,” Tyene’s voice turned deceptively innocent. “He’s dreamy, dark, and undoubtedly dangerous. Your favourite type, Ari. Perhaps two beauties shall succeed where one fails to turn him away from his marriage vows.”

“We have always shared everything,” Arianne agreed huskily. “Nym, Sarella—”

“Leave me out of this travesty,” Sarella said at once, blushing despite her teak-brown skin. She wrapped her cloak around herself and made for the door. “I’m going to the library.”

Without giving a proper courtesy, she fled from the room as if her garments were on fire.

“She’s sweet on that captain,” Tyenne chuckled. “Though I saw her eyeing the Stark girl, too. Rella’s always had an eye for beauty.”

“Let her be,” Nymerai warned. “She came here to read. We cannot ruin it for her.”

Arianne wanted to do nothing more than try to seduce the bastard dragonrider now.

But the king wasn’t here. He was gone beyond the Wall, and they were left with nothing but time. Worse still, there was nothing to do in Winterfell, not even as guests, and they held no love for dark rooms and dusty old tomes like Sarella. Even the royal court was closed, and the red-haired princess didn’t invite any of them to her infamous embroidery sessions, and the rest of the Northern ladies followed suit and treated her and her cousins like lepers.

She sometimes thought of approaching the red dragon that roosted on the roofs. If Stannis’s daughter could ride it, why not Arianne? She had Targaryen blood, too, for the daughter of the Unworthy was her ancestor.

But Quentyn’s fate stayed her hand. There was more to riding dragons than blood.

She groaned and flopped onto her feather bed, staring at the rafters above. Even those seemed dreary now.

Winterfell was a cage, and the cold a silent jailor.

Jaime Lannister, Casterly Rock

Casterly Rock quickly approached in the distance as he spurred Duty. He had ridden hard with little rest since that fateful day in the Golden Tooth. Tyrion was left behind to be escorted to Casterly Rock by two hundred redcloaks, but Jaime could not afford to waste even a second.

A raven had been sent ahead, detailing some of the unbelievable… horrors he had witnessed, but Jaime doubted anyone would genuinely believe it.

He felt like a fool, and only the motley was missing while he penned the letter. A fortnight prior, Jaime would have claimed any man telling him what had transpired under the walls of Golden Tooth a liar and a cheat. But he had been there, and he had seen and lived it.

Perhaps he *was* a fool. The greatest fool in the realm.

In mere heartbeats, a twenty-thousand-strong army was drowned in a sea of fire, turning from an encampment to a field of smoke and ash. This was not the Field of Fire with the dry grass at the end of a long summer to be set aflame by Balerion's dragonfire, but a wet, muddy field with all the grass swept clean long ago. A part of Jaime suspected it wasn't even done by dragonfire. The fire of dragons did not change colour, that much he knew.

He had seen the dark blue behemoth and his flames, which were as dark as ink, streaked with swirls of blue.

The inferno had been different. The eerie fire that had devoured the army was a deep, molten purple, like an enormous flower hewn out of amethyst, and it had not come from the dragons.

If not from the dragon, what birthed that fire?

The thought alone chilled Jaime and haunted his dreams.

All the knights of repute and lords of standing within the Golden Tooth had placed their seals beside Jaime's, as if ink and good names might lend weight enough to sway a king. He doubted it would. Even as he rode, Jaime found himself brooding on the letter's likely fate—read, perhaps, but not heeded.

His thoughts turned to Eddard Stark's bastard. What horror had stirred the Northern king enough to pull him from the ashes of battle and fly home with such haste? What threat could daunt a man who commanded sorcery and dragonfire?

'Perhaps he dies out there, facing some horror of yore,' Jaime thought. '*Perhaps not.'* He would not wager a single penny on Jon Stark's death. Men like that did not die easily.

The letter granted two moons' grace, but already the snow came harder each day. Jaime had passed through five storms in as many days, and even now the wind howled like some beast dying in the distance. If the South was so beset by cold and wind, he dared not imagine the North. The roads would vanish beneath the snow. Land routes were madness now, and sea routes would be no less treacherous. Still, Winterfell must be reached.

