

TV Review: Game of Thrones Season 4 Episode 1: 'Two Swords'

Blonde is the new black in this season premiere. [George Wood](#) reviews

Monday 7 April 2014



Rating: ★★★★★☆

Warning: this article contains spoilers.

"I'd rather have no brains and two balls" - Daario Naharis

'Two Swords' opens with Westeros seemingly under the tight grip of Tywin Lannister, perfectly symbolised by Ned Stark's greatsword Ice (the same sword that departed him from his head) being melted down and forged into two Lannister swords. The shot of Charles Dance watching the scabbard of Ice burn is chilling; the Starks have well and truly lost.

But in *Game of Thrones*, no one is safe. Not even a Lannister. The ending scene sees Needle, the other sword of the episode's title, returned to Arya in vengeful, horrifically bloody fashion. Sure it's a tiny victory, and Arya poses no threat to the Lannisters, but the final shot of Arya and the Hound riding into a smoky landscape neatly highlights that nothing is certain in this world. The Lannisters may have won the war, but the power they hold is not quite as stable as the first scene might have suggested.

If there's anything in the episode that underlines this idea, it's the arrival of Prince Oberyn Martell, or the Red Viper, a snake in the Lannisters' midst as the series approaches the Royal Wedding. With swords representing the past and future of Westeros in the episode, the knife Oberyn uses to stab the Lannister

in the brothel represents a far more unpredictable threat.

"Tell him the Lannisters aren't the only ones who pay their debts." Oberyn's true intentions for visiting King's Landing are revealed to Tyrion: vengeance for the brutal death of his sister Elia (who was married to Rhaegar Targaryen, son of the Mad King) and her children by the Mountain, under Tywin's command. Oberyn is one of my favourite characters from the books, and it's great to see him and his paramour Ellaria Sand being translated well on-screen, sexual appetites intact.

Still, the Lannisters remain most interesting/living family to follow, their cutting family dynamics always proving to be a highlight of the series. Last season saw significant strides in Jaime's character development, and here he is in turn rejected by Tywin, Cersei and Joffrey as he adjusts back to his family life (though his friendship with Brienne continue to make the two a major shipping couple, according to Tumblr).

Because of the sheer geographical distances in *Game of Thrones*, it's difficult to play off different pairings between the main cast, so existing character dynamics need to stay fresh. It's the reason why Tyrion and Jaime stay interesting, but also why the Daenerys plot line can feel a bit tedious (though seeing the dragons start to become unruly in this episode was admittedly a spectacle).

Elsewhere, 'Two Swords' was extremely efficient in catching up with Sansa, Margaery, Lady Olenna (played by the delightful Diana Rigg), Tyrion, Bronn and Shae. Ygritte (last seen firing arrows heart-wrenchingly at Jon Snow) and Tormund meet up with the cannibalistic Thenns, while Jon avoids execution at the Wall (yay!). Arya and the Hound remain an interesting pair to follow - as much as I like to see Stark vengeance, seeing the Hound's violent influence rub off on Arya is disturbing. But if it increases her chances of living (which are pretty low if you're a Stark), then kill away!

'Two Swords', like all season openers so far, spends most of its time reintroducing the massive ensemble (and we haven't even touched upon Stannis, Bran or Theon). But with a tasty introduction to the Martells and a strong thematic presence in a world still reeling from the Red Wedding, there was just enough of the new to balance out the old. Welcome back, *Game of Thrones*.



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