The Starks Endure

by WendyNerd

Summary

The whirlwind of strife of wars past and present requires Jon and Sansa to wed (and consummate) in order to secure their new kingdom. With dragons to the South and Others to the North, they are surrounded by foes, and can only do what they can to keep things together. Which is all they want, right?

Notes

Hope you guys like this. Decided to approach this with the two marrying still thinking they’re siblings and just went from there. At the time I’ve posted this first chapter, I’ve written up to 93 pages.

Later Note: Some kind of weird error happened at some point and a bit of text got scrambled and some other completely awful text showed up. I’m not sure how it happened (I checked
my original document and it's fine.) but I have fixed it now. I'm sorry about that!
Marriage, like all things in life, are never like the songs. That’s one thing Sansa’s always understood, deep down. Probably from observing the tensions that the otherwise happily married Lord and Lady Stark dealt with over Jon. She sometimes wonders if that understanding was what so pushed her to want to please Joffrey, despite all the signs that appear in hindsight.

Still, Sansa thinks even most wives--- even the more long-suffering ones--- would admit she’s had a particularly unlucky run in the field of matrimony. First the betrothal with Joffrey. Then the marriage to Tyrion, which, in a twisted way, was almost the best of the lot. Then Ramsay, over a hundred nights of beatings, rape, cuts, taunts, and torture.

And now this. A measure to keep her safe now that her first “husband” of sorts has touched ground on Westeros again, and arguably has a claim on her. To keep her safe from other grasping, would-be suitors, especially when Jon is away. A way to protect Jon, and solidify his claim to the North. To protect all of the Starks, really. Jon is of age, the rest of them are not. If Bran was king, there’d be struggle over a regency. Same for Arya. Even Sansa.

Not that this is a popular move. The Old Gods may have fewer rules than their neighbors in the South, but even they frown on incest, as do their vassals, many of which worship the Seven anyways. It was all Sansa could do to keep her Uncle Edmure from drawing Sweetrobin into an open revolt when this was announced. The knowledge of the Lannisters’ activity certainly doesn’t help things.

But it’s a move that is done for security purposes. Conflicts over both Sansa’s and Jon’s hands might have led to violence and unrest. Either of them marry a Northerner, and the Riverlands and Vale claim favoritism. They marry a Valeman or a Riverlander, and the Northerners accuse them of abandoning their culture. They wed one particular Northern noble, and their House’s rivals lose their minds. If they each marry a noble of a different realm, one is left out until Arya and Bran can wed, and then there will still be one realm who has greater representation. Their lords are a bunch of squabbling children.

There’s inheritance issues. The lords declared Jon King in the North, but Sansa was still Lady of Winterfell, and arguably the more rightful heir to the throne. And that was before Bran’s return. Jon is still a bastard, legitimized or not, and even the grounds on which he left The Watch are… unprecedented. The question of who is Head of the Family creates a host of problems. Then there’s all the property that the Boltons left behind. And the blood ties to the Vale and Trident. And the fact that Bran, crippled, is unlikely to sire any heirs of his own. The fact that if Jon dies in the upcoming war, it could cause an uproar in the North.

The marriage is a political arrangement, a manner in which both of them may don a crown and bolster the legitimacy of the other, and establish one another as an unquestioned authority. If one dies, the other keeps ruling uninterrupted. They present a united front to deter would-be conspirators and puppeteers, keep the power firmly in Stark hands, maintain the dynastic support that ties two of their three realms to them, and mutually endorse the same succession rules as monarchs. It’s a formal partnership.

And, at least, it’s a match between two people who love and trust one another, and have the same goals.
The plan isn’t so terrible on paper. At least, not when they first lay it out. The succession would go as follows: they can take lovers. Jon will claim any children Sansa bears as his. If she is without issue, the line will drop to Bran, then Arya. They’ll make sure Arya weds a younger son and is invested her with a title of her own when she comes of age so that the Stark name is preserved. Failing all of that, if Jon has any bastards, he’ll legitimize one.

Sansa fought a war with Jon. She fights one now. She rules a country with him. She can weather an unconventional marriage, surely.

But it really isn’t so easy, at all.

For one thing, they must handle the issues of consummation and legitimacy. Tyrion Lannister sails for Westeros alongside the dragon queen Daenerys Targaryen, to supplant his highly unpopular sister, take the Iron Throne back for House Targaryen, and name himself Lord of Casterly Rock. Despite their opposition to each other, both sides of the Southern War agree on one thing: they do not recognize the North, Riverlands, and Vale as an independent state, ruled by their own king. Both intend to reign over all nine constituent realms of Westeros, and will not accept the Stark claiming a third or a half (depending on whether one counts by individual realms or land mass) of Westeros.

Given how the rumors of Tyrion committing patricide turned out to be all too true, Jon and Sansa can’t be sure of his state of mind. Tyrion might see reclaiming his Stark wife as a way to please his queen, fighting for control of all the Stark domains through her. Sansa is the eldest legitimate Stark, and her only trueborn brother is a cripple. She and Tyrion were wed before all the court of Westeros in the Great Sept. And while the Great Sept and most the Faith establishment is gone, the followers of the Seven still had power. Daenerys, furthermore, has declared Tyrion innocent of Joffrey’s murder, and the true heir to Casterly Rock. If she wins (which is almost certain), Tyrion will have legal grounds to claim almost anything.

He could even claim that her marriage to Ramsay wasn’t really legal due to their prior union. And the fact that Sansa had manned an insurrection against Ramsay could help his case.

The only thing that can stand in the way of him taking her as a wife if that happens would be the fact that their marriage was unconsummated. The grounds on which she was wed to Ramsay.

To her ironically-useful humiliation, Ramsay didn’t permit any doubt as to when, where, how, and by whom her maidenhood was actually taken. Making Theon stand witness at their wedding night wasn’t enough. There were pre-marital examinations. Her second husband also took the bloodstained sheets of their marital bed and petticoats of her wedding gown, displayed them in the Great Hall, and preserved them.

A marriage only becomes completely binding once consummated. To keep Tyrion from claiming the North through her for his new queen, they had to cling to this standard utterly.

If her new marriage were to have any more validity than her farcical union with Tyrion, however, it meant…

Perhaps that it need only happen once would be solace, if not for the fact that due to the nature of her relationship with Jon, they’d need witnesses.

Her first marriage had the most public wedding, but Tyrion ended any chance for a bedding and the night following was as private as it was chaste. Her second marriage had fewer guests, but her husband raped her in front of her father’s ward.

Now?
It couldn’t just be one witness. They claimed sovereignty over three realms, and Sansa’s connections
to the other two were crucial to stabilizing power in their new kingdom. And it couldn’t just be
anyone. It had to be people with unquestionable credibility, even people who normally wouldn’t
agree with one another.

It gets worse.

It’s not enough that the world has seemingly gone mad. But it seems Sansa has as well. Perhaps
she’s been infected, having spent so much time in the care of Cersei Lannister. Perhaps she’s just so
warped by all that has been done to her that she cannot process any sort of love or kindness from a
man without giving it a carnal bent.

Regardless, she’s not only sick, she’s betraying Jon. Jon, who has done so much for her. Jon, who
works so hard to keep her safe. Jon, who trusts her. Jon, who sees her as more than just a prime cut
of meat in the marriage market. Jon, who is risking and sacrificing his own happiness for her.

She’s betraying Arya and Bran. The only way they’ve managed to process this is by operating under
the assurance that this is nothing but a political arrangement, that their family dynamic remains the
same.

She’s betraying her people, and the entire basis for this marriage in the first place. Part of the reason
this is even happening is to give her a chance to prove to all the North that she is fit to lead them. But
she is sick, grotesque, and unfit.

Sansa must remind herself of this constantly, to keep her feelings at bay. When she catches herself
slowing her stride through the courtyard to watch Jon’s elegant movements as he spars with another.
When she feels the strange urge to take his hand, run her thumb along his skin, and hold it for just a
little too long. When he kisses her cheek or forehead, and she has to stop herself from “accidentally”
moving her head so his lips meet hers instead.

They’re together so often, too. One of the things they’ve discovered since their reunion is how much
they have to teach one another, how much each one needs to learn. Jon isn’t just leading a threadbare
military force anymore, he’s leading a new nation. Sansa isn’t just observing and maneuvering for a
court or playing politics, she’s leading and preparing a new country for war.

The thing is, despite their apparent differences, they work so well together. Sansa’s always
shuddered at tales and explanations of bloodshed, of soldiering, was always bored by tactics. She
always got the impression that when people--- men--- allegedly tried to explain it to her, that they
were doing so under the assumption that she’d never understand it, or need to remember it anyways,
and/or that she was stupid. It was always so arrogant, a mix of rapid-fire, nonsensical jargon and
baby speak.

Jon, though, detailed things clearly, concisely, respectfully. He made it all sound interesting. And, in
return, he listens to her.

The way they learn from and explain things to each other, the way they understand their respective
subjects, is so similar. They come to conclusions with one another to organically. Even their
arguments are more interesting than combative.

And they trust each other, so much. And when they’re working through thing together, the business
of ruling seems less like a burden or a struggle, and more like an adventure, a challenge. She feels
more hopeful, working with him. And she can tell he feels the same way.

They eat most of their meals together, they’re usually the last people they speak to before they retire,
with most evenings spent by the fire, mulled wine in hand, going over everything thing from treasury allocation to the funny story Tormund told that morning.

Nothing is easy. But with Jon, so many things seem less harsh.

Except for those moments where she looks at him and sees not her brother, but a man. A handsome, gentle, clever, brave, strong, caring man. A hero. A person who can hold her without provoking her most fearful instincts.

Then it gets hard.

Or when they have to speak about what they must do to preserve everything they’ve built.

It’s just not fair. She finally finds a man with everything she could ever want or need, one who doesn’t frighten her, doesn’t want to own her, who cares for her. She’s set to marry him. But of course it has to be under these circumstances. It’s perverted. It’s twisted. It’s cruel.

She faces her wedding as bravely as she can. She’s made it through weddings to Ramsay and Tyrion. She stomached weeks of posing as Joffrey’s Lady Love. But her anxieties over this are of an entire different nature. This time, she’s not afraid of him, she’s afraid of herself.

But she likes to think she’s done well in suppressing these unnatural impulses. Enough that as she and Uncle Edmure turn to march towards the Heart Tree and her future, she’s able to put a smile on her face.

Jon, at the base of the tree yards away, but getting ever closer, smiles back. But there’s a sadness to his expression, one which creates another crack in her already-damaged heart.

No one will be able to call her anything but ‘Stark’ ever again, she reminds herself. And she’s going into this marriage retaining things of her own. One near-consolation of her marriage to Ramsay is that with the Boltons wiped out, she’s the only legal claimant left for their holdings. She’s already made arrangements for the property and income. She’ll always have a household of her own, she has status in the peerage in addition to her royal position, she is able to offer a dowry that doesn’t consist of the promise of her family home. She’s able to officially expand the Stark family income and means. She can determine the future of funds, use it to protect her children.

