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

22nd Day of the 6th Moon, 303 AC

Melisandre of Asshai

The last moon had opened her eyes.

Winterfell was akin to Storm's End; she could feel the old, forgotten spells woven into the bedrock below. They blocked light, shadow, and darkness in equal measure. And the air *sang* when Jon was crowned, the tune echoing deep into the ground below.

From smoke and salt, he was reborn, waking more than he had been before. Tempered by the cold grasp of death and reforged fires of the funeral pyre, the impurities had been purged, leaving only a will of iron, a heart of steel, and a body of flame.

She could see it now. The Red Temple was wrong. The High Priest had been wrong, and so had been the others.

Azor Ahai needed no guidance, for he was a force of his own. Yet that realisation brought her no relief.

Melisandre knew when she was not welcome. All her attempts at gaining his favour were met with a cold but polite rejection. Even seduction had failed. Jon Stark was not immune to her charms, for lust lurked beneath his icy facade. Melisandre knew lust; she knew the desire in the eyes of men, no matter how adept they were at hiding it. Yet Jon Stark was not ruled by his lusts.

Over half a moon had passed since the king had last spoken to her. No new tasks were given to her, not even a trial to prove herself further or something menial. Slowly but surely, a realisation ripened in her mind. The king never meant to wield her powers further.

She knew all other attempts to grow close would be rebuffed. She would be forever avoided, as was any word of R'hllor. Jon Stark cared little about the gods, whether of stone and stream or flame and shadow. He held to the Old Gods, but it was just the cool words of the king carrying on old traditions, not the pious devotion of a true believer.

Melisandre understood why he did it, no matter how much she misliked it. Stannis had failed, and with his demise, most Northmen would forever doubt the Lord of the Light. Not even firewood was spared for a small bonfire so Melisandre could hold a proper prayer. "Firewood is for warmth in the North," the new steward had said. "Too precious to waste on prayers."

The king's open distaste for R'hllor and ban on offerings to the fire and open preaching had sealed her fate. No courtier would go against Jon Stark, and few pious would crop up, no matter how much Melisandre sowed the seeds of the One True God. The harsh North had bred stubborn men, who had only grown more mistrustful of outsiders after half a decade of war.

Ser Perkin Follard and Ser Corlyss Penny were dead, both fallen in the Battle of Winterfell. Jon Stark had thrown them in the thick of the fighting, and Melisandre still couldn't say if they were deliberately put in danger or if they had just proven themselves poor soldiers.

Now, her acolytes were reduced to the drunken Morgan and Merrel, with a handful of poor wildlings and Northmen who had lost everything. No one of importance dared to entertain R'hllor's blessing. The crown's favour could make a cause, but the disfavour could break it. It had certainly broken her cause here.

Perhaps they were right. Perhaps the North did not need her or the Lord of the Light. Under Azor Ahai's iron grip, they would weather all challenges, with or without Melisandre. And Jon Stark knew this, so her services would remain unneeded now that his powers had grown.

Half of her mission was complete, though it left a bitter taste in her mouth. Success stung now that it was not of her own doing.

Perhaps it was time to look southward again, set her sight on the remaining kingdoms. Now, the North was safe, but they were plunged into darkness, misery, and despair. Countless souls had perished, and those who survived were scarred… and needed the light of R'hllor. They needed the hope and salvation that only the Lord could grant them.

In two hours, she gathered her personal effects, secured a handful of old garrons, and mustered her meagre followers. As the sun peeked through the clouds above, Melisandre of Asshai rode out of Winterfell through the South Gate, followed by her small retinue.

23rd Day of the 6th Moon

Shireen Baratheon

Cracking her eyes open, Shireen found herself out in the open. The air tasted of salt and blood, and the faint chill tingled on her face.

The colours were blurry and shapes smudged, as if she were peering through a curtain of running water.

She glanced about the sprawling lake. On the shore, three young sentinel trees were buckling, about to topple under the fleshy tentacles of a giant squid. A massive direwolf pounced in, effortlessly tearing through the squiggling limbs. Shireen blinked, and the direwolf had morphed into a giant dragon in the sky, spewing torrents of purple flame at the boats around the small docks.

It was all so ghostly that Shireen blinked, rubbing her eyes, only for the view to change before her. A far smaller drake with coal-like scales wobbled like a duck, chasing after a lame lion.

Another blink, and a tall, shining tower grew in the distance, at the mouth of a river pouring into the sea.

From the raging waves, a man walked out, crowned by a circlet of driftwood and seaweed. A drowned crow perched stiffly upon his shoulder, staring at the void.

He was eerie, and with every step through the foamy waves, the feeling of wrongness grew heavier. After another step, his skin bubbled and his body twisted. Within a heartbeat, the man was gone, and an… abomination of wriggling flesh and darkness had taken his place. Even the arms and legs were gone, replaced by a storm of tentacles.

He halted, and the suckers along the twisted limbs blinked, revealing a myriad of black and red eyes that all gazed at her.