Casterly Rock loomed ahead, sheathed in a shroud of white. The Rock had not seen snow in earnest since his childhood. He had dreamt of it often in his youth. It looked… smaller than he remembered.

He'd meant to make it in three days, but Honour had dropped dead beneath him, and Glory's legs had nearly gone before they reached Sarsfield. He had ridden on with three fresh mounts—Duty, Valour, and Justice. Noble names for beasts that bore a broken sinner.

He climbed the stairs to the Lion's Mouth, and the gates creaked wide before him.

“Lord Commander Jaime Lannister,” a red cloak said as the portcullis lifted with a mighty groan. They still recognised him, though he’d not set foot here in years. Or maybe it was the golden hand they remembered. “The small council expects you.”

Jaime’s mood soured again as he handed his horses to the stableboy nearby and turned to the knight. “Lead me there, Ser…?”

“Ser Timmos of Abrington.” The man puffed up his chest like a peacock as they entered one of the hallways and guided him towards one of the large meeting chambers.

“Never heard of you,” Jaime said. “Where did you fight?”

“I defeated one of the Karstark bands near the ruins of Tarbeck,” was the proud response. “It’s where I earned my spurs.”

“A mighty deed,” Jaime said dryly. “Shall I pen a ballad? *The Glorious Rout of the Karstark Scouts*?”

The knight turned crimson.

“I was called back to serve at the Lion’s Gate!” the man added, voice tight but still arrogant.

“A doorsman, then. A poor one at that, seeing you have left your post.”

Ser Timmos' face reddened even further, spluttering almost incoherently.

“Take this fool out of my sight,” Jaime drawled, and the nearby red cloaks dragged the upstart knight away. He had far more important matters than entertaining lackwits and braggarts. “You there, lead me to the small council.”

As he rushed up to the lord’s floor after the servant, Jaime made a note to himself to have Captain Vylarr send the arrogant knight somewhere else later. Perhaps near the Golden Tooth, the nearby lands would surely be filled with deserters, brigands, and many more problems—a worthy place for a man to prove his mettle.

If he had any at all.

Usually, Jaime would have asked to take a bath, wash away the stench of the horse, and travel before presenting himself, yet he found himself caring little about any of that. He briefly wondered why the council members were the ones to demand his presence and not his sister, but his mind simply blanked out. As a Regent, his sister was supposed to run the court and always grasped for more power. Seven hells, he had no idea who the other members of Tommen’s small council were beyond Daven being Hand and Lord Ellard Crane becoming the master of laws.

After ten minutes of climbing stairs and crossing hallways, the servant finally stopped at a thick, oaken door guarded by a solemn-looking red cloak. The same door behind which his father had held meetings with Uncle Tygett and Kevan. Alas, they were all dead now, and the room served yet another Lannister.

With a nod, the man-at-arms announced his name and stepped aside.

He paused for a breath, then stepped through.

At the head of a familiar long table of dark, vanished wood sat Tommen, upright for once, the boy-king lacking his usual meekness. A large golden kitten was draped over his shoulder like a gilded pelt, snoozing quietly. Behind him stood two knights in white, muscled and towering over six feet and a half—Ser Lyle Crakehall and Ser Tytan Brax. Real knights, at least. Not Cersei's lickspittle fools.

Cersei was not there.

Only Daven, his cousin, sat at the table beside a lean, sharp-eyed man Jaime did not recognise. He could only be Ellard Crane, judging by the crimson crane-shaped brooch on his collar.

Jaime knelt. "Your Grace."

"Uncle," Tommen said, his voice cracking. "Come, sit. You are Lord Commander now and have a place on my council."

He rose and took his seat, glancing about. "Shouldn't the Queen Regent be here?"

"She is no longer regent," Lord Crane said. "And the other councillors have been dismissed, too."

Jaime blinked. "Why?"

"Dark sorcery," said Daven, face grim. "Qyburn has been hanged for the forbidden practice. Harys Swift has been dismissed for misuse of royal coin at the behest of the Queen Dowager. But Cersei did far more—including breaking the sacred laws of hospitality with a Northern envoy who… who turned out to be a dragonrider."

So Jon Stark spoke true. Jaime eased himself into the chair. He had hoped the man lied. But the Northmen loved their blunt honesty.

Even so, the news did not shock him. His sister's madness had long since ceased to surprise. Jaime was not sure he even wanted to know anymore.

Lord Crane cleared his throat, fiddling with a scroll in his thin fingers. "The letter you sent was difficult to believe, Lord Commander. Ser Addam Marbrand, Lady Lefford, and half a hundred knights and lords of renown have inked down their names as witnesses, yet I still struggle to believe."

Jaime closed his eyes and shuddered at the memory.

"You wouldn't believe it if you hadn't seen it," he rasped. "I wouldn't either. But I saw it. I swear by the seven—I saw him. One man and a dragon against an army, all drowned by a sea of fire."

"Dragons are dangerous, we know that," Devan said grimly.

"You don't get it, Devan." Despair crept into Jaime's voice. "We fought Daenerys and Aegon's dragons earlier that day—their dragons could only burn a handful of men at once. They assaulted the Golden Tooth but were easily rebuffed by the scorpions and the marksmen. This was not a dragon's doing. A dragon can not turn a whole army encampment into a fiery grave in an instant!"

“Tell us everything, uncle,” Tommen demanded, but his face was pale.

And so Jaime told them. He told them of that day, from dawn till dusk. He told them of the monster that was Jon Stark, who seemed to wield a giant’s strength and that neither sword nor fire daunted the man as he had slaughtered his way through the Targaryen knights. He did not know how long he was speaking for, but at the end, his throat had gone dry.

“...And now,” Jaime concluded, voice hoarse, “we have less than two moons to return Ice, deliver Ser Meryn Trant’s head, and formally recognise Jon Stark’s crown and dominion over the North.”

The meeting chamber was so silent that one could hear even a pin drop.

“To kill a Kingsguard for obeying orders sets a dangerous precedent,” Crane said at last, face troubled.

“Those were shit orders,” Jaime murmured. “And Joffrey had no right to give them, for he was not of age.”

It was a weak excuse, but one that those who held the law sacred would accept.

“That might be so,” the Reach lord agreed, sighing. “But acknowledging it would diminish the prestige and honour of the kingsguard. It would erode the royal power of the crown, too.”

“What honour?” Jaime laughed bitterly. “What prestige? My nephew’s *wise* rule saw four men crown themselves king in a year. The Iron Throne is lost, the Crownlands are lost, and so are most of the kingdoms that once paid homage to Tommen.”

“Jaime… this is madness,” Devan said, his pale brow glistening with sweat. “You must see that these terms look paltry, but they are unacceptable.”

“I'm only the messenger,” Jaime shot back, face grim. “Jon Stark delivered his terms. I carry them, nothing more.”

“And Trant?” Daven demanded.

“He struck Sansa Stark bloody before the court.” Jaime's voice was flat. “A highlord's daughter and Joffrey's queen-to-be, beaten for all to see! Do you think no one would remember? That it would have no consequence?! It might have been done by Joffrey's orders, but Joffrey was a little beast, my lords, make no mistake.”

What would Barristan have done if he had been ordered to strike the Stark girl?

Would he strike her or refuse to follow his king’s orders?

What would Jaime have done in his boots?

Jaime couldn’t answer, and it scared him.

“It is true,” Tommen agreed, voice quiet and low. “My brother… he was not kind.”

The words stifled any retorts.

“Let us not dwell on minor trifles and focus on the problem at hand,” The Master of Laws said, voice growing weary. “Our position is marginally better than before. With Aegon and Daenerys gone, the imminent danger is replaced with… this new threat. Ser Jaime, do you think this Northern King would try to conquer the Seven Kingdoms as Aegon did? There is nothing to stop him now, after all.”

Relief flooded him as he saw they were finally taking his words seriously. One of many hurdles was passed.