Bolton wealth isn’t exactly unsubstantial, either. Ramsay had his extravagances, but wasn’t the Head of the family long enough to make a real dent in the family coffers. Roose kept his bastard’s expenses in check, though Ramsay found ways around it. Prior to her late husband, the lord of that family had been generations upon generations of jealous, greedy misers, and many of them were skilled administrators and financiers.

Their wealth began rebuilding Winterfell long before Sansa returned North, and now their money pays for most of this wedding. Thank the gods, too. A display and extravagance on the level of, say, Joffrey’s wedding to Margaery Tyrell would never happen, of course, but they can’t exactly do things cheaply, either. There are no contortionists, fire-eaters, mummers, or singers shipped in from the Far East, their guest list is a third of what the Red Keep welcomed, they are presenting four courses instead of seventy-six, there are no cloth-of-gold streamers, or giant decorations meant for one occasion.

But weddings of the sort of scale befitting a monarch cost coin. Roose’s penny-pinching meant he only allowed for the most intimate wedding for his son and Sansa, with almost no guests and nothing that could generously be called a ‘banquet’ (Littlefinger even put up the costs for Sansa’s gown, and Roose wouldn’t even pay for maiden and bridal cloaks), which, in Sansa’s mind, rather defeated the
purpose of using her name and face to solidify his claim to the North. But even the calculating Roose was inept when it came to the importance of image.

The lords of the North, the Vale, and the Trident must know that the Starks are unified, that she and Jon are truly wed, that despite all their misfortunes and struggles, the House of Winterfell is as strong as ever, more than capable of providing for and leading their people through the upcoming challenges, and that they understand the importance of treating with one’s vassals generously.

While there are misgivings about the expense of it during these times, it’s necessary. They have many guests to accommodate, and a need to present a strong, prepared, solid front for their subjects. Winter is here, the Night’s King is coming, and enemies are at all borders. They can’t very well convince all these people that they can lead through all that’s coming if they can’t even provide their vassals proper hospitality for a royal wedding.

They have to shock their enemies with how well they’re able to provide and celebrate after such grievous misfortunes. Awe them into confidence in their young monarchs.

This included having to speed up some construction on the castle itself.

The walls and trees of Winterfell are not blanketed in fine silk and cloth of gold, nor is every candlestick, plate, and fork of precious metal. But everyone is accommodated comfortably. The candles are beeswax, everything metal is polished to the point of being reflective, excellent wine is provided. Guests receive favors--- silver letter-openers.

Sansa walks toward the Heart Tree in ivory velvet trimmed with silver rabbit’s fur. A panel of embroidery of silver wolves and snowflakes and icy-blue Tully trout runs down the center of her bodice and skirts. Her maiden’s cloak is reversed. White fur surrounds her neck and covers her shoulders, and provides the inner lining for the pale-grey lamb’s wool that hangs from the top of her back to her ankles, seed pearls sewn at the borders of the fabric.

She wears her hair loose, virginal, the only thing keeping her auburn tresses away from her face is a circlet of blue winter roses. Concealed by the collar of her cloak is a white-gold and opal wreath, a Tully-family heirloom. A matching belt sits right above her hips.

Sansa wasn’t going to deny herself or her family fine clothes befitting their rank. They are royalty now, and the importance of that is as driven by politics as it is by ego.

Which is why she had to deny Jon his request to don the cloak she originally made for him, the one modeled after Father’s. She made that one to be worn for daily tasks, for battle, for hunting, for ranging. Father, despite his power, was not a king, and he was a humble man. That virtue on this occasion is not affordable.

Hence the grey velvet and ermine draped over his shoulders, held on by a chain and clasp of silver and diamonds. His doublet is a brocade of silver thread on white silk, his his trousers of steely velvet. A chain of white gold is draped along his shoulders under his cloak, with a pendant of a white wolf with ruby eyes hanging dead center of his chest. All of it just makes his thick, dark hair seem darker, his eyes more piercing and intense. He’s a dream groom.

Ghost, almost blending in with the snow, sits just off behind him, to the side, looking almost like a white shadow.

Bran, seated at the base of the Heart Tree upon a large chair, is boyishly handsome in navy silk trimmed with charcoal satin. His fur-lined cloak of lamb’s wool is clasped with silver Stark wolves.
Arya, blue roses in her hair as well, stands beside Bran’s chair, Needle belted at the waist of her forest silk gown with the weirwood embroidered on her chest in silken thread. Silver fox fur sits upon her shoulders, crowding her short neck and giving the impression that her head was blossoming out of a field of dirty snow. It was actually rather adorable.

Everyone here is in their best, though it clear from the looks of some of the lords’ and ladies’ clothing that this is the first occasion on which they’ve worn them in a long while. Many of them had finery that looked a size too big: a harsh reminder of the normally-hungry times in which they live.

But it’s the very best anyone here has looked in a long while. And most everyone smiles, though there isn’t much time to gauge how many of those smiles are fixed. But with one look Sansa can tell that every eye is curious.

It’s a lovely wedding, especially for winter. The sky is relatively clear and there’s actual sunlight. A storm the night before left a blanket of fresh, sparkling snow on everything. The lanterns that create the mock-aisle for the wedding are unnecessary.

Nicer, Sansa decides, than any she witnessed in King’s Landing. Even the opulence of Margaery’s union with Joffrey cannot compare with when nature itself seems to celebrate.

One thing that can be said is that a godswood wedding is certainly of lower cost than a grand sept one. No incense, no minister, no sparkling idols or ritual items. Sure, one had to rely more on nature, but when the weather was right, one couldn’t ask for a lovelier setting.

She’s glad the sun shines. Maybe some will take it as an omen that the gods look kindly on this union.

One thing she’d change—- she wishes Jon hadn’t slicked his hair back. She loves his unruly curls.

She spots a couple of people trying not to shiver. Despite the winter weather, she feels warmer and warmer as she steps closer and closer. By the time Uncle Edmure has stopped and Jon asks who comes before the gods, she’s boiling. The removal of her cloak is no relief.

“Edmure of House Tully, Lord of Riverrun and Warden of the Trident, come to present my niece, Sansa of House Stark,” He ushers her forward, “Princess of the North, Lady of Winterfell and the Dreadfort, a woman of true and noble birth, grown and flowered, to be wed before the Gods. And who are you?”

Edmure stumbles over his words a bit. He’s acquired a stutter during his captivity. Sansa’s heart aches with every halt in his speech. Her poor, sweet uncle.

“I am Jon, of House Stark, King of the North, the Trident, and the Vale, Warden of the North, and Protector of the Realm, a man of noble birth, to be wed before the Gods.”

“Jon of House Stark, before the eyes of Gods and Men, do you take Sansa of House Stark as your…” Edmure pauses and clears his throat, “As your lady wife and queen? To be bound together in marriage until your death?”

For a second, Sansa is sure Jon will say ‘No.’ That he’ll spot something in her eyes and know. She’s almost hoping he does. He can. It’s not too late. But he looks at her, his eyes searching. His lips part and, in his soft, yet firm way, says, “Yes.”

He then clears his throat. “And do you, Sansa of House Stark, before the eyes of Gods and men, take me, Jon of House Stark, as your lord husband and king? To be bound together in marriage until your death?”
“Yes.”

Jon unfastens his cloak and places it on her shoulders. He takes a moment to fasten the clasp securely, and their eyes feet, their faces inches apart. They’re both so scared.

Then he kisses her. It’s chaste, gentle, and it lasts four counts. Because she counts.

It’s not quite finished yet.

Another deliberate, practical arrangement was combining the official coronation with the wedding. And not just because it reduced the cost of two ceremonies to one. The Trident was still held by the Freys and Lannisters when Jon was declared king, and though Edmure bent the knee, there wasn’t the same opportunity for mass fealty to be declared. Being officially crowned now allowed them to be officially declared and crowned as rulers of all three of the realms they claimed, in front of lords from every region, giving them all a chance to properly swear fealty and bear witness.

With them married, as well, it gave them the perfect opportunity for them both to be crowned, blessed, and declared, on the same grounds, with the same status. For other coronations, the queen either did the honors of placing the crown on her husband herself, or stood by in support. A queen is usually a consort, not a regnant in her own right. Not a monarch. The formally crowned head is the ruler.

But now, both of them kneel before the Heart Tree, both of them begin their vows.

Beside Bran’s chair is not one, but two crowns, carrying equal authority.

Both are new. The original crown of the Kings of Winter was lost to the centuries, and Robb’s was eventually melted down by the Freys.

Sansa designed, commissioned, and paid for these crowns with Bolton gold, and enjoyed every second of it.

Steel swords, pointing to the sky, are entangled by white-gold weirdwood branches with red enamel leaves, save for the center, there the leaves are rubies. Aside from size, the coronets are identical.

Arya crowns Jon, Bran crowns Sansa. They are declared King and Queen of the North, Vale, and Trident, Wardens of the North, Lord and Lady of Winterfell, and Protectors of the Realm.

The two of them get to their feet and turn to the applauding crowd, hands joined. Everything has gone perfectly, but, as expected, there’s an air of awkwardness to it all. Some, especially among the followers of the Old Gods, look nervous even as they cheer, as if wondering if they’ll be struck down for supporting this union before a Heart Tree.

No one is struck down, instead, the king and queen lead everyone back to the Great Hall.

They’re on their thrones, receiving oaths from each of their new vassals, for ages until at last they can descend to the tables. Sansa finds herself unable to eat much. Jon seems to notice, and loads smaller portions onto their shared fork to offer her. At her third wedding, Sansa is suddenly struck by the absurdity of this tradition. Having her husband feed her? She is not an infant.

She takes determinedly large swigs from their cup.

There’s not much uproarious mirth at the high table. No matter how well they’ve arranged this, no matter what oaths are made, no matter what comparatively greater matters face them, there is no getting around it. This is a wedding of half-siblings. A wedding of half-siblings necessitated by a
complicated and dangerous political situation that requires them, in a matter of hours, to fornicate in
front of multiple witnesses.

Until then, the brother-husband and sister-wife are surrounded by their other brother, and other sister.

And one of the primary reasons they’ve been brought to this point is because Sansa, as a woman,
was deemed incapable of holding any authority of her own: over herself, over her people, over her
lands, over her own home. Because despite the fact that she contributed as much, even more, to the
reclamation of this kingdom by their enemies, her bastard brother was the one declared ruler over
her. Because the world decided that it was the right of men to make women and girls marry whoever
they wish, and that husbands had the right to claim and control their wives lives and property.
Because the world was set up so that the only way she could ensure that the drunken relative of her
father’s murderers couldn’t steal her kingdom was by having a bunch of people watch her own
brother enter her. Which also happened to be the only way she could also make sure that no one had
grounds to start an insurrection in the middle of a national crisis.

Everything is scrambled, confused, and cruel. And this is the solution.

All of Jon’s kindnesses can’t change that.

No one is comfortable here. The lower tables manage to have some fun, but she notices they very
pointedly don’t look up at the new couple very often.