All of her hair stood on end as dread pooled in her belly.

The monstrosity slowly turned her way, his gaze piercing straight into her soul. A terrified shriek choked in her throat, and Shireen turned around, bolting away. But her foot caught on a rock, and she stumbled down face-first.

Pain jolted through her head, dazing her for half a long moment.

Groaning, she swiftly tried to rise, but an oily shadow loomed above, and her limbs stood frozen in fear. The monster was then before her. It stank worse than it looked. Her mind refused to think. Maggots squirmed through the gaps in the half-rotten flesh, and darkness oozed from the fissures where veins should have been.

A tentacle lunged, lashing around her ankle. Shireen could feel the rest of her strength drain away. Then, Shireen felt something else. Something familiar and warm. For a heartbeat, the world held its breath, and even the monster halted.

The tentacle grasping her leg exploded, and the pressure drowning her mind was cast away.

The ground shook and cracked. From the fissures, slabs of stone burst out with a groan, set in a circle around her. Along the stone, runes lit up in pale grey, the glow pushing the darkness aside. For a long moment, the abomination squirmed. Then, it shook itself, and with each shake, waves of darkness flowed out, cloaking the tablets and stifling the glowing runes.

Shireen's heart leapt in her throat when all the tentacles surged towards her.

A scream tore out of her mouth, yet no sound came out. Her limbs refused to budge, even her fingers felt like lead. Wide-eyed, Shireen watched as the storm of squirmy flesh swallowed the world—

A giant white blur crashed into the darkness, and everything exploded. The world ***shattered*** *to pieces as an unholy wail rang in the distance.*

Shireen awoke, swimming in a cold sweat, a silent scream on her lips. Her breathing was harsh and heavy, and her heart was hammering against her ribs. Gods, it had felt too real. Slowly, she calmed as her gaze fell on the familiar ceiling. She was in Winterfell, and no harm would come to her here.

With a shaky hand, Shireen pushed aside her blankets.

It was just a nightmare, she told herself. It had to be.

She had had plenty of nightmares before, but not so vivid. Never had a dream felt so real. If she closed her eyes, she could smell the foulness again, and she could feel the oily tentacle around her ankle. It

burned. Shireen studied her leg; just over where she had been caught, the skin across the ankle was angry red. It itched like a burn and looked like one, and she could see blotches in the shape of squid suckers.

Shireen swallowed. Dreams were not supposed to hurt.

With some difficulty, she turned to sit up, only to freeze. She was not alone in the room.

Ghost crouched before her bed, teeth bared in a silent snarl at something in the distance. The great shaggy tail had risen like a spear, ruffled along with the white fur, and his baleful red eyes glowed in the dark.

The silence stretched, but nothing happened. Then, the shaggy tail lowered and the fur settled, and Ghost curled in the middle of the floor, as if to sleep. But his ears kept twitching, and one crimson eye remained open, studying the room.

Now, you shine like a beacon for all the terrors dwelling in the darkness.

Shireen had thought those words meant to frighten her. And gods, she was frightened. Even nightmares were not supposed to hurt.

For once, she wanted to speak to the red witch. Shireen would take any explanation, no matter how vague or ominous. But Melisandre was gone. She had ridden south a day before with a small band of wretches following her. Shireen might have danced and sung in joy once, but right now, no joy was left in her.

Her gaze settled on her door. It was locked in from her side. Then she glanced at the alcove—the closed shutter was too small for a bear-sized wolf to slip in.

“How did you slip in?” Shireen whispered at the direwolf, halfway between confusion and relief.

If Ghost heard or understood her question, he made no move to show it. Even so, Shireen was grateful for his presence. Deep down, she knew that if he hadn’t come, something terrible would have happened.

The night is dark and full of terrors.

The words burned in her mind now, raising far more questions than they answered.

Then, her eyes fell on Ghost again. She couldn’t tear her gaze away. Somehow, her earlier apprehension just melted away. Ghost was so fluffy. His fur looked soft, like threads of white silk, and Shireen wanted nothing more than to bury her face in it.

Tempted, she slowly inched closer, but the closer she was, the more her hesitation grew. It wouldn’t be proper to pet the king’s direwolf.

…At least not without permission.

Reluctantly, Shireen tore her gaze from Ghost and called for the servants.

An hour and a hot bath later, Shireen slipped into the Great Hall to break her fast. It was early dawn, and the tables were nearly empty aside from a handful of drowsy courtiers dotted across the benches.

The two Stark princesses were both here, seated at the high table, though Shireen couldn't say if they had slept poorly or just liked to rise with the sun. Princess Arya had returned two days past, yet this was the first time Shireen had seen her in the Great Hall. The whispers had spoken true—the king's youngest sister favoured a man's garb, a doublet of grey velvet slashed with silver, linen breeches, and a slender sword on her hip, looking more like a wealthy sellsword than a princess.

Shireen meant to sit at her usual table to the side, but Princess Sansa waved her over with a smile. This was her first invitation to the high table, as informal as it was.

"Princess Sansa. Princess Arya." Shireen dipped into a curtsy before taking her place. Arya's face scrunched as if she had just eaten a whole lemon. Had she already given offence?

Scullery girls scurried forward with trays of steaming fare. Shireen lost herself in the scent of freshly-baked kidney pie, pulling in a plate without hesitation.

Arya drew a breath to speak, but a pointed glance from her elder sister silenced her. The contrast between them couldn't be starker. Sansa was tall and willowy, with hair like spun copper and the courtly poise of a princess, whereas Arya was short and wiry, her mousy brown hair a tangle, and her eyes were all restless. And there was something else, something bizarre Shireen could not name. A feeling at the back of her head that made her feel watched even when Arya's eyes were elsewhere.

The younger Stark studied her in turn.

"Arya, this is Lady Shireen Baratheon," Sansa said.

"Weren't you supposed to have greyscale?" Arya asked bluntly.

Shireen nearly choked on her pie, while Sansa let out a groan.

"I did have it," she coughed, swallowing her mouthful with effort. "But it's gone now. I'm not sure how myself."

It was the truth. While she knew the King had done it, Shireen had no idea *how*. It felt right to abandon the lies, especially when each one felt wrong on her tongue and weighed on her mind for days. Those who cared to look seemed to sense the truth no matter what she said, though there was even some kitchen tale about how Wolkan had a hand of silver that could mend all ailments bar death. Shireen knew the old man to be good, but not *that* good.

"A blessing from the old gods, no doubt," Sansa said, a faint knowing smile playing across her lips. Arya only snorted and jabbed her fork into her roasted sausages.

The remainder of the meal passed in peaceful quiet as Winterfell stirred awake and the Great Hall filled. Just as Shireen was eyeing the desserts, the Greatjon came thundering up to the high table.

"To House Stark, the North, and Princess Arya Freysbane!" His booming voice shook the rafters. Arya buried her face in her palms. The Umber lord upended a horn of ale in one great gulp, not spilling a single drop.

“Hear, hear!” The cry was taken up across the hall. Horns and tankards were raised high; mead, wine, and ale sloshed and spilt into the Northmen’s throats.

Shireen smiled despite herself. Reaching for a small cup of dark ale, she lifted it with the rest and took a daring gulp. Sweetness and sourness ran down her throat, sending pleasant warmth to her belly. The next swallow came easier.,

The Great Hall was awash with laughter and cheers, but Shireen found it… welcoming. Warm and cosy, where Dragonstone’s halls had been cold and lonely.

Was this how home felt?

25th Day of the 6th Moon, 303 AC

Sansa Stark

The past few days blurred together as Sansa dove into the duties of a lady of the keep with dogged devotion.

Steward, kennelmaster, smith, master of horse, and a score of lesser servants and cooks had been found, restoring Winterfell’s Household to its former strength. Sansa had talked with each one, only allowing those who looked honest and trustworthy with a backstory to match. Her great-uncle was hard at work, slowly but surely recruiting warriors to man the garrison and serve as House Stark’s sword.

It was slow work, for Brynden Tully only took the best of the loyal veterans and those who had shown promise and discipline in the Battle of Winterfell. Even so, barely a hundred and fifty warriors had been recruited after nearly a month. He had taken a pick of three hundred fit boys as young as seven, intent on training them into the next core of House Stark.

Arya’s return had been the greater surprise, and the kinder one. Her sister was not the Arya she remembered. It was a quiet girl, watchful, but her eyes were even sharper than before. She spoke of her time after King’s Landing little, and what little Sansa had pried out was, *“I travelled too far and saw too much.”*

She had pressed her once, patiently coaxing for more, but Arya’s grey eyes had turned cold and weary, like the overcast sky above, and Sansa asked no more. The world was a cruel, dark place, and she hated how it had turned the defiance in her sister’s eyes into something… emptier. All her words, all of her actions felt stilted… like half an act, as if her sister had forgotten everything. It was not an impostor either—Ghost would have sensed it.

Perhaps with time, Arya would open up and speak.

It had been nearly a moon since Jon had made his offer, and Sansa still weighed her choice. Yet a king couldn’t wait forever. As stable as the North seemed, a lone ruler would never sit easily. Sooner, even his bannermen would clamour for a queen and ask for a male heir.

Sansa thought hard and thought fast, but no answer came to her. For the first time, she had been given a choice, an offer greater than any woman had ever received. She could never have chosen her future, not

like this, and now, the choice left her perplexed to no end. Even the Targaryen kings had not allowed their daughters and sisters such luxury in the depths of their madness.

With most of her tasks accomplished for the day, Sansa turned to needlework. Embroidery required steady hands, and in turn, steadied her thoughts. Today, she had invited a companion. Shireen sat beside her, content in the quiet, stitching a doe across a dark woollen scarf, though her stitches were rough. The girl was a pleasant companion, mindful of her manners and keen of mind, trained in history, governance, rulership, and even warfare, as befit a king's sole heir.

Where the gods had given with one hand, they had taken with the other. The scar on her cheek, the too-square jaw, and the Florent ears spoiled what beauty might have been. The long, raven hair softened her face and hid her ears, and her stormy eyes were a striking blue that made even Sansa feel a pang of jealousy.

Since Jon had magicked away the greyscale, the girl seemed more at ease, and her presence alone was soothing. There was no prattle of girlish titters that Sansa had so often fallen in the past, no sharp remarks or ambitious prodding she had endured in King's Landing, just two women working hard in the quiet of the parlour.

The peace was shattered with the slam of the door. Sansa did not need to look up to know who had come—only a single soul dared to move through Winterfell with such brashness.

"Sansa, Jon's been sighted!" Arya's breathless voice was bright for once. "Do you think he'll let me ride one of the dragons?"

Sansa's lips curved despite herself, and she set down the half-finished vest. Beside her, Shireen hissed softly as blood welled from a pricked finger—Arya's abrupt entrance had jolted her needlehand.

It was good to see her sister smiling again, and for a short moment, she looked like that young, mischievous girl running across Winterfell. Only the mention of their brother could bring a smile to Arya's face as of late. Perhaps his presence would help the smile stay for long, ease whatever woes plagued her heart.

"Dragons are not like horses to be mounted," Sansa said. "It is said you need dragon's blood to ride one."

"Jon is a Stark, just like me!" Arya's petulant pout no longer grated.

"Perhaps," Shireen murmured, eyes lowered. "But his mother must have had a drop of dragon's blood."

Arya went still, her smile gone, and she shot the other girl a glance as if only now remembering they were not alone.

"Come. We'll greet him," Sansa said, rising.

Inwardly, she stifled a laugh. All the eyes were set on Jon's mysterious mother, and each rumour painted a different story. A Lyseni's captain's daughter, a beautiful dragonseed from the Crownlands, and even an escaped bed-slave from Lys, according to Larence Snow.

Eddard Stark had not lied once, but his silence had deceived the North. It had misled the king and the entire realm, and everyone else looking into the matter in a way that even Littlefinger could do no matter how hard he tried.

Sansa's fears of the Dustin Widow spreading the truth out of spite had died along with her. She suspected Jon had a hand in that suicide, but perhaps it was for the better. No matter the crime, lopping off the head of a noblewoman so early in the reign would be ill-done.

They walked into the snowy courtyard, finding it full. It seemed word of Jon's return had spread like wildfire. Courtiers, chieftains, newly arrived lords, and even the servants had eagerly rushed to greet their victorious king.

Through the open gates came Jon on his black courser, with Larence Snow on a dappled destrier at his side. A girl rode closely behind them, coltish and doe-eyed—Eddara Tallhart, now the ruling Lady of Torrhen's Square, with her father and brother dead. Two tall young men flanked her, their brown surcoats marked with the sentinel trees of Tallhart.

When Jon swung down from the saddle, Sansa was first to kneel, snow seeping cold through her skirts. All the yard followed her lead, even the wildling chiefs, which made her hide a smile. So much for not kneeling.

"Winterfell is yours, Your Grace," she said.

"Rise." Jon's calm voice rang across the crisp air. But instead of taking her hand, he pulled her into a fierce embrace, then caught Arya with his other arm.

"I'm glad to see you, Arya," he whispered, quiet enough that only they would hear.

"When the snows fall, and the white wind blows—" Arya began.

"The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives," the three finished together.

And just like that, surety settled in her chest. Her restless thoughts eased, and Sansa knew the answer she would give.

"Jon, we need to talk," she whispered as he let them go. Arya's eyes narrowed at them, joy draining away from her face.

"After supper in the crypts, then," Jon said, face unreadable.

"Arya should come as well," Sansa added, giving a soft smile to her sister. "She deserves to know."

"Aye," he said. Though there was something cold, something grim in his gaze as he eyed Arya.

Before they could say more, Greatjon Umber came striding forward, Howland Reed at his side.

The Giant of Last Hearth went to one knee. "I, Jon of House Umber, Lord of Last Hearth, swear by the gods old and new my House's fealty to the Starks of Winterfell. Our swords and pikes we give to your name, your justice and your protection we accept."

The mercy Jon had shown Hother Umber after Rickon's tragic death had won the Greatjon's heart and unwavering loyalty. He proclaimed it loudly—louder than any other, and often. At first, Sansa had thought it was just a ploy to avoid punishment, but the greying giant of a lord meant every word.

Jon clasped Umber's forearm and drew him to his feet, accepting the vows.

Howland Reed knelt next. "To Winterfell we pledge the faith of Greywater. Hearth and harvest we yield to you, my king. Our swords, spears, and arrows are yours to command. Grant mercy to our weak, help to our helpless, justice to all, and we shall never fail you. I swear it by earth and water. I swear it by bronze and iron. I swear it by ice and fire."

These were dark, grim oaths from a time long past, yet the words still rang with power.

Sigorn Thenn, Tormund Giantsbane, and Soren Shieldbreaker were the next to step forward, laying their swords and axes at Jon's feet. Their vows were plain and simple as wildling folk were, but no less earnest for it.

"True friends can always be found on the battlefield," Jon said, his solemn voice echoing across the yard. "Arise as clansmen of the North!"

"Gods, look at them." Arya's voice was thick with amusement. "Before, half the girls wouldn't even spare Jon a glance. Now they're all making doe eyes at our brother, all but pushing over each other to hold his gaze."

Talia Forrester, Eddara Tallhart, and a knot of clansmen's daughters and granddaughters had clustered near the high table, all casting hopeful looks toward the king. Some were scarcely Arya's age or even younger, maidens not yet left girlhood, but it made them no less eager. Jon Stark seemed intent on pretending none of them were there, though the faint twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed his amusement.

"Your brother is strong, and kind, and just," Shireen murmured over a small cup of ale. A faint blush coloured her pale cheek, and even the scar gained a slight colour. "King or not, there's little to dislike in him."

The words startled Sansa; the Baratheon girl rarely spoke, let alone so boldly. The ale had loosened her tongue, perhaps, but Shireen was not wrong. Jon was brave, gentle, and strong…

"You like him!" Arya jabbed an accusing finger at the maiden. Shireen's blush deepened, yet she made no denial. Arya's smile turned sly. "Go on then. Ask him for a dance!"

The poor girl all but shrank into her seat, looking as if Arya had suggested she leap naked into White Knife. A younger Arya would have teased her mercilessly, but this one found some mercy in her heart and let the matter drop in favour of her meal.

Half an hour later, Sansa, Arya, and Jon stood before the statue of Lord Eddard Stark.

"This looks nothing like Father," Arya said, her frown deepening.

Tonight, the chill in the crypts had deepened, each of their breaths misting. Her gloved arms were now hidden in the folds of her cloak for warmth. There were no balls of purple flame to warm the vaulted crypt, only a single lamp Jon had hung on a sconce.

“This is all we have left of him,” Sansa answered. “Mother, Rickon, Bran, Robb… all their graves are empty. There were no bones to bury.”

They all eyed Robb’s unfinished statue. Only the legs were carved; above and behind the knee was just a formless lump of grey stone, cold and dead, just like Robb.

The lamplight guttered, and for a heartbeat, Arya’s face was eerie, demonic. Then it was gone, replaced by a mask of indifference.

“Bran could still return,” she said quietly. “No one’s heard of his death.”

“The word is out,” Jon told her. Ever since they dove into the cold depths of the crypt, his eyes had not left Arya. “If he lives, the Northmen will help him back home. But, sister,” his voice sharpened, “ why are you cloaked in death?”

Arya flinched away from him, eyes guarded. “What do you mean?”

“I now wield magic, Arya.” His voice was slow but filled with power, and the air around them shimmered, as if about to ignite. “I can *sense* the void gnawing at your mind and soul.”

“Oh.” The small sound broke from Arya’s lips, and then her mask crumpled. She collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, weeping on the cold stone floor.

Sansa’s heart twisted. Her sister looked so small, so fragile, like she would shatter like glass at the slightest touch. Jon gathered Arya into his arms, murmuring soft words of comfort as she sobbed.

“Am I… am I going to die?”

“No,” he said without hesitation. “But you must tell me what happened. All of it.”

The story that followed chilled Sansa to the marrow: muttered confessions between gasps and hiccups—Faceless Men, blood magic, swapping faces, and death. Too much death. By the end, Arya pressed her face into Jon’s tunic, sniffling loudly.

Jon’s right hand—the one stroking her back—clawed, grasping at the air just above Arya’s cloak.

The chill deepened, and Sansa felt it in her bones, and the woollen gown and fur cloak did nothing to stop it.

Jon lifted his closed hand as if plucking something, and then she saw *it*. A transparent, wiggling cloak appeared in his clenched fist, writhing as if trying to escape his grip. The hairs on her neck stood on end.

The lantern light dimmed, and colour drained from the world.

It was no cloth he held, but a cloak of woven faces: men, women, and children, each twisted in silent agony. They were all lifelike down to the last detail—she could see the wrinkles on the faces of

greybeards, she could see the moles, birthmarks, and even old scars. Then, their hollow eyes stared back with hunger.

Sansa's knees buckled, and her breath froze in her throat.

'I'm going to die,' was all she could think. If there was true evil in the world, this was it—

Colour returned to the world.

Petals of amethyst flame bloomed from Jon's fist. They swept over the faces, setting them alight. Mouths twisted into soundless shrieks, and faces at the edge wriggled free from the burning abomination, leaping away as if afraid.

The fire followed.

Twisting ribbons of purple pounced like a wolf after its prey. They churned, the fire took the shape of dragons and wolves, their fangs snapping and tearing into the ghastly spectres until nothing remained.

When the last one was torn asunder by the fire, the burning beasts then prowled through the crypt for a long moment as if searching for more foes, and then vanished into whisps of smoke.

Sansa sucked in a sharp breath, her lungs greedily gasping for air. The terrible chill was gone, and the world was no longer grey.

Jon gave her a slow, steady nod, his left arm still cradling the sobbing Arya. Sansa leaned against a nearby stone pillar for support, her strength gone from her legs. Her voice had fled her… but what use were words? Words felt weak, meaningless before the terror she had just witnessed.

Gods… Arya had carried this all along.

She shut her eyes and prayed to any god who would listen. *Let Arya be safe. Let her be well.*

Arya stirred at last, pushing herself away from Jon's hold. "How?" Her voice was raw and ragged, yet there was no trace of the hollowness from before. "How do I fix it?"

She had not noticed—everything had happened so quickly. It had ended even swifter, within moments. She couldn't have seen the purple flame or the ghastly… horror, not with her face buried in Jon's chest. Perhaps it was for the better. Sansa herself wished she could forget. Even Ramsay and Joffrey seemed small beside the black evil that had blotted out the world, for they had been only men.

"Simply stop," Jon said, voice gentle but firm. "No more faces. No more killing. No more potions or *praying to Death*. The shroud of ruin that fed upon your very being is gone. Time and peace will heal the mind and mend the soul."

"That… that easy?"

His smile turned forlorn. "Without the ruinous veil? Yes. And Winterfell is an old, powerful place that would aid you. The seat of power for House Stark in more ways than one."

Jon had a gift for understating things, Sansa thought. Just the memory of the grey despair made her want to weep. Instead, she stepped forward and tugged Arya into her arms. Her sister desperately

latched back to her, her embrace shaky, but warm. Small as she was, holding Arya eased the tightness in her chest. Sansa began to hum a lullaby from their girlhood, running her fingers through her sister's tangled hair until her own heart calmed.

"Gods, we have fallen far," she murmured.

"But we survived," Jon said. "And so long as we live, we can rise again, no matter how hard we stumble."

He was right. He had always been right. A laugh, hoarse chuckle bubbled out of her throat. "You are wise, brother. I have decided."

"I suspected." His mouth curved slightly. "What is it?"

"I… do not want to be queen. As long as you let me stay here."

The hungry yearning in her heart was still there, and Sansa suspected it would never truly go away. The promise of love, warmth, and affection could wash away the cruel scars and memories of woe and pain from her mind. She could still have them, but without the cold shackles of royal duty, without the chains that were the court and ruling.

She *could* do it, but peace, calm, and quiet were like a balm upon her weary heart and mind. A queen would get no peace or quiet. And she was safe here, in Winterfell's halls. As she had witnessed tonight, Jon could do things she had never dreamed of. Her brother—no, her cousin—had grown strong and fierce and would suffer no defeat.

"Very well," he said. "My promise stands."

At that, Arya stiffened from her embrace and twisted away.

"Why… why do you sound like a Lannister?" she croaked, red-rimmed eyes darting between them. "Or a Targaryen?"

Jon's smile grew crooked. "A Targaryen?" he echoed, glancing at Sansa as her cheeks warmed. "It's a long tale, I believe."

"I want to hear it," Arya said, sniffling. "I told you mine."

"I suppose now is a good time as any." Once again, Sansa and Arya were pulled into Jon's warm embrace. "It begins a long, long time ago, when I was young, green, and quite foolish—"

It should have been a grim, hopeless tale—Sansa knew the story. But her brother told it lightly, with wry twists, making it sound more like a children's fable.

She closed her eyes, letting the cadence of his voice wash over her as the two sisters wrapped their hands around Jon. And it was enough.

26th Day of the 6th Moon

Ella Waters

Being a handmaid to Lord Manderly's granddaughters had not been as Myrcella feared. It could be considered kind… if she could forget her station for a moment.

She still remembered the first day. Smiling slyly, the Merman Lord had introduced her to Wynafryd and Wylla under the foolish alias she had chosen for herself. Ella Waters, a bastard from the Crownlands, born to a petty lord and a whore. Even as a bastard, she had been well-treated these past two moons. Her duties were light—combing out hair, accompanying Wyman's granddaughters for embroidery, and lending a ready ear when either sister wished to speak.

Wynafryd was proud, Wylla was sharp of tongue, but both were easy enough to please. No one in White Harbour much cared for a nameless girl with a scar on her face. Some looked on with pity. *"To have such a pretty face met with ruin,"* they would say to her face and shake their heads. *"The gods are cruel.*" The rest ignored her.

It was oddly peaceful to be a nobody, not to have looks of envy, lust, or calculated greed pointed her way. If she were truly Ella Waters of the Crownlands, Myrcella might have come to love it.

New Castle's white stone towers were smaller than the Red Keep or Sunspear's palace, yet cleaner and kept in better order. The people were kinder here, too.

Yet the peace and quiet Myrcella enjoyed did not extend to the rest of the North.

Jon Snow, the Bastard of Winterfell, had marched down from the Wall with an army of clansmen and wildlings, or so Wylla claimed. The rumours claimed them to be savage brutes one day and heroes in the next. Regardless, the Bolton host had crumbled before their might, and now Eddard Stark's natural son sat in Winterfell.

He called himself king and demanded homage from each Northern lord. He called himself a Stark too, as if the last will of his fallen brother could change his name.

Myrcella might have scoffed—a bastard king in a broken kingdom—yet Wyman Manderly took the summons to Winterfell in earnest. On the second day after the raven from Winterfell came, the old fat merman sailed up the White Knife with his granddaughters in tow. Myrcella followed, of course, as did fifteen knights and five times as many men-at-arms.

They left the river past Castle Cerwyn when the river grew too narrow, too shallow, and pressed on by a wheelhouse. Though the snow made it painfully slow, almost as small as her mother's great monstrosity that had barely seen them to Winterfell half a decade ago.

Unlike the Manderlys, Myrcella felt no joy at the prospect of going to Winterfell. She had not been told her fate, yet she could see it plain enough. Wyman Manderly would give her to the Northern king as one might give a gift… or a hostage. She thought of Sansa in King's Landing, and the thought made her mouth taste of ash.

Escape passed through her thoughts once. Then, she looked at the endless expanse of snow and cold in every direction and the Manderly men-at-arms who watched her every step and never thought of it again.

Dread slowly crept up her spine as they travelled, and Myrcella could do nothing but listen to the chatter of the two sisters.

“I scarcely remember his face,” said Wynafryd, her long brown hair flowing in a loose braid down her chest. “I remember he sulked on the lower tables, leaving the harvest feast rather early. Gods, it was a lifetime ago.”

At one and twenty, the eldest Manderly sister was a slim beauty wrapped in a gown of fine Norvoshi wool of sea-green. The younger sister wore her braid in garish green, and her gown in pale grey. She was taller of the two, with full breasts that threatened to spill out of her bodice.

“The last one with the king was what, six years?” Wylla tittered, voice half a pitch higher than usual. “I remember him. He shied away from the dancing, too.”

Myrcella listened on with half an ear. Jon Snow—or Stark now—was often spoken of since the raven from Winterfell had come. At the start, Myrcella had listened with rapt attention, hoping to gauge the man’s character from the tales. The two sisters talked and talked until they grew sick of it, yet said little of interest—they knew precious little of the Stark bastard king.

“The last time a natural son rose to kingship was long before the Conquest,” the older sister said, voice soft. “Even now, it would have never come to pass without King Robb’s decree.”

Two years had passed since the Red Wedding and Robb Stark’s fall, but they still called him king. All Northmen did. It had been subtle at first, words whispered when servants and guardsmen thought nobody of importance had been listening. But after the Boltons fell from Winterfell, they all spoke of it openly.

“No royal decrees would have won him a crown if he had lost before the walls of Winterfell,” Wylla scoffed, flicking her hand as if brushing away a fly. “The Cerwyn guardsmen swore by him, decree or not. They swore the Demon of Winterfell can cleave ten Bolton men with a single swing.”

Her elder sister’s lips curved faintly, but her eyes stayed cool. “Swinging swords well and winning battles does not make a king, Wylla. A swordsman may be a poor ruler. And hearsay,” she added, “is worth as much as Aunt Lynara’s tales.”

At the mention, Myrcella thought of the lady in question—an airheaded woman with a penchant for flights of fancy, yet unable to hold a thought for more than a minute.

“There’s some truth to that,” Wylla allowed, “but a king must have both a strong hand and a sharp mind. And to me, it seems Jon Stark is halfway there. Ella, what do you think?”

“Err—” Myrcella blinked, caught between their two pairs of curious blue eyes. “It’s… hard to judge a man from the words of others.”

“Come now.” Wylla prodded her with a fingertip. “You must have some thought on the matter.”

Myrcella folded her hands in her lap. “Charismatic enough to win the wildlings to his cause or chosen as Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. Skilled in commanding to beat Bolton against the odds. But the Watch mutinied against him, and…” She hesitated. “And he broke his vows when he left the Wall to take up arms in the North.”

That gave the sisters pause. Wynafryd inclined her head in silent agreement, while Wylla only toyed idly with the green-dyed braid coiled over her shoulder, her face surrendering nothing.

“He lived through the mutiny well enough,” Wylla said at last. “And if he were such an oathbreaker, would the mountain clans fight for him? Robb Stark’s decree washed away any stain, in any case.”

“Yet none of that speaks to the man’s heart—” Wynafryd began, but her sister was already answering, the two slipping into easy bickering while Myrcella’s thoughts drifted elsewhere.

Wyman Manderly’s scheme was easy to see—he hoped to make one of his granddaughters a queen. Wynafryd was too reserved, while Wylla’s eager admiration made her the obvious choice. But would Jon Snow take a merman’s granddaughter for a wife?

Myrcella did not know. She struggled to put a face to the name and had heard nothing of him in the Red Keep or Sunspear. Few bastards ever rose to a station of import, and even fewer talked of them, and five years ago, Jon Snow had been but a boy only seen in the North.

What sort of man had the Bastard of Winterfell become?

Savage and grim-faced as the wild men he had led to victory? Dashing like a gallant knight from the Reach? Was he cruel? Proud? Lusty? Or as stubborn as a mule?

Everyone seemed to know *of* him, but few knew *him*. His mother was the one true mystery. *What woman had moved Eddard Stark to set aside his vaunted honour?*

Some whispered Ashara Dayne, others a washerwoman, a camp follower, even a Lyseni whore.

Her musing broke when Wylla slid the small window at the front open. Cold air swept in, and they caught a glimpse of the looming grey walls growing bigger and bigger by the minute.

Once they drew closer, the walls showed a grim adornment: heads freezing on iron spikes. Some were nothing but skulls, others still had bits of half-frozen flesh, but the crows were hard at work, pecking it away.

The sight turned Myrcella’s stomach. So many dead.

Would her head be the next to join the battlements on the morrow?

She clutched her cloak tighter.

The welcome was nothing like the last time she had crossed these gates. Then, she had been Myrcella of House Baratheon; now, she was Ella Waters, bastard handmaid.

The cold bit hard the moment she stepped down. Even under thick wool and fur, she shivered. Only two Manderly knights were permitted inside, but even their swords were taken. “No man may bear arms in Winterfell without the king’s leave,” the guard who had taken the blades told them.

Inside, they were welcomed by a dozen men-at-arms, led by a craggy-faced knight, his surcoat bearing a black fish on rippled red and blue.

“Ser Brynden Tully!” Lord Wyman Manderly greeted, stepping forward. “It is good to see you hale and hearty. Last we heard, you were slain during the fall of Riverrun.”

“Word of my death was greatly exaggerated,” the Blackfish snorted. “I escaped by swimming in the Tumblestone and found my way back to my niece. His Grace has been kind enough to grant me the honour of serving as Winterfell’s master-at-arms.”

A hundred new questions rose in Myrcella’s head. What little was left of House Tully had no reason to cast their lot with Eddard Stark’s bastard, yet here the Blackfish stood.

Mercifully, they did not linger long in the cold and were escorted towards the inner yard and into the warmth of the Guest House. Somehow Lord Manderly, for all his wheezing, had managed to secure an audience with the king in less than an hour.

Next, they were escorted into the Great Keep to the king’s private audience chamber. Wyla and Wynafryd both grew silent, looking around as if they were seeing Winterfell for the first time. Myrcella’s heart grew heavy with each following step, and the knot in her belly tightened. She had never come to this part of Winterfell last time. She had not needed to—Lord Stark had always accompanied her father, serving at his pleasure.

A guardsman announced their arrival and swung open the oaken doors to the chamber.

Myrcella tried to remain behind the Manderly sisters, but Wyman’s meaty hand dragged her out to the front. Her gaze fell to the fireplace, where a beast in white fur rose, towering over them all. A direwolf. She had seen the red-eyed pup with a snowy coat before, a small thing no bigger than a cat…

Now, the beast had grown, studying her with a pair of fiendish red eyes.

Lord Manderly was bending his great bulk to one knee, booming out words of fealty. Myrcella couldn’t hear a thing. Every inch of her being was set on the beast that prowled closer. The great white snout lowered to her face, as if to inspect her. She could feel the bloody breath prickling her skin.

Her heart drummed so loudly she could scarcely hear her thoughts. She closed her eyes and prayed to the Seven, to the old gods, to any that would hear—that the monster would pass her by.

When she opened them again, the wolf was gone from her side, sitting peaceably beside the king with a pink tongue lolled out. Myrcella was not fooled—she caught a glimpse of those razor-sharp teeth that looked like they could snap bone in two.

“...These are my granddaughters, Wynyfryd and Wylla, Your Grace,” Lord Wyman was saying. The sisters dipped low in perfect curtsies, cheeks faintly flushed as they looked at the king.

Myrcella’s gaze followed theirs, and she felt her stomach drop.

Jon Stark was taller than she remembered, with a warrior’s shoulders. The dark Stark hair was still there, but the eyes were not grey, but burning purple. And gods, he was comely—the faint scar crossed one brow, only adding to it further.

“And this,” a meaty hand motioned her way, “is one you may find most useful—Princess Myrcella Baratheon.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks as those purple eyes fixed on her. There was power to them, a power that made her feel small. She buckled her knees to curtsy, but the world tilted, spun around, and was swallowed by darkness.