“I don’t think he cares,” said Jaime. “He came for vengeance, not conquest. But I would not dismiss the threats he made.”

At that moment, the golden kitten in Tommen’s lap woke up and stretched adorably. The feline agilely climbed on the table, and Jaime could finally take a good look at his son’s new pet. As it was yawning, he realised why it seemed odd, much to his distress. It was no cat, but a lion cub—probably escaped from the lion cages beneath.

He opened his mouth to warn Tommen, but the pure look of joy on his son’s face had him close it quickly.

“Don’t forget, they have leverage,” Daven added quietly. “Princess Myrcella is a hostage in Winterfell, and the North was never conquered without dragons. There’s no way for us to bring House Stark to heel, and they’re already kings, even without our recognition. It pains me to admit it, but our recognition is merely a formality.”

Tommen’s brow was scrunched up in thought as he scratched the lion cub’s neck.

“We’ll return Widow’s Wail,” Tommen decided. “Ser Balon Swann will bring it north with two dozen knights. I want no harm to come to my sister. Send out the ravens—I will acknowledge House Stark as the kings of the North henceforth.”

“And Ser Meryn Trant?” Daven pressed.

The boy hesitated, doubtlessly remembering something unpleasant—and rightly so, for the dour-faced Trant knight was a cruel and distasteful lout. His eyes found Jaime’s. Jaime nodded once.

“Let his head be my apology,” Tommen said at last, slumping on his chair as if all the words had drained all of his strength. “To Lady Sansa.”

“It shall be done, Your Grace.” Lord Crane sighed, looking resigned. “But what is to stop Arryn, Tyrell, and Martell from claiming a crown for themselves?”

“We’ll deal with the new problems as they come,” the boy-king answered, as if it were the simplest thing in the world and picked up his lion cub. “Add five million dragons to it as a gift for King Stark’s accession.”

“That’s just weregild! We haven’t lost the war just yet, it’s too much—”

“Can you fight dragons and sorcery, Lord Daven?”

The Hand clenched his jaw, but under Tommen's sharp gaze, he averted his eyes. That simple question alone had disarmed the stubbornness and pride of the royal councillors. But both their pride and stubbornness had long been worn down by the War of the Five Kings. Jaime would know—he was no different in that.

Both his cousin and Lord Crane were still reluctant, and yet, they were wavering, their brows knotted in thought. Perhaps they would have objected louder, but Jon Stark had shown abilities far beyond what they had ever considered.

"There is only one dragonlord left in the Seven Kingdoms," Tommen said firmly. "And the field of fire outside the Golden Tooth shows he's not to be trifled with. Regardless of whether he wishes for conquest or vengeance, we cannot give him any reason to turn his ire our way. He already spared Mother when she was at fault. The blood debt between our houses is great enough as it is. King Stark had shown us mercy once, and there might not be a second time, so this is an easy chance to make quick amends—gold is the one thing I don't lack. And… Cella is in Winterfell, and she must not come to harm."

A flicker of worry passed through his son's face. Was he worried about his sister?

Good lad.

"His Grace has the right of it," Jaime spoke up. "Anything that reduces the chance of Jon Stark and his monster returning here is worthwhile. Honour, glory, gold, and a good name are worthless to the dead."

Crane shuffled in his chair, looking ill at ease.

"But five million dragons… it's a bit too much to be sent at once. Too risky, too."

"Send it over a couple of years, then," Tommen said, waving away his hand as if to chase away Lord Crane's concerns. "But the rest of Stark's demands will be met at once."

"Can Ser Balon be trusted with such an important task?" Jaime couldn't help but ask. The marchers were hardy folk. Ser Balon Swann was better than most, but the task was too important to be entrusted to someone with questionable loyalty like a Stormlander.

"Yes, Lord Commander," his son said, face blooming with a smile. "The knight hunted down Darkstar, the man who tried to kill my sister, through the deserts and rivers of Dorne and brought me his head personally. I have complete faith in Ser Balon that he would accomplish this mission admirably. If there is nothing else, the council is adjourned."

Removing Trant would indeed be prudent, and Jaime felt no reluctance at the idea. It would separate the wheat from the chaff and give Tommen's kingsguard the potential to be great. As great as the white cloaks that Aerys had commanded. The only thing left was for the Lord Commander to be worthy of the title. Jaime's gaze flickered to his left hand. He had to shed a lot of sweat, blood, and tears to retrain his skills. But he would do it, no matter what. He *had* to do it.

Jaime shook his head, looked around, and realised that everyone else had left the chamber while he was lost in thought. Sighing, he stood up and hastily ran out.

Thankfully, it took him only a few moments to reach Daven in the hallway.

“Cousin,” he called out, voice strained. “Do you have a few moments to talk?”

“I suppose I can spare a few minutes for the vaunted Lord Commander of the kingsguard,” was the wry response.

His cousin quickly led him into an empty storage room nearby.

Jaime did not bother mincing his words and asked bluntly, “Do you know where Cersei is right now?”

“I probably shouldn’t tell you,” Daven said, looking at him sadly.

“Cersei is my sister.”

“It’s precisely because she’s your sister that I’m afraid to tell you.” His cousin sighed, rubbing his beard. Jaime did not look away, holding Daven’s gaze without blinking. “Seven above, fine. She’s confined to her childhood quarters on Tommen’s orders.”

“Thank you, cousin!”

“Jaime!” Daven’s voice stopped him just as he turned to leave. “Be careful—Cersei might not be as you remembered her.”

Jaime headed towards their childhood quarters. Devan’s words rang in his head, but Jaime couldn’t help but wonder if he ever knew his sister and only managed to see her true colours after he had lost the sword arm that had made him so famous.

Two red cloaks were posted at the door to her chambers. Jailors. It didn’t take much effort to make them let him in for a visit, probably because he was Tywin’s son and Tommen’s Lord Commander—his name still held weight here.

Jaime froze as soon as he entered.

A part of the chamber was tidy, but the rest was in complete squalor. Velvet gowns and Myrish lace were scattered chaotically—some even torn like beggar’s scraps. Empty wine casks, cutlery, and food littered the floor, with bits of pastry and what looked like a day-old steak. Amidst the ungainly mess, Cersei was sprawled on a coach padded in crimson velvet, nursing a cup of wine.

His sister… his sister had grown plumper. Her cheeks were full and meaty, the body below fleshy and rounded in all the wrong places—her gilded gown looked ungainly, and even flawless pale skin had reddened. But it was not the beautiful, rosy colour of a fair maiden but the angry red splotches of a drunkard.

Cersei… had grown ugly.

She finally noticed him and, with some effort, stood up and rushed towards him. “Jaime!”

Or, at least, she attempted to do so, but failed because she slipped on a half-torn gown thrown on the floor.

He winced as she crashed on the floor with a loud thud, but he hastily stepped forth to help her up. His golden hand was useless as usual, and his left arm strained under Cersei's now-significant weight, but he succeeded.

"Jaime, you must help me!" his sister cried out, latching onto his hand. A heartbeat later, she recoiled. "You stink!"

Her scrunched-up, reddened face made her look like an ugly hag, and Jaime wondered what he had seen in her before.

"A sennight on the road does that to you. I just arrived and came to see you first thing," he found himself lying.

Her grimace turned into half a smile, and she grabbed his good hand and clumsily led him to the terrace outside.

He often thought about what he would do when he saw her again. A dozen scenarios had played out in his mind, but now that he was faced with Cersei in person, his mind had gone blank.

On the balcony, his sister grabbed his belt and began to undo it. He quickly grabbed her hand, unwilling to test whether he could resist her touch.

"Cersei, this can wait," he said flatly. "Tell me, how did you end up confined in your quarters?"

Anger flashed in her emerald eyes.

"Those traitorous wretches!" she shrieked, face twisted into a snarl. He felt nothing at her outrage. Nothing besides the pain pulsing in his temples came from her raised voice. "They managed to set my son against me. Jaime, you must speak with Tommen and help me eliminate all the traitors. I want their heads. I want them all dead, and each one of their heads on a spike, Jaime!"

A few years prior… he would have believed her. But now Jaime knew better. Neither Daven nor Tommen had lied. Jon Stark had even less of a reason to lie.

Why was he not surprised that every word of his sister's mouth was a lie or an attempt to manipulate him?

"What about that Northern envoy?" he asked, despite dreading the answer.

"That brute attacked me and tried to force himself on me!" Cersei wailed pitifully and was about to cling to him, but scrunched up her nose and kept her distance. "But once I regain my position as regent, I will deal with him, too. As long as you're on my side, nothing can stop us, Jaime. Not the Northern barbarian, not the damned Roses, nor the foolish Dragons!"

His heart froze at that moment. Once his sister set her mind on something, it would never change, no matter what. He had no doubts that sooner or later, she'd manage to escape this confinement or maybe get Tommen's ear.

And she wanted to provoke the calamity that was Jon Stark?!

Did she want to kill them all?!

Cersei had not seen the pair of cold, amethyst eyes that looked down on everything as if they were no better than ants. She had not seen the inferno that had vanquished an army—

“Jaime?” Her hopeful voice brought him out of his musing, and he forced himself to look at Cersei.

He *really* looked at his sister. A vapid shell of her former self, angry at everyone and everything. Or perhaps she had always been an angry harpy if a pretty one. At that moment, he vaguely became aware that every single problem in his life could be traced to one source. His sister. And his weakness and inability to refuse her.

Fury, unbridled fury, rose deep inside him, taking hold in his chest. How long until Cersei manages to fuck things up enough to kill them all?

Jaime knew what he had to do, now.

He had long ago abandoned any notion of decency.

Could he do it?

Why was he hesitating after all the vile deeds he had committed and all the oaths he had broken?

“Jaime, what are—” her words were choked out as he found his hands around her throat.

He did not even remember reaching out to grab her…

Cersei attempted to scream for help, and since his golden hand could not truly squeeze, she would have succeeded. Just as she opened her mouth, he found himself smashing his right hand at her temple like a hammer, and she grew limp and fell on the tiled floor.

His heart leapt into his throat as he looked at Cersei’s prone form. He warily placed a finger under her nose and, much to his relief and terror, realised that she was still breathing. He had only knocked her out, not killed her.

Jaime froze as his mind blanked once again, feeling lost.

Leaving her here was not an option, and he had already attacked his sister. But could he kill her? Could he become a kinslayer just like his brother? He wiped the sweat trickling down his brow as he hesitated.

They had come out from the same womb, and they had entered the world together.

But… why was he even hesitating? He attacked her already and was an oathbreaker many times over; kinslaying would be yet another black mark on his already darkened name.

He clumsily hauled his sister’s body up, smashed her head on the rocky surface outside for good measure, and tossed her over the railing towards the roiling waters of the Sunset Sea. Jaime morbidly watched as she hit a few of the rock protrusions on her way down before being swallowed by the raging waves smashing at the base of Casterly Rock.

Cersei couldn’t survive the fall; even if she did, she would drown within moments.

Jaime Lannister had just killed his twin sister. The realisation struck him like a punch to his gut. His legs buckled, then, and he collapsed on the tiles like a doll with its strings cut. His limbs felt as heavy as a mountain, and movement was a struggle.

Seven above, he was tired. He was so tired, and the weariness seeped into his bones and marrow. The world felt… dull. Meaningless.

He swallowed, then.

Gritting his teeth, Jaime latched onto the railing with his good hand and struggled up on his feet.

His gaze was set on the churning waters below. They had taken Cersei. Perhaps it was time to follow her, too. They had come together into the world, and it was only right to leave together.

Yet no matter how much he willed his body, he couldn't.

There was one thing still holding him back. Tommen still needed him more than ever after his mother had just perished.

Jaime closed his eyes, pushing down his self-loathing. He had disappointed everyone else… but he would not disappoint Tommen.

"Guards, GUARDS!" he croaked out with whatever little strength his voice had.

Hurried footsteps entered the apartments, and Jaime forced himself to school his face and swallow the bile that threatened to overwhelm him as the red cloaks came to the balcony, swords drawn.

"My sister slipped and fell into the sea!"

2nd Day of the 12th Moon, 303 AC

Shireen Stark

"YOUR GRACE!"

She groggily opened her tired eyes only to see the worried face of Jorelle Mormont.

'Couldn't they let her sleep more than a handful of hours for once?' she complained inwardly.

The last few days had been more than tiring. Shireen became aware that something warm but sharp poked her cheek. She grabbed it and brought it in front of her eyes, only to see the howling direwolf necklace Jon had gifted her and couldn't help but smile fondly.

Still, she stood up. Duty never rested, and it felt like the fate of the kingdom now lay on her small shoulders. Shireen could not collapse. Not yet.

"What's happening?" she asked sleepily as her hand absentmindedly tucked the golden pendant back under her clothing.

"The dead are coming through the Bay of Ice!"

The vestiges of her drowsiness disappeared immediately, replaced with numb dread.

Was today the day they fell?

“Help me!” the Queen commanded as she slipped out of her furs and stretched her arms.

The cold air made her shiver despite her thick nightgown that would have passed for a heavy travel cloak back in Dragonstone. She hid a wince, and her sore legs groaned in protest when she stood up. Spending all of her time on dragonback had turned out to be painful for her untrained limbs, and her thighs had grown raw two days prior. Jorelle quickly brought her woollen riding gown, arming doublet, and brigandine.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Four hours, Your Grace,” answered the Mormont maiden as she helped her into her armour.

It was not enough rest for her and her dragon, but it would have to do for now.

Three days had passed since she had begun her attempts to melt down parts of the freezing Bay of Ice.

It was a tall task, almost impossible. Poor visibility, heavy snow, and the ever-increasing cold made her feel that her effort was futile. And maybe it was.

Yet Shireen was not one to give up, so she kept struggling.

Perhaps she had managed to delay the inevitable by a day or two. The patches of ice melted by Stormstrider’s flame were quick to freeze again, but they were thin and brittle, unable to bear the weight of wights.

But it didn’t matter anymore—no matter how hard she tried, she could not melt the whole Bay of Ice.

Only a few hundred yards of fortifications were hastily built to the west. The shore was far too long to defend with a timber-laced palisade rampart. Even if they closed themselves off in a walled fort, the dead would simply swarm around them and spill into the Gift.

Jorelle finished helping her get into her armour and handed her a heavy woollen tunic and the fur-lined cloak. Shireen clasped her belt above the tunic and secured the sinister bronze dagger Jon had gifted her. With so many layers of clothing, she felt as clumsy as a bear.

The freezing air outside lashed fiercely against the bare parts of her face and hands. It felt even colder than before.

She quickly pulled up her fur hood and hid her fingers inside her sleeves, but even the layers of wool, linen, and fur scarcely warded the creeping chill off anymore. Looking utterly unbothered by the frigid air, Lord Umber was waiting for her outside the tent, his cloak wholly covered by a layer of white, courtesy of the still-unending snowfall. Jyanna, Morna, and the spearwives followed her closely like a king’s battleguard. Or was it the queen’s battleguard, now?

A few dozen men were furiously shovelling all the newly fallen snow into large piles, white puffs of breath visible everywhere, while everyone else was scrambling chaotically.

She looked around but couldn’t see Ghost anywhere. Though, unless he wanted to be seen, the white direwolf was impossible to spot in the snow anyway.

“Your Grace.” The Lord of Last Hearth’s voice was grim, his breath misting each word as his face filled with an odd yet peaceful acceptance. His stride was still stiff—it seemed his wound had yet to heal. “Wull is organising the defence of our southern flank. We have yet to build a palisade there. Mallister commands the northern wall, and Lord Commander Tollett and Maege the western side.”

Shireen Stark drew a sharp breath, and the cold air tore down her throat like a knife. “So it’s come to this,” she said, her voice smaller than she meant it to be. “We’re to be surrounded. Overrun.”

“The gods have decided against us,” Umber said, face a grim mask. “Knowing you has been an honour, Your Grace. I am gladdened the king has chosen you for a wife and queen.” Then he leaned in closer, his voice a whisper. ”If the fight is lost… turn your dragon south. Flee. You must live, no matter what!”

For a moment, she stood dumbstruck as the giant of Last Hearth bowed and trudged away into the snow. He went to his death with no more fanfare than a man going to war. Wounded and weary, yet still he went. Duty drove him forward, as it had so many men before him.

Shireen watched him vanish into the storm, and something cold clenched in her belly.

It was the right advice, of course. She was queen and a dragonrider, and her value was incomparable to common lords and soldiers.

Yet the thought of fleeing made her sick with shame.

Her fists curled, and pain lanced her palm—her nails had pierced the leather of her gloves, drawing blood. To abandon them—to fly south while the free folk, the mountain clans, the black brothers, and the lords of the North stood and died? All these were Stark men, following her now just as much as they followed her husband.

They were loyal to Shireen, now.

Her eyes stung—both from the cold and the tears pooling, but she decisively wiped them with the hem of her cloak. Shireen Baratheon, daughter of Stannis and wife to Jon Stark, was no craven.

“If Westwatch falls, then I fall with it,” she whispered through gritted teeth. “I’ll win this battle or die trying!”

She cursed the gods then, with every foul word she knew. Cursed the winter. Cursed the House of the Dragon, who drew her husband southward when he was most needed.

As if stirred by her anger, Stormstrider rose from a snowdrift, his great wings shedding frost with a tremor that made the earth itself seem to shudder. He let loose a roar and spat a streak of purple flame skyward.

Drawing a breath to calm herself, Shireen strode forward to meet him. The dragon stilled at her approach, letting out a low growl that melted into a rumble of recognition. She placed a gloved hand against his snout, and the beast leaned into her touch. Nearby, Jyanna worked to secure the saddle with heavy chains, though her fingers moved clumsily in the bitter cold.

Once Stormstrider was ready, Shireen pulled on her gloves and mounted. Turning to her sworn shields, she barked, “Join Lady Mormont at the western wall. Hold the wall no matter what!”

They saluted, and she kicked the dragon skyward.

The cold wind bit through her scarf and stung her cheeks, but she pressed on. The snowfall had thinned for once, and from above, she saw clearly: a vast, shambling mass of death creeping over the ice. Corpses, endless and slow, but relentless. Already, they clawed at the northwestern wall. And in the southwest, they crept toward the undefended shoreline, a wide walkway into the North.

They had used that shore not long past, to gather firewood and net fish before the bay froze over. Now it would serve as her battleground.

She wheeled her mount toward it. “Dracarys!” she shouted.

Stormstrider obeyed—he always did. Flame poured from his maw, a torrent of purple that scorched through the shambling dead below.

Shireen felt her hair stand on end, then, as if she had plunged into an icy lake. All of her instincts screamed, and her gaze turned to the darkness of the Bay of Ice. She felt small and helpless again, and even Stromstrider felt uneasy, shuffling beneath her legs. A flash of ice, then came a sound like glass shattering. The drake shrieked, cutting off the stream of flame. Shireen’s heart lurched as her saddle shook. Stormstrider bucked and twisted, his wings faltering.

“NO!” she shouted, wrenching at the reins. But the leather strap meant to secure her waist dangled loose, and one of the steel chains snapped free, while the other had already been torn.

“STORMSTRIDER, DOWN!” she cried, but the dragon thrashed, deaf to her words.

Then the saddle slipped.

The world spun. She was falling.

Air whipped past her face, tore at her limbs. She twisted mid-air, just in time to see the beast diving after her, his keening shriek echoing. Blood glistened along his side, and his scales were torn and cracked where the saddle’s chains had previously stood. She saw it better; now, another blur of ice struck Stromstrider, skewering the soft membrane of his wing and glancing across his back.

Shireen’s scream died on her lips as she spun. And below, the shore rose fast to meet her.