The high table is inhabited by their family and their closest friends. On Sansa’s other side is Arya,
who stares at her plate, but occasionally shoots a nasty look further down the table. Two seats down
from her, on their Uncle Edmure’s other side, is his lady wife, Roslin Frey. The bride of the Red
Wedding. She keeps her head down and seems sweet, but that’s another circumstance that cannot
exactly be ignored.

It probably also doesn’t help that Sansa’s last husband fed the woman’s sister and her newborn son
to his dogs. And that the gold that paid for this wedding is a result of that grisly murder.

Bran is between Jon and Sweetrobin, and her little brother graciously pretends to be interested in
their husband’s chatter. Brienne and Lady Mormont are beside young Lord Arryn, and at the very
end are Lord and Lady Manderly. Beyond Roslin is Davos, Tormund, and Lord Commander
Eddison Tollett. Robert is the only one who is talkative.

Sansa cannot help but keep glancing at the three nearest tables. At each one sits one of their
designated “conjugal witnesses”. To the left table is Anya Waynwood, Lady of Ironoaks, one of the
most powerful peers in the Vale. An old woman of unquestioned honor and decorum. To the right,
Lady Dustin, with her sharp eyes and notable respectability. At the center table, Lord Tytos
Blackwood, who remained loyal to Robb and resisted the Freys until they practically broke down his
walls, revered by all.

Three peers, one from each realm, with reputation for duty and honesty. Lady Dustin had
connections to House Bolton and some uneasy history with both Father and their late Uncle
Brandon, but she was also known to openly despise and criticize Roose and Ramsay, and refused to
offer them outright support. Her only son was killed during the Red Wedding, after all. If she
testified that the marriage was consummated, people would take that as truth.

Dancing begins, but for once, Sansa can’t bring herself to get to her feet. Arya and Sweetrobin lead it
instead, albeit clumsily. In fact, everyone at the high table save for Jon, Sansa and, of course, Bran,
flee to the dance floor.
Bran sighs and watches them all move around the hall wistfully. He sighs. “So lucky…”

Sansa looks over at her brother in surprise. “I don’t remember you dancing much. You’d always sneak away from our lessons to go climbing instead.”

“Well, now that I can’t do it, I miss it. I may not have been as good as you or Robb, but still…”

Her heart sinks. “I’m sorry, Dear Brother.”

“Lord Cerwyn is coming up. I think he intends to ask you,” her brother replies, gesturing to the approaching young lord, “I’d like to see you dance with him, Sansa. You always loved it.”

She looks at Jon. “Do you mind?”

He shakes his head. He even forces a smile. “Please. He’s young and he’s not bad looking, aside from the spots,” he says quietly, “Perhaps you’ll like him.”

Sansa’s stomach lurches. She knows what he’s doing. And despite the strangeness of it, she understands. It would probably be for the best if she were to find a lover and conceive an heir sooner rather than later. But she feels thoroughly uncomfortable with this encouragement.

Sure enough, Cley Cerwyn comes to the table and asks for a dance. He leads her out, a kind, timid smile on his face. And when the song begins, he speaks.

“Your family would be very proud of you, Your Grace, if you pardon my bluntness.”

Sansa glances over at her new husband. He’s staring down their cup. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“I am. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Your courage against the Boltons was unmatched.”

She’s touched, and surprised. She is rarely praised for this. Their victory is almost exclusively attributed to Jon.

“Thank you, my lord,” she replies, “It is kind of you to say so.”

“Ramsay flayed my parents right in front of me,” he blurts out. Sansa almost freezes. He continues. “I never met such a horrible person. The Others can’t be as vile. When I heard about your marriage, I thought about you. I know we’d never met, but my heart broke for you. The Boltons killed your family too. And Ramsay at least left once I paid the taxes my father refused him. But you had to be with him every day. I can’t imagine what it was like.”

Sansa purses her lips. She hasn’t had anyone speak to her about Ramsay like this since Theon. “You can probably imagine better than most. I’m so sorry for what happened.”

“I should have answered your call. I was visited by the monster, and you lived with him. And you still faced him again. Even knowing better than anyone what he was, what he could do. I’m sorry I didn’t have your courage. My parents would be ashamed of me for my cowardice and dishonor. Yours would be proud. You let nothing stop you from taking back your home and saving everyone.”

Jon was right, she does like him. “Lord Cerwyn, you are too kind, but you don’t need to—–”

“—–No, I do. Because I’m not the only dishonorable coward here. And you should know, you have nothing to be ashamed of. I know why you’re doing this. And I know that no one has any business judging you. I just want you to know it too. I didn’t stand with you before, but I will now, for what it’s worth.”
Her eyes narrow. “You haven’t spoken to my br--husband, by any chance, have you?”

“Aside from my oaths earlier, no. I don’t think he’d understand. But I know you do.”

The song ends, and she thanks him sincerely before heading back to the table. She’s weary. So weary. But Lord Cley’s words resonate.

She leans over to murmur in her new husband’s ear. “I hate to do this, but… Can we just get this over with?”

Jon glances at her. “Go ahead and slip away. I’ll have your maids sent up and join you in an hour or so.”

Chapter End Notes

I know Bran is there, and Bran knows the truth, btw.
Sansa:

Her maids do come, and but are soon dismissed by Lady Dustin and Lady Waynwood.

“This is wise of you,” Lady Dustin, her brown hair streaked with grey and her lined face still handsome, tells her. Her dark eyes scan Sansa at her dressing table from head to toe. “It’s far too early for anyone to stop celebrating, and with any luck, you’ll be able to get this over and done with before most of them realize you’re gone.”

Sansa bluses beneath her shift. “Thank you for doing this, my ladies.”

“I doubt you mean that, Child,” Lady Anya says, coming closer and resting a wrinkled hand on her shoulder, “This is utterly barbaric, and we all know it. You’re a gently bred girl, and you’ve already suffered so much. But I promise to ensure that everyone behaves as decently as possible.”

“As do I.”

Sansa looks into the mirror and nods. “This won’t be the worst wedding night I’ve had.”

“I believe that,” Lady Dustin remarks, taking a seat near the fireplace. “You know of my connection to the Boltons?”

“They were distant kin, I believe?”

“Yes and no. We were both closer and further apart than you imagine. My sister, Bethany, was Roose’s first wife. Mother of Domeric.”

“Domeric?” Sansa knows the name. Her mind races. “Lord Bolton’s trueborn son.”

“Aye. Ramsay’s half-brother. My sister was lucky enough not to live to see her son murdered by that bastard.”

Sansa feels a chill. But she’s not surprised in the least. “What happened?”
“Well, Domeric was a sweet boy, sensitive. Accomplished, too. He played the harp beautifully, was incredible in the saddle, in the lists, with a blade, wrote poetry. Nothing like his father, more like his mother. And Bethany was a gentle soul, let me tell you. Like you. In fact, if not for Ramsay, you might have become Lady Bolton under far better circumstances. Poor Domeric was a lonely young man, especially after his mother died. Well, somehow, he learned that he had a half-brother. I’d like to find and kill the person who told him. He became determined to meet the bastard, even though everyone, including his father, warned him away. But he defied everyone and rode off one day to meet his brother. Three days after the two brothers met, Domeric was dead. Poisoned.”

“How terrible! Was there nothing that foul man wouldn’t do?”

“No. What’s more,” Sansa informs Lady Waynwood, “He enjoyed it.”

“The first time I laid eyes on that beast, my skin was crawling. I never forgave Roose for giving that lad my nephew’s inheritance.” Lady Barbrey sighs. “But then, I’m one to hold grudges. I was almost your aunt another way, actually.”

“How so?”

“Your Uncle Brandon.” Her guest gives a wry smile, “He took me in one of the glass gardens right here in Winterfell. It was the sweetest pain. And he promised to marry me as he did. It was stupid. He was betrothed to your mother and everyone knew it. But if you’d ever met Brandon Stark, you’d understand…”

“…Lady Dustin!” Lady Waynwood puts a hand to her chest. Lady Dustin shrugs. “I actually ended up marrying Lord Dustin, of course. Willam put a babe in my belly shortly before Brandon died, then rode off with your Father and Robert Baratheon. Your father claimed he died as a deserter, and wouldn’t bring his bones back to the Barrowlands to bury him with honor. He named me Lady of the Barrowlands on behalf of my son, though. Dorren grew up only ever knowing his father as a traitor and a coward, not even worthy of a proper burial. And maybe that was true, but what did it matter? He was dead, my son lived, and deserved to believe good of his father, even if it were a lie. But oh no, honorable Ned Stark had to tell the world, no matter how much suffering it may have caused an innocent lad. Then, to restore the family honor, Dorren rode off with your brother and died during the Red Wedding.”

“I’m so sorry, my lady,” Sansa hangs her head.

“Don’t you be sorry for anything. You’re not responsible for the actions of the idiot men in our lives. You’re barely a woman grown. I don’t have the same love for your family that the others claim, but I hold no grudge towards you.”

“At least you’re honest,” Sansa answers, “Their love didn’t do me any good when Ramsay still lived. And I’m sure now this union is testing their affection as well.”

“Many understand why it’s happening, Your Grace,” Lady Waynwood assures her, taking a brush to her hair. Her touch is that of a mother, and for a second Sansa almost expects to see Lady Catelyn’s reflection behind her in the mirror.

“And many more see me as corrupted by Cersei Lannister, sleeping with my brother and doing whatever it takes to be a queen,” Sansa answers, “A woman who wed Tyrion Lannister and Ramsay Bolton to get what she wanted.”
“If they had any sense, they’d have realized that if that’s all you were, you’d have just goaded Ramsay into crowning himself. It wouldn’t have been hard. And it’s their own fault for crowning that bastard brother of yours instead of the trueborn daughter of Winterfell. Nevertheless, it’ll pass. They’ve all officially signed their names to this, and you Starks are still popular. You win the Dawn and keep the Lannisters away for good, all will be forgiven. You don’t, and we’ll all be dead anyways.”

“For pity’s sake, Lady Dustin!” Anya complains.

“She says this for my sake,” Sansa interjects. She looks at Lady Waynwood. “You’re so kind, but be honest, you are not put off by this arrangement at all? You don’t have doubts? Lady Waynwood, you’ve seen me lie before. I’ve lied right to your face, then pretended to cry into your shoulder. I am truly sorry for that, but we both know what I am capable of.”

“You were under duress, controlled by that other monster!” Lady Waynwood says, “And nearly all of what you said was true.”

“Yes. But that’s why I deceived everyone so well. And I knew it.”

“It was a matter of life or death. And this may be as well, and not just for you, child. We all have to do questionable things to survive. Just because you were good at it doesn’t mean a thing. I’m old enough to know better.”

“I thank you for being so understanding.” Sansa sighs. “And I apologize for making you two witness my disgrace, but I wanted as many women as possible, and…”

“…Not another word. When he arrives, try to forget we’re here.”

Almost as if on cue, there’s a knock at the door. Sansa’s heart seems to freeze, and she jumps from her seat, nearly knocking Lady Waynwood over.

“Enter!”

Lord Blackwood is an older, thin, sharp-eyed man with a dignified manner. He acts almost businesslike as he enters, in contrast to his anxious king.

Jon’s doublet is gone, leaving him in his trousers and tunic. His eyes fall upon Sansa, but he quickly looks away again. She suddenly feels naked.

The others address each other formally, Lady Barbrey rising to her feet.

Jon clears his throat. “My Lord, my ladies, if you please, may I have a moment alone with the queen before we… begin?”

None of them hesitate to leave..

Jon and Sansa stand apart silently. Jon keeps his eyes on the ground, Sansa looks at him. She silently admonishes herself for noticing the area of his chest that the open laces of his tunic reveal.

“Did you know that our Uncle Brandon seduced Lady Dustin?!” She suddenly says, rather wildly, “He promised to marry her!”

Jon looks at her again. “I…”

“It’s one of the reasons she never liked our family. That, and Father didn’t bring her husband’s bones
back when he died. She says she doesn’t resent me for it, but I’m not so sure about you. I don’t think she likes men any more. I don’t blame her.”

What is wrong with me?! She’s right outside the door!

“That’s… I suppose I don’t blame her, either.”

“She doesn’t blame us for this. And Lady Waynwood doesn’t either. She forgives me for lying to her about Aunt Lysa. They’re both kind, in their own ways. Lady Waynwood brushed my hair. Is Lord Blackwood kind?”

Jon goes red. “I… Yes, he seems very kind.”

This is easily the most awkward conversation she’s ever had. She feels like she’s talking to a stranger. But she can’t stop herself.

“I was wondering, will they need to witness the whole act? Will they have seen everything they need once you’re inside me? Or will they need to see you spill? They may need to be here the whole time, so they know it’s possible for us to have children.”

He gapes at her, eyes wide. Sansa wants to gape at herself. She also wants to sink into the floor. Or die. Or gape at herself, die, then sink into the floor.

“Is there something you need me to do? I’m no maid, but I imagine you won’t go about this like he did.” She doesn’t need to specify who she means. “I doubt you enjoy inflicting things on people. And for this to work, you at least need to… not hate every minute of it. At least, not completely. I know it’ll be— difficult.” She almost said hard, but thought better of it.

Jon suddenly marches toward her, and for a wild second, she thinks he’s going to kiss her and throw her onto the bed and ravish her. But instead, he presses his forehead to hers, closes his eyes, and takes her hands.

“Say the word,” he murmurs, “Say the word and we can end this. It’s not too late.”

“You say the word.”

His eyes open. “Pardon?”

Sansa puts her hands on her hips. “You want to end this. That’s why you’re asking me to, right? But you’re not putting that burden on me, Jon Snow. I’m ready to do my duty. I’ve suffered worse than this. So if you aren’t willing, you’re the one who has to stop this.”

“Are you implying that I’m not as dutiful as you are?” Jon appears affronted.

“I’m saying you may not be. And that’s fine. You don’t have to do this, Jon. I won’t make you do anything.”

“No one’s making me do anything! I’m doing this for us, for the North, for the family. And I’m perfectly willing and ready to do so! I just don’t want to make you do anything!”

“I’m just as willing in all of this as you are, Jon. And I know the difference better than anyone!”

“I just want to make sure!”

“And I want to get this over with!”
“Well, so do I!”

“She pulls away and marches to the bed, pulling back the sheer curtains, and moving under the furs. “I’m not getting naked.”

“I don’t want you to! I’ll just lift your shift when we’re… doing this.”

“Good. And I’ll try not to call you ‘Loras’ or ‘Sandor’.”

“Who?”

She goes red. “Never you mind. Try not to call me ‘Ygritte’.”

“I wouldn’t!”

“Good.”

He stares at her through the curtains for a second. “You… You know that we can’t have the furs while they’re here, right?”

“She yanks them off in frustration. “Fine.”

“You’re… you’re acting strangely.”

“I wonder why. Just… Just call them in, please. Let’s do this.”

“Um…”

“What?”

“There… There actually is something you may need to do. To… prepare.”

She sits up. “What?”

“Well, perhaps I’m wrong, but… well, are your parts… wet?”

“Her eyes widen. “Are you asking me if I’ve pissed myself?”

“No! But…” He groans and alarms her by pulling back the curtains, then sitting at the edge of the bed. “You know I’ve only ever been with Ygritte, right?”

“‘Yes.”

“Well, whenever we were… together… her parts were always wet. Slick. Not like she made water, but something else. It’s something that happens to women when they’re… ready. Properly ready. It makes the act more comfortable.”

“I don’t think I was ever slick before. But then, it was never comfortable.”

“It hurts otherwise, I think. But the slicker you are, the… better… you’ll feel. It’s how to tell how… ready… a woman is.”

Now that she thinks of it, she has heard references to wet parts in a bawdy song or two. She goes red.

“I just don’t want to hurt you!” Jon insists quickly.
Sansa looks between her legs. “How do I… ready myself?”

“Ygritte was always ready when I was. But I know it can happen through touching.”

“Do you have to touch me?”

He looks stricken. “You can try yourself, if you wish.”

She goes red. “Alright, but you can’t look.”

He pauses. “Really?”

“Oh, is that a problem?”

“I don’t want to look! It’s just…” He gives a strangled laugh. “… It just seems a silly thing to insist upon, given what we’re about to do.”

Her eyes narrow. “If.. If you must know, my parts are never exactly dry.”

He makes a choking noise. “Maybe, but they have to be… slicker. For… for the movement.”

Sansa nods. “Alright. But don’t look.”

He turns away. And just as she’s about to touch herself, there’s a knock on the door.

“Pardon, Your Grace, but is everything alright?”

“FINE!” They both shout.

“Just give us a little more time!” Jon barks.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Sansa closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. And her hand goes between her legs.

It’s not like she’s never touched this area of her body, but never like this. It was only ever to wash, or inspect herself, or because she was in pain. There were times, though, that she did feel a strange urge to do so. When she was alone, was thinking of handsome men, and felt warm all over. Come to think of it, she always seemed to find her smallclothes wet when this happened.

She tries to think of Ser Loras, poor Ser Loras, who was so beautiful. She might have married him, and been Lady of Highgarden. She might have even birthed his children, named them after her lost brothers and parents. But that never would have happened, not really. She thinks of Loras in the yard, when he removed his practice armor, and his sweat-soaked tunic stuck to his chest…

But for some reason, it doesn’t make her feel as good. Perhaps because it’s difficult to think of Loras without thinking about Margaery, and the horrible things that happened to them and their whole family.

She tries to think of Sandor, the Hound, instead. His breath against her cheek, his angry eyes, the way he loomed over her… This is a little better, but it also scares her a little.

What Lady Barbrey said occurs to her, about Roose’s poor first son, Domeric. She might have been his wife, and he was gentle and good and accomplished. She tries to imagine what he might look like. Nothing like Ramsay. She imagines him tall, and dark, with muscles, with high cheekbones and dark, kind eyes, a sweet, rare smile, full lips, thick, dark curls…
She feels warmer, and she feel wet, but she realizes with a start who the person in her head actually is. Her eyes pop open, she snatches her hand away, then yelps.

At this, Jon turns, face red. “Are you---?”

“I’m done,” she tells him. Seven Hells, she was supposed to have ended this!

None of the three witnesses will look either of them in the eye when they enter. Sansa is thankful for that.

The curtains are sheer, but with small viewing gaps for clearer sight. Sansa stares determinedly at her feet.

Then Jon stands and begins removing his clothing.

She expected him to keep his tunic on, but he doesn’t. He gets as naked as his Name Day. Sansa tries not to look at his male parts, but her eyes go to his chest, which summon more confusion, then his stomach, then his arms, then, worst of all, his face. She looks away from him entirely, ashamed of herself. She feels every bit as naked as he is. More so.

It’s like her skin has been stripped away as well, and they can see what’s inside her. Every shameful feeling. When it’s like this, it doesn’t just stay in her head, it flows through every inch of her.

He takes her hand. She looks at their knuckles, then, reluctantly, into his eyes. He leans in, and she expects him to kiss her. But instead, he whispers.

“Just forget that they’re here, alright? Close your eyes when you’re ready.”

She nods and takes a deep breath. And another. And another. Then she closes her eyes.

She feels his weight shift, she feels him move atop her, his breath on her neck.

Her eyes pop open and she pushes him away.

“No, no, I can’t!” She cries. “Not like this, please!”

He practically leaps off of her. She hears Lady Dustin groan.

“GET OUT!” Jon barks. Sansa sits up.

“No!” She says quickly. The witnesses freeze, reluctantly.

“We have to do this, but… Not…” She swallows and glances at Jon. “Get on your back?”

Jon looks surprised. “You know---?”

She holds up a hand. “I feel like I’m being drowned.”

“Very well.”

He lies back, clearly stunned, but just as clearly aroused. Sansa decides to be brazen. How else to handle this? There is no privacy to be had here. She must face down humiliation, shame, make the insistent audience afraid.

So she looks straight at them, gets on her knees, and hikes her shift up to the place just below her backside.
“There’s no room to hide, can we agree?” She asks, pulling the skirt around tight. “No question of what’s going to happen here.”

All three nod, shocked. Even Lady Barbrey. Sansa clears her throat, then straddles her husband.

“Ready?” She asks.

He nods.

She lowers hers hips and engulfs him.

It’s not so bad. She keeps her eyes on his face, so she doesn’t forget who is inside her. His hands go to her hips to help her balance. She plants her hands on his chest.

After a while, she does close her eyes. There are moans. But she is still ever-conscious of the eyes on her. On them. She wants to face this with him, but reaching out terrifies her.

At long last, Jon squeezes her hips tighter and halts his movements. His release is like magma in a field of fire.

Sansa pulls herself off and looks over at the witnesses as haughtily as she can. “Satisfied?”

They don’t speak, they nod. And quickly file out.

Silence engulfs the room while she burrows under the covers, trying not to look at a single, sculpted, naked inch of her husband.

It takes a while for him to break it. “I’m not sure how to put this, but you… handled that brilliantly.”

“I do try. I must admit, I’m impressed with your approach to nudity.”

“When you’ve spent years sharing a bath in the freezing cold with a bunch of other men, many of whom hate you, nakedness no longer bothers you.”

“You weren’t coupling, though.”

“Ygritte and I were part of a raiding party. We slept beneath the stars, amidst a number of other Free Folk. There wasn’t much privacy. I was worried about you.”

“I thank you for that.”

“You shouldn’t. You should expect it.” He reaches out and touches her shoulder, compelling her to look at him. He smiles. “I suppose I needn’t have worried too much. I haven’t seen you like that since the war. So… defiant.”

“How else is one to respond to a challenge? My skin has turned from porcelain, to ivory, to steel.”

“Indeed.” He leans over and kisses her cheek.

For a moment, she forgets all her troubles and confusion. And it’s like they’re sitting by the fire again, sharing a drink.

He gets under the covers as well and sighs. “Things can go back to normal now, at least. Thank the gods.”

Her stomach flip-flops. “Normal? I’m not sure I know what that means for us.”
He shrugs. “Granted, our lives are… unique.”

“And ever-changing. Robert Baratheon was only six years ago. We haven’t even had time to establish our own standards. And things will continue to change.”

“Good point. But we won’t have to do this again.”

She eyes him carefully. She knows he says this for both their benefits, but she watched him when they coupled. He seemed to enjoy himself, and he said himself that nudity and even coupling in front of others doesn’t bother him too much. But she can’t be sure exactly what this was like for him. Was he just putting on a brave face? Was it a complete ordeal?

Her thoughts are flooded with conflict. She doesn’t even want to pretend to be pleased by his statement. It might make him think he hurt her in some way.

“...Are you sure you’re alright?” Jon asks her.

“No. But there’s nothing you can do about it if I’m not. What about you?”

“The same, I think.” Jon clears his throat. “I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable at the banquet, though.”

“At the banquet?”

“With Lord Cerwyn.” Jon runs his hands through his hair. “I don’t want to pressure you or anything, but…”

“...I’m already pressured,” she responds, “Regardless of what you do. And I’m aware that we’re better off with a child sooner, rather than later. And Lord Cerwyn was very nice. I understand, I do.”

“I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you,” he tells her, “Given everything you suffered. But you must know, I want nothing more than for you to be happy.”

“I know, Jon.” She smiles at him. “You’re a good man. But, you know, maybe---” But she stops enough.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Saying it would probably leave all of the wrong impressions.

“No, really, what?”

She groans. “Fine. Maybe tonight was enough.”

Sansa’s eyes are fixed on him, trying to decipher his reaction. He looks surprised, to say the least.

“I suppose that’s a possibility. But, you know, if not, it’s fine. The Stark line is meant to lie with you anyways. You mustn’t think----”

“---I know, Jon!” She snaps, not sure why she’s suddenly so irritable, “You don’t have to keep reminding me. I trust you! But did you ever think that such a thing might actually be easier for me?”

He freezes. “How?”

Sansa groans again. “Think about it. Even if you claim my children, there will still be suspicions. A bastard, claimed or not, will always be less safe than a trueborn one. And we’d have an heir as soon
as possible, meaning I won’t have to feel pressured for too long. So, if I take a lover, I can do so on
my own schedule alone, and not based on the needs of the realm. And a child, especially a son,
makes us both more secure. Especially if that child has your Stark coloring.”

“I suppose you’re right.” He gazes vaguely at one of the bedposts. “But… Joffrey…”

“Myrcella and Tommen were perfectly fine. Cersei is just as mad as her son was, and her parents
weren’t siblings. Monsters result from all manner of couples. The Targaryens wed brother and sister
for generations, and had some great heirs. I’m not saying the situation would be ideal. But it
wouldn’t guarantee another Joffrey, either.”

Jon turns his eyes to the canopy. “It would---” But he stops himself.

“What?” She asks.

“Nothing.”

“I told you, Jon. What were you going to say?”

He groans. “It would be so much easier if we weren’t siblings.”

There it is. She’s just surprised he’s the one who said it. She lies back and stares at the canopy
herself. “Yes.”

Silence again. Silence until dawn. And when they wake, they find themselves entangled in one
another, his head in her neck, her arms around him. They pull apart at once, and the room seems
colder. They hurry to dress.

He leaves the room first, with just an awkward kiss on the cheek. She weeps.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

They try to resume the relationship they had before the wedding, but it’s different, no matter how
much they pretend otherwise. It hangs over their every meeting.

But he’s determined, and they spend most of their days together, before adjourning for empty beds. It
never bothered Jon before. It does now.

They spend so much time together that when Sansa doesn’t arrive for their evening meeting in his
solar, it prompts him to investigate. It’s unlike her to be late or absent for anything without at least
sending a message.

Jon finds her in her bedchamber, alone, sobbing into her pillow. He stifles his panic, and hurries to
her side.

“Sweet girl, what is it?”

She turns her head so her red, leaking eyes meet his. “My blood came.”

Jon’s stomach sinks. It’s been two moons since their wedding. Sansa hasn’t shown any interest in
pursuing a lover since. She hasn’t said a word. He had no idea she was counting on this. Sansa turns
back to her pillow.
Is it because she wants a child, or because she never wanted to have to share a man’s bed again? Jon isn’t sure. But he’s afraid for her. And he’s angry on her behalf.

And, he realizes, he’s disappointed too. Despite their brief exchange that night, he never expected, counted on, or considered the possibility that she might conceive since. But for some reason, knowing now she hasn’t upsets him. An opportunity he didn’t even realize he wanted is suddenly gone.

Jon runs his hand through her hair. How he loves her hair. “I’m so sorry, Sweetling. Truly, I am.”

She doesn’t answer him, she just cries. But it’s enough. He stays with her all night.

The morning comes, and he’s in a sour mood with everyone but her. He wants to scream at everyone for putting the two of them in this position. He wants to rail against the gods for making them siblings. He wants the world they’re supposed to save to just fuck off for a while.

He just wants to hold her.

The day only make things worse. At the morning council meeting, they’re presented with a letter bearing the Targaryen seal. The letter claims to be from Queen Daenerys, but Sansa recognizes it as Tyrion’s hand.

She has taken King’s Landing, and by extension, all of Westeros. The war of the queens is over. The good news is that she makes no reference to the union between Tyrion and Sansa. The bad news is that she summons ‘The Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North’ to come south to parlay and swear fealty now that the true ruler has arrived ‘at last’ and Westeros is ‘unified again.’ It’s stressed that all must come at once to prove their loyalty and good intentions as soon as possible.

They also get reports of the carnage. Half of the city burned. Cersei and her supporters died screaming. Daenerys has already arranged for a squadron of men to head to the Riverland borders.

And, from the north, there are reports of the White Walkers drawing closer.

Jon cradles his brow. “I have to go. I must parlay with her.”

Chapter End Notes

I know Bran is there, and Bran knows the truth, btw.
Secrets

Chapter Summary

Bran brings a secret to Jon. Sansa discovers a secret about Arya.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Hannah for her beta-work!

Jon:

“You’d leave? Now?!” Sansa exclaims. He hates the pain in her voice. Sort of. Seemingly contradictory feelings blossom within him. Her horror at them being separated comforts him as much as it agonizes him.

His hand moves to take hers and he looks into her eyes. “You know I must. There can be no more delay. She’s already crossed the Red Waste and the Narrow Sea. There is nothing stopping her from flying here on one of her dragons. I have to at least parlay with her. Especially with the White Walkers coming. And you need to stay here.”

“Starks never do well in King’s Landing. She’s the daughter of Aerys the Mad! What if she makes you into another Brandon?”

“Then she’ll end up just like her father. She wouldn’t dare.”

There’s argument among the council. Jon hates every moment of it. He hates himself for leaving her now. But by the time they disperse, it’s agreed that he must set off south in no more than a week’s time.

He’s mulling over this in his solar when Bran, of all people, arrives, carried in by one of his handlers, who is quickly dismissed once a seat is taken.

Jon is struck by his brother’s expression. He’s never seen him so miserable, and he’s seen Bran in a coma.

The lad can barely look him in the eye. There’s silence, but Jon has only so much time. “What’s wrong, Bran?”

The young man swallows. “Jon, I’ve been the most selfish, idiotic arse.”

“What are you talking about?” Bran is one of the best people he knows.

“Something… Something I’ve kept from you. That I’ve been keeping from you since I returned to Winterfell.”

Jon leans forward. “Something from a vision?”
Bran nods. Jon feels his heart race. Bran sees things about their enemies. “About the White Walkers?!”

Bran looks at his lap. “No. About you.”

That’s unexpected. “Something about me? What?”

And the lad tells him.

By the time he finishes, Jon is leaning back in his chair, clutching the armrests, white-knuckled. Where is he? Because this can’t be the same world he was born into.

For a short while, all he can hear is a soft hum. And eventually, Bran’s voice returns, choked with tears.

“... I’m so sorry, Jon. I should have told you the moment I returned. There are so many times I should have done it. I was so afraid of losing you, and I just… I don’t know. I’ve been so mixed up since I lost Summer… I’m so sorry, so sorry---”

“---Just stop it!” Jon realizes he’s on his feet, towering over his brother. No, not his brother. “I don’t want to hear about how sorry you are! How scared you’ve been! We’re all scared, Bran! But we’re supposed to be able to have one another again, trust each other, now that we’re here again! And all this time, you’ve been lying to me! You and Father and who knows who else! Who else knows?!”

“Howland Reed. He was with Father at the Tower of Joy.”

Jon shuts his eyes. “What about his daughter? Your friend, Meera?”

“I didn’t tell her. She may know, I’m not sure what her father has told her.”

“And when were you planning to tell me, exactly? For fuck’s sake, Bran, you… you…”

Jon covers his mouth and tries to recover some composure. Then points toward his window. “Right now, as we speak, there is a woman who has conquered Westeros with three bloody dragons, who wants us to bend the knee, and you’re only telling me now that she’s my aunt?! She was at war with Cersei Lannister, for fuck’s sake! I’m due to ride to meet with her in seven days! We have monsters marching straight towards us! The lords of the North declared me king over your sister! I’m married to Sansa! You let me and your own sister wed with everyone believing we’re siblings! You let us---”

He paces, barely able to keep his head straight. “My whole life, I’ve been burdened with being a bastard. A human dishonor. The canker on the otherwise happy family of the man I idolized! And you’ve known, all this time... do you have any idea what you’ve put us through?”

“... Us?”

“Yes, Bran, us. My wife thinks she wedded and bedded her brother. I, her husband, thought I’d wedded and bedded my sister. Your other sister thinks her brother and sister are incestuous. And... who knows what else! And you knew otherwise! Gods! If you’d told me... I could have just abdicated in Sansa’s favor and made an alliance with Daenerys by now! Do you realize how much suffering may have been avoided if you’d been honest?!”

Something flares within Bran’s eyes. “And how much suffering might have been avoided if Sansa told you about the Vale forces?”

Jon freezes, utterly outraged. “She wasn’t even sure they were coming! And don’t you dare compare
these two things! Sansa fought a war with me!”

Just as quickly as it appeared, the flame seems to go out, and Bran shrinks back. “I was afraid if you knew that you’d leave!”

Jon stares at him, baffled. He grits his teeth.

Jon’s blood runs cold. “You honestly think so little of me to believe that I’d abandon you all because of a name?! What did you expect would happen if you were honest? That I’d… what? March south and claim the Iron Throne?”

“Claim the throne, die trying, marry Daenerys…”

Jon gapes. “And you preferred that I marry our sister instead?”

“If it kept us together!”

The room seems to shake. There are tears in Bran’s eyes.

Jon tries to lower his voice. “If you thought I could replace Robb—–”

“—It has nothing to do with that! I just wanted to keep you here! You! Yes, I already had one brother march south and never return! And a mother! And a Father! And my other brother! At least I got to say good-bye to Robb and Rickon! And you are all I have left!”

“That isn’t true! Are your sisters worth nothing to you?!”

“They’re why it’s even more important! Arya and Sansa need you too! I made Rickon go to the Umbers. I made him part from me. If I hadn’t…” Bran’s shoulders shake. Jon feels his heart break.

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is. Don’t try to tell me it isn’t. I was supposed to protect him… From the beginning, he begged everyone not to go. I was all he had left, and I left him. And he’s dead. I hear him beg me, every night, not to leave him. I hear him cry out for everyone to return home. I hear him weep over everyone leaving. And I…. I can’t let it happen again, Jon. I can’t let us be separated. Not again. Not when we’re finally back again, after everything. And I can’t lose another brother. I don’t care what it takes. We have to stay together.”

Jon stares. He wants to weep himself. But somehow, he can’t.

“I would never want to leave Winterfell, or any of you.”

Bran looks up at him again. “Yeah, but it’s not a matter of want, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

The lad shakes his head. “Even if you didn’t want to leave, what if you were forced out? All three kingdoms need you and Sansa, but if the lords knew…”

Jon steps back. Sometimes, he forgets that Bran is still a lad, in so many ways. “You never needed to tell the lords! Just us!”

Jon sits again, clutching his brow. “Bran, I don’t care what my name is, I’ll always be your brother. I’ll always be a Stark.”
“Being a Targaryen as well still changes everything. What if Daenerys wanted to marry you? Or if the lords wanted you out for being a Targaryen? You’d do it if it would keep the North safe.” Bran shakes his head again.

“Not anymore, obviously.” There’s a pregnant pause. It’s weighed down by the obvious futility of his brother’s heartbroken efforts. The undeniable fact. “Bran, there was always going to be some point where I had to go south. As a Stark or a Targaryen. We couldn’t ignore things beyond our borders forever, especially with winter here and our enemies approaching. But it doesn’t mean I would stay there.”

The way Bran closes his eyes makes Jon suspect that some part of him knew this. “Robb, Mother, and Father thought they’d be back, too. I didn’t fight my way back to Winterfell just to feed my last brother to the dragons. Or let you get involved in any more...” He trails off.

“...More what?”

“Magic.” Bran cringes. “Magic destroys people, Jon. It’s bad enough that I’m a freak---”

“---You’re not---!”

The lad’s fire returns. He glares at Jon defiantly, and bellows.

“I AM! AND THAT IS BAD ENOUGH! YOU’RE SURROUNDED WITH ENOUGH OF THIS AWFUL NONSENSE WITHOUT GETTING DRAGONS INVOLVED AS WELL!”

Jon tries to calm himself, his heart aching. He hates the look on Bran’s face. His little brother looks disgusted with himself, fearful. But Jon’s sympathy and concern can’t quell his anger and resentment. It’s so hard to keep his thoughts in check. Something occurs to him, though.

“Why now?”

“What?”

“Why now? Why tell me now?”

“You’re going South.” Bran swallows bitterly. “There’s no point anymore.”

Jon grits his teeth. That’s not good enough. *He might have at least told us when I married Sansa. Did he think that wouldn’t be enough to ‘keep me here’?*

His heart breaks for his brother. But there’s no getting around the consequences of his actions. Bran isn’t the only one whom Jon loves. And there are so many he loves who are and have been hurt by this.

“Do you know how I spent last night?”

Bran hesitates. “How?”

“Comforting your sister as she cried. Do you know why she wept?”

“Why?”

“Because she didn’t conceive on our wedding night. We haven’t shared a bed since then, you see. And she...” Jon closes his eyes again. “She hoped it would be enough. Because we need an heir, because she feels obligated to provide one, because she doesn’t want to have to seek out a bedmate, because she wants a child, because she doesn’t want to have to share her bed ever again after
everything she’s suffered… I’m not sure. But if we knew…”

Another pause as Jon tries to spit out the words. “If we knew, we might have had so many more chances! Having a child would allow her to be truly free. But she doesn’t have that. She’s bound by the obligation to get pregnant and deliver. She might have a babe in her belly now, if we hadn’t thought we were…”

He can’t even say it anymore.

There’s another long silence.

“You said you’d always be my brother, Jon. How does that work if Sansa’s not your sister?”

Jon wants to scream. “I married her, remember?”

“But if it doesn’t change how you feel, if you planned on not living as husband and wife, then why should this change that?”

Why indeed? Jon knows the answer, but he doesn’t feel like discussing this with Bran. “You know what? That’s none of your business. That is between Sansa and I.”

“She’s my sister!”

“She’s a grown woman, and my wife and queen. I am your king. You blessed our marriage. And you are a boy. From the moment we said those vows, what’s between us stays between us and whomever we prefer to share with. And quite frankly, Bran, I’m not in the mood to share with you right now.”

Bran bows his head. “Of course.”

“Also,” Jon says, getting to his feet again, “I’m concerned that if I spend another moment in your presence right now, I won’t be able to calm down. And when I leave for King’s Landing, I’d rather not be so consumed with fury. So please call your handler and leave this room.”

Bran looks crushed. But he obeys. Just before he vanishes, though, Jon calls to him.

“Yes?”

Part of Jon’s mind shouts at him to say something kinder, more comforting, something brotherly. He understands Bran’s guilt, the part about Rickon, it is still painful to think about and he understands. But instead, he utters the words “You’re not to tell anyone else. I will handle my own identity from now on.”

His little brother nods and leaves. Jon sits by the fire and broods for a while. He’s angry with himself for being so harsh with Bran. What kind of man could scorn a lad in such pain? But he… He couldn’t help it. There’s so much that this revelation comes with. So much danger. So much pain to the other people he cares for. Pain that might have been avoided. It’s not just answers, but yet more questions, many of them haunting. He’s a Targaryen.

Growing up, he was raised to think of House Targaryen as once-great kings who eventually deteriorated into a succession of mad monsters. Of Aerys II --- his grandfather, he realizes with a shudder--- as a violent, fire-obsessed, perverse murderer who would have killed everyone in Westeros if he could. Of Rhaegar Targaryen --- his father ---- as a similarly mad raper who abducted the innocent Lyanna Stark and more or less raped her to death. She died birthing me.
What more did he not know? Eddard Stark lied to him— lied to everyone— his whole life. What more lies was he fed? What really happened between his parents? And why?

He’d always taken it for granted that Rhaegar was simply a monster, and that’s why he took Lyanna. If so… He’s the product of two generations of violent lunatics. What does that mean for him? He’s the child of rape as well. The product of a Targaryen violating a daughter of House Stark. His father may have been a silver-haired Ramsay, for all he knows. They said Aerys The Mad subjected people to sadistic tortures, after all.

And if Rhaegar wasn’t a monster--- which Jon still doubts. His mother still would only have been about fifteen/sixteen and the man was married with two children already--- what does that mean?

What does any of this mean now? How is he supposed to handle this? Hide his true identity away for the rest of his life and pretend to indulge in incest? Tell the truth and risk Daenerys’s wrath and the rejection of his vassals? If half the intel they’ve received from the South is true, his--- his aunt--- does not exactly tolerate rivals.

And he will be a rival, just as he’s been to Sansa. He’s male, and he’s Rhaegar’s son. Even if he’s still a bastard (also uncertain. Targaryens had taken multiple wives in the past), he could come ahead of her in the succession. The Targaryens have a particularly troublesome history with bastards.

But what of the dragons? Bran may seem opposed to him going near them, but what if they’re the deciding factor in defeating the Others? What if using them will save thousands, possibly millions of lives? If Jon has Valyrian blood, he may be able to ride one of them and save them all. Daenerys is one woman with three dragons. Surely two riders would be more effective than one? What if he must embrace and expose his heritage to save them all?

What if it’s that very heritage that destroys them?

_I have a claim to the Iron Throne._ Jon knows one thing: he doesn’t want it. Even as a boy, he dreamed of being Lord of Winterfell or a brave knight. But the southern throne? No. Even if he had, recent history would be enough to deter him. He doesn’t want that thing. He wants home and peace and family and safety. But regardless of his wishes, he knows it could end up mattering little. Word gets out, and ambitious lords who don’t want Daenerys could easily start up factions in his name, regardless of his own feelings and actions. Jon Targaryen will be a threat to Daenerys Stormborn whether he wants to be or not. He doubts his aunt has gotten this far without being able to figure that out.

It takes him over an hour to realize he can’t grasp any of this alone.

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Sansa:

The basement baths of Winterfell are the result of their hot springs, the same water that is pumped through the walls to keep the castle warm. While the tubs are spacious and the water hot, Sansa prefers to take her baths in a tub in her chambers. There’s more privacy, and the bath chambers are incredibly humid.

But today, she descends the stairs to the bath houses below, drying cloths and soap in hand. Arya is down there, taking her daily dip after training. Sansa isn’t even sure this is a good idea, though.

After Jon left, Sansa couldn’t get comfortable. The blood between her legs is a mark of failure, a promise of pain and future unpleasantness.
Looking at it, she can’t help but wonder if she’s even capable of doing her duty, ever. She was with Ramsay for months. He was on her every night. And she didn’t conceive. At least, as far as she knows.

That’s even more frightening. She might have conceived and miscarried. He’d been so rough with her, it was certainly possible. And if so, what if that rendered her permanently infertile? The Septa said nothing, but still…

Sansa found herself seeking out her sister.

With Bran crippled and Rickon gone, the only chance for the bloodline to continue aside from her and Jon is Arya. If Sansa can’t have children, it’ll be Arya’s duty.

As reluctant as she is to put that burden on her sister, there’s few options available to her. Arya is sixteen, surely flowered by now. Almost fully grown.

Sansa knows better than to urge Arya into a marriage at this point. Her sister only just got home, clearly still struggles, and while the two have reconciled, their relationship still isn’t perfect. The last thing she wants to do is hurt her sister.

But she has a duty to the North.

So she visited her sister’s chambers before Arya set out for the day, and tried to broach the subject. Not of marriage, of course. But of her.

“Are you well?” She asks, as her sister changes into practice clothing, back to her. “You’re healthy?”

“Of course,” Arya replies, pulling on a tunic and stuffing it into her trousers. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I have no idea, but I worry about you.”

Sansa does, too. Constantly. There’s so much Arya refuses to talk about regarding her time away. Her eyes, severely haunted, say much, but not enough for Sansa to have any idea how to help her little sister. She can do very little to help when she doesn’t even know what truly happened. Arya hadn’t even disclosed much to Jon, which was doubly troubling.

The queen sees so much pain in her sister. But her attempts to understand are rebuffed, and she’s afraid to persist. Jon has promised to get through to her, but has made little progress.

Arya, despite clearly traveling thousands of miles to get back to them, has been… withdrawn. She’s barely even reacted to the marriage, for instance. She spends all her waking hours training, hunting, riding. Overall, she’s quiet, fairly unresponsive to attempts at interaction.

Arya starts pulling on a jerkin, still facing her window. “Why? I survived for years on my own. I’m fine.”

A lie. But this is typical of her sister these days. She’s always defensive.

“No one is doubting that, Arya, but you’re not on your own anymore. And I don’t just want you to ‘survive’, I want you to live.”

“You sound ridiculous.”

Between the bitter disappoint, Jon’s upcoming departure, and her cramps, Sansa can no longer hold her patience. “Arya Stark, I am the Head of this family and your queen, and I am trying to speak to
you! At least show me the respect of facing me while you reject my attempts to be a sister!"

Arya freezes and turns, albeit slowly. Her eyes look darker than usual. It could be the rings under them; she clearly has not slept.

“What do you want from me, exactly?”

“I want you to give us another chance. I know I wasn’t the best sister, but we’re together again. I miss you. I worry about you. I love you. Please, Arya, talk to me.”

“I love you too,” she says quickly, “I don’t hate you, if that’s what you think, either. I just don’t feel like talking. I came back here to be home again, not to revisit what I left behind. You have enough troubles without worrying about me. I’m fine. Stop asking me.”

Sansa rises from her chair, aghast. Asking if someone is well is hardly even prying. It’s basic courtesy. Why should it bother her so?

But she backs away. “You’d… You’d tell me if you weren’t well, wouldn’t you?”

“Sure.”

“Promise me, Arya.”

“You’re being absurd!”

“Promise me!”

“Fine! Now, would you let me get to the yards?” She rushes out, past her sister, and shuts the door.

All back together, Sansa thinks as she heads towards the bathing chamber, And I still seem to be losing them.

She should make more of an effort, hence her presence here. Perhaps being naked and vulnerable with Arya will make her sister more open. And Sansa suspects she could use some comfort. Jon has retreated to his chambers, and she honestly can’t stand that he’s leaving. Bran is in the godswood. And the Stark sisters need each other.

She hears her sister humming to herself through one of the doors. Sansa knows the tune. It’s the song of the Forest Lass. The door is locked, but Sansa has the keys to every chamber in the castle. She strides in, humming along with her sister.

Arya yelps, sitting on the edge of the pool, naked as her Name Day, and jumps to her feet.

“It’s alright, it’s oh---” Then she sees it.

Her sister’s hands don’t jump to cover her breasts or her sex, but her lower stomach. But not quickly enough for Sansa not to see.

Arya’s lower belly, from her ribs to her pubis, is marked with ugly scars.

Lots of them. Heavy ones.

Sansa knows the difference between the shallow and heavy ones. Jon was killed, stabbed numerous times by his own men, by the Watch. She’s seen the marks. She’s seen all of Jon’s scars at this point, from scrapes to the very blows that briefly ended his life.
Perhaps, though---

Sansa drops everything and hurries to her sister. Arya backs away, but the older sister persists, taking her wrists. “Let me see---”

“No!” Arya struggles. “Stop it! I---”

“LET ME SEE, ARYA!” With a strength Sansa didn’t know she possessed, she restrains her sister. Perhaps Arya simply gives up. It certainly seems so. Tears fall from her brown eyes as her hands fall from her abdomen.

Yes, they’re deep. So deep that Sansa can’t quite fathom how her sister is still alive. She’s seen people die from less, even with a maester at hand. She runs her finger along the marks. Her sister had been stabbed as much as Jon had. Possibly even more.

“Who did this to you?!” Sansa demands. “Who was it?!!”

Arya won’t look at her. Sansa reluctantly takes her sister’s chin in hand and makes her.

“Look at me and TELL ME!”

“There’s nothing you can do---!”

“That’s what everyone said about Ramsay. Now tell me who did this!”

“She’s dead! I killed her!”

Arya pulls from her sister’s grasp, sobbing, clutching her stomach again. “Are you happy? I don’t even know what her name was. She was… I lived with her, and she gave up her name. She hated me. She did this, and later, I killed her. She was one of many, many people I’ve killed! She wasn’t the first, and she wasn’t the last! She was No One, and now she’s nothing!”

Sansa’s heart breaks. “You were defending yourself---”

Arya looks at her again, astonished. “That’s what you have to say? I know that! The only thing I regret is that I didn’t do it sooner! That I was stupid enough to let her get to me!”

“Arya---”

“That isn’t even the point! I killed plenty of people before, and after! Didn’t you wonder who massacred Walder Frey and all his sons by the time you got to the Riverlands?! I killed his sons and fed them to him! I was only eleven, trying to escape King’s Landing, when I stabbed a stableboy in his gut! He was my age! And I don’t care! I don’t! Nor should you! You should thank me for all the lives I’ve ended!”

Arya slumps her shoulders and looks at the ground. “What you should hate me for is all the life I can’t create anymore. For lying to you about it all this time. For leaving the entire North in danger. For failing you. For putting the entire future of our House on your shoulders. And not even telling you!”

Sansa steps back. Arya is two-thirds-right. There’s no way her womb survived this. Which meant that the only ones who could possibly continue their family line were her and Jon.

She’s also right that she’s done wrong by keeping this from them. That… That makes things so much worse. So much more desperate.
But she’s wrong about one thing. Sansa can’t manage to hate her sister right now. She can’t even be angry at her. Or, at least, she can’t process her anger. She’s too overwhelmed by horror, sympathy, and fury at the nameless person responsible.

Still, the desperation of this is sinking in. The consequences. The fear. One of their few insurances is gone. It was never there.

She bleeds between her legs. Her sister sobs and crumbles to the ground.

Sansa falls to her knees and pulls Arya to her. “I don’t hate you,” she whispers, “I can’t do that. You’re still my sister. I still love you.”

“You don’t understand,” Arya sobs, “I was so stupid! I spent all this time training, learning to protect myself! I knew I had made myself a target! I knew what she could do! But I just lounged about in the open, didn’t even pay attention, didn’t even think when she came close! I should have! I knew she was looking for me! And I just…”

“It’s not you fault, Arya, do you hear me? It is *not your fault*. Don’t you dare think it is. Please.”

“I should have told you! You and Jon!”

Sansa pauses at this. She takes a deep breath. “Yes.”

Because it’s true. If they’d known… She’s not sure. But she knows it would have changed things. The two of them went to the godswood believing that they might manage a purely political union, even still be brother and sister, that if they couldn’t manage together, there was another. But there wasn’t. There isn’t.

If she doesn’t have a child, House Stark dies with her. After everything, everything she’s survived, everything she’s done, everything she’s fought for, everything she’s accomplished. It could all be for nothing.

But Arya…

A particularly nasty cramp hits her. She’s also clutching her tummy now.

“Are you alright?” Her sister asks, sounding panicked.

“Fine,” Sansa says, “Just women’s troubles. I started bleeding last night.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Sansa swallows. “So am I. Arya… Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I didn’t want you to know that I failed you. That I’m useless. That you’re the only one who can do anything. It was already bad enough and you had to marry Jon and… I’m so sorry, Sansa.”

The queen bows her head. “Does anyone know?”

Arya shakes her head. “The only people who could know are dead. And I’ve been careful.”

“Jon must know. And perhaps Bran. But no one else. Can you… Can you deal with that?”

“Jon is going to hate me. I’ve betrayed him.”
“No, he will not. No more than I can.” Sansa takes a deep breath. “I… I don’t know how angry I am with you, Sister. I can’t know right now. But I’m far more angry at that Nobody, I’m so sad for you. I’m heartbroken. But I… Do you want to be the one to tell Jon?”

Arya hesitates, then nods. “Can you be with me when I do?”

She nods. “Of course. It doesn’t have to be right now. But it does have to happen before he leaves. You understand?”

The younger Stark sister nods. Sansa gives her a squeeze.

“Did you finish your bath?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, let’s get you dry and dressed then. And maybe you should take a sleeping draught and retire early.”

“Oh, yes. I’m tired. I’ve… I’ve not slept much.”

“I can tell. You look like a raccoon. Why do you think I’ve been such a busybody lately?” Sansa asks as they get to their feet.

Her sister laughs.

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Jon:

She’s by her bedchamber window, writing at her desk. The quill is put aside when he enters.

Before he can say a word, though, she speaks.

“I’m sorry for last night. And this morning. I was being silly.”

“No, no, you weren’t.” Jon takes a deep breath. “Sansa, Bran had another vision.”

She looks anxious. “Oh?”

“No now. Actually, it’s one he had months ago and chose not to tell us about until now. As it turns out, Father lied to everyone all those years. I’m not his bastard son. I’m the son of Lyanna and Rhaegar Targaryen. Lyanna was dying from childbirth when he found her in the Tower of Joy and she gave me to him to raise and protect from Robert. I’m a Targaryen, and not your half-brother at all. We’re cousins, Queen Daenerys is my aunt, and I may be the rightful heir to the Iron Throne.”

It all comes out like that. He just blurts it. And hearing it in his own voice, it’s actually quite comical. He starts laughing like a madman.

Sansa’s usually full lips are a tiny little line. Her face is colorless. “You’re jesting with me.”

“No!” Jon says, shaking his head, “That’s the mad thing, I’m not! It’s all true! Apparently Howland Reed knows. He was at the Tower, you know. And, possibly, his daughter, Meera, knows as well.”

Sansa sinks back into her desk chair, clutching her chest. And, hilariously, looks at him and asks, “Are you alright?”
Jon finds this amusing as well. “I may have to sit down, to be honest.”

Sansa gestures to her bed. Jon settles in and lies back against the pillows, kicking his boots off.

“I’m so angry with him,” Jon says.

“With Bran, or Father?”

“Both.”

“So am I. Not even just for your sake but for---”

“---Yours.”

“Mother’s, actually. At least, where Father is concerned. They were married all that time, and it hurt her so much. He could have told her eventually.”

Jon considers this. “Yes.”

“It would have been easier for you if she’d known as well, of course. She’d have probably been kinder to you.”

“Maybe. But she may have seen me as a danger regardless.”

“Maybe.” Sansa actually starts laughing. “Oh, Gods, what are you going to say to Daenerys?”

“I was hoping you’d help me figure that out.”

She adopts a fake, raspy, low voice. “‘Oh, hello, Nauntie. Oh, I’m sorry, let me explain. It turns out I’m really your older brother’s only surviving descendent! Isn’t that fine? I may have a stronger claim to your throne than you. I mean, I already call myself king, but it’s true, we’re family! Oh, you’re curious as to why I didn’t come to your aid when you were at war with Cersei Lannister if we’re related? Well, I know it’s hard to believe, but I only just found out about it from my cousin who has magical tree visions! And now I need you to come to my aid against the White Walkers and allow me and my other family to keep half of Westeros. So anyways, how has your life been?’”

Jon holds back his laughter long enough to gasp, “I do not sound like that!”

“You do, though!”

They both clutch their stomachs at this point. Sansa shakes as she walks to the empty side of the bed and lays on her side. Jon’s laughter diminishes. She’s so close now, as close as they were the night before.

But it’s different now. More consequences of this revelation occur to him. But he still chuckles. It’s mad. The world is mad. Perhaps, so are they.

He feels the maddest of all, or, at least, getting close to it.

For despite her sisterly teasing just a moment before, when she rests her weight into the mattress, something changes. At least, it does for him. She’s beside him, inches away, face split into a glorious grin.

They’ve been in the same bed so many times before. He’s even been inside of her. But somehow, this, this is truly different, though she continues to laugh. Jon searches her face for… something.
Does she recall what he said on their wedding night? About how much easier it would be if they weren’t siblings? He wonders if that’s true, now. If she hasn’t thought about it yet, will she? She seemed to agree with him that night. Is she questioning that as well?

Jon and Sansa thought they understood each other, better than anyone. And perhaps they did.

But what about now?

They keep laughing, much too long.
Union

Chapter Summary

Weary of guilt, confusion, and self-repression, the king and queen grant themselves some relief at last.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Hannah for beta-ing again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa:

Laughter is the opposite of appropriate behavior for them at the moment. It’s the last thing that makes sense. It would horrify anyone who could see them. It’s not right. Jon should be consumed with confusion right now, possibly crying into her lap as she comforts his tortured soul and shakes her head from her own bewilderment. Or he should be striking something with a fist or a practice blade as she watches, mind silently racing to figure out how to handle all the fallout. But they should be a tableau of confusion, fear, resentment, and self-doubt.

Chuckles don’t fit.

But they’ve done all of those other things before, often. Every so often, Jon will be hit again with the true yet unbelievable reality that he was dead and brought back to life by a child-murdering witch and need to work out his horror and confusion over this; sometimes with Sansa observing and ready to advise and comfort him once he’s completely shattered a dummy with his practice blade. Or Sansa will be randomly flashback to some abuse by Joffrey or Ramsay or Petyr or really anyone, and need to curl up somewhere private and have someone--- usually Jon--- remind her that it’s over and she’s home safe.

Jon Snow/Stark is not Jon Snow/Stark. He’s Jon Targaryen. Or Jon Snow/Targaryen? The answer to his origins somehow raises more questions. The complications of him being her half-brother turn into new complications of him being her cousin, on grounds both personal and political.

Perhaps they simply have no energy for tears or brooding left in them, and that laughter has been so restrained and unused for so long that it’s now spilling over. They’d also laughed when she told him winter has officially come, at last. News which promises death and hardship, and they giggled.

It’s all just so absurd, honestly. It truly is. Her humble, passive, dutiful brother, willing to couple with his sister for an audience out of his conviction that he needed to at least share his power, if not give it up altogether, has been the possible true heir to all of Westeros all this time.

And they can’t even be sure how strong his claim is!

Even upon discovering he’s not Ned Stark’s bastard--- one of the most definitive parts of his identity
his whole life--- he still maybe a bastard unfit to inherit. After years of wanting to know the truth of his mother, it brings yet more confusion and questions.

She feels so sorry for him.

It’s not even the “he may still be a bastard anyways” part that elicits the most pity from her. It’s what it may mean for literally everyone else. She knows Jon. He is a man now, fully dedicated to the duties and responsibilities towards others that he’s been entrusted with. The worst part for him is probably all the fallout of this that will affect the North, not his more personal concerns. Hell, he’s probably make things hurt more by trying to repress his personal issues with this so he might focus on protecting everyone else.

Jon doesn’t feel free to let himself be himself --- Whoever that is--- She thinks, wildly. And she understands. She understands that more than most, anyway.

Gods, he’s to set off to meet Daenerys in a week.

She pulls him into a hug, crushing his face into her neck. They both laugh together, and she can feel the rapid pace of his heartbeat against hers.

There’s this famous line, recited in many a legend and several songs of brave knights. It’s such a common place and cliche that the source of the quote has been lost to the centuries. But it always comes when a brave knight, on his way to slay a monster or an evil lord or storm a castle or help some villagers or go on any manner of valiant quest is warned of the danger that faces them. The flawless hero replaces, “Ha, I laugh in the face of danger!”

As a girl, not yet cynical about cliche or really anything, always felt thrilled by that line. As she became more worldly, the presence of that line, when not deconstructed later on in the narrative by the heroic speaker being crushed by his own hubris, she loathed it.

Now, though, she finds herself doing exactly as the cliche knight declared in every half-arsed story of chivalry. She’s laughing in the face of danger. And she can’t help but wonder if some knights have declared such a thing, and were referring to exactly this form of laughter.

And this is danger. Great danger.

In the North alone it might upset the current state of power, the very thing their marriage was meant to protect, among other things. Sansa isn’t even sure if the marriage is valid, consummated or otherwise, if he’s been Jon Targaryen all along. Can that be grounds for annulment? And that’s not even getting to the rest of Westeros…

He needs her help more than ever. And she needs his.

Even if Daenerys accepts the truth--- as admittedly far-fetched as it is--- what if she decides that she wishes to marry Jon to solidify her authority? She might see it as a way to both absorb their domains and secure her place on the Iron Throne itself. What lengths might she go to in order to do that?

Jon Stark was already going to be meeting Daenerys under… awkward and unclear standards, to say the least. But the long-lost Jon Targaryen?

And everything they’ve done in the north so far has been based on the idea that Jon is, in fact, Jon Snow Stark, Lord Eddard’s son and Robb’s eldest sibling/brother. Now he’s none of those things. There’s now yet another crack in the foundation of… well… everything.

The foundation the two of them have been struggling to build more than anyone. That they’ve
designed.

And they laugh.

What else is there to do?

Do all end up laughing in the face of danger when they know the world is about to fall apart?

But then, they’ve known that the world may end for quite a while. How long can any man or woman’s wits last in the face of such a thing?

“I laugh in the face of danger”, may just be the confession of a mad coward disguised as a platitude of courage. Perhaps just a verbal mask for the self-aware suicidal so that they might still be remembered well in the songs and stories. Technically true; but phrased dishonestly.

Half-truths are truly the foundation of politics. And they are political creatures, regardless of whether they wish to be.

Sansa wants to help Jon, wants to help think of some way to appease his long-lost aunt. But she can’t think. Or, rather, she can’t think well enough at this point to come up with an entirely rational, elegant solution.

Trusting herself to do so would be impossible, anyways.

At first, she tries to ignore it and tell herself it’s just her imagination.

But as she goes deeper into thought and it continues, it’s harder to ignore.

Jon’s face is burrowing into her breasts.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

This is the last thing he should do.

But she’s grabbed him, and pulled him to her. And though her gown isn’t low cut, and the fabric doesn’t seem as thin as it could be, he can still smell and feel her.

And her teats.

Sansa is warm, sweet, welcoming, lovely. And though the dimensions of her breasts and cleavage are apparent, there seem to be as many secrets and spaces to discover here as that cave where Ygritte brought him so long ago. She’s a valley of secrets and mysteries that beg to be discovered.

With all he has to process, resolve, and accept, he just wants to give his psyche a rest at the moment and just be. Just live by instinct and need.

Sansa is not his sister. Sansa is not his sister.

But she’s still his wife.

This is her bed. He is her husband. And they want and need a babe.
He’s already abandoned any rationality he possesses, hence the laughter. What else can he do at this point?

Remember that she’s still a person with thoughts and feelings. That she grew up with him as a brother every bit as he grew up with her as a sister. Recall all that she’s suffered, especially in the realm of the bedchamber.

Those are all things he can do. So Jon raises his head from the intoxicating embrace that are her breasts and looks to her. The best he can do is make sure she is fine with this.

His mind goes to their wedding night—agonizing in so many ways. But in one of their true moments of privacy, he mentioned how much better things would be if they weren’t siblings. And she agreed.

Of course, neither imagined such a thing being reality at the time. But that exchange wasn’t entirely meaningless, was it?

That’s up to her, now.

They’re not siblings.

What that truly means is now out of his hands where they’re concerned.

But he still proposes the possibility; through body language, look, and essentially every method of non-verbal communication he can think of. It’s hard to express what seems an eternity of longing through a few gestures.

Eyes meet eyes. He seems to drown in rings of Tully blue. Jon doesn’t apologize.

“Help me, Wife,” he says in a choked voice.

“As a wife, or as a sister?” She responds, her voice breathless.

“Whichever you prefer. I’ve said what I mean.”

She breathes deeply. The way she always does before giving her position when a major decision is to be made.

“I would very much like to be your wife as well, but…” She’s more confused than ever. Sansa knows she should feel overjoyed by this. She knows his meaning. He, like her, wants this. He wants a true marriage with her. And that great barrier, that overwhelming, destructive wall that stood between them and the freedom to truly be with one another is gone. Despite all the dangers that face, there’s this.

But are either of them ready?

~_~_~_~

Sansa:

She entered into this marriage knowing it to be a sham. That she wouldn’t have to live as his bride, or perform her wifely duties beyond one night. That her decisions regarding men were entirely up to her, that all that was really needed was a healthy child, preferably a son, for Jon to claim at some point. An arrangement many women might consider a dream.
But Sansa never really wanted a score of lovers. For months now, she’s only had eyes for Jon. It didn’t help that up in the wintry north, every man, young and old, was currently bushy-bearded, red-faced, and gruff.

Even her fantasies, though, didn’t in any way prepare her for the real thing. This revelation is in many ways a dream come true. And she wants to be his wife, she does.

But she’s also still afraid. It’s easy to visualize and idealize activities one is unlikely to ever engage in again. It’s not that she doesn’t want to share her bed with him, it’s that she’s not sure he’s ready.

Sometimes, she looks back on their wedding night and wonders if the presence of witnesses may have actually made things easier for her. They, and the agenda that brought them there, was an enemy, a challenger, something to outmaneuver. Riding atop of Jon became less about the act itself, and more about declaring to the world that she is not afraid, that she shall stand by her decisions as queen, and do whatever it takes to maintain peace and stability for the North. That she, as queen, is above humiliation. It became about turning the shame instead onto them.

Perhaps that’s why she insisted upon getting on top in the first place. Granted, when it started, she’d felt like she was being buried in him, or about to be held down, and that made her instincts go mad. There’s no denying that the nature of their consummation had to do with Ramsay.

Her late husband took her from behind, from the side, got on top of her, towered over her. He did all manner of things. But one thing he never did was have her ride him.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like it. Among Ramsay’s creative means of abuse was inviting Myranda to their bedchamber and making each woman watch him with the other. Or, sometimes, when coupling with Sansa, having Myranda join in. But there were times when he’d get on his back and pull a naked Myranda over his hips, and she rode him like a horse. And Ramsay did indeed enjoy it.

There were a number of things he’d do with Myranda, right in front of his wife, that he’d never do to her. He promised that eventually, he’d perform some of it, but only after she’d given him a son and he didn’t have to make sure her spilled in the right area every time.

But the riding, getting on top, was never anything he promised or referenced to her. He joyfully played with Myranda, having them hold blades against the others’ throat as she rode him. Ramsay liked to play with knives. More than once did he take cold, sharpened steel to his wife. But with Myranda, he let her hold blades herself. Let her control things.

It was the kennelmaster’s daughter source of pride in all of this. Not the only one, of course. Myranda had free reign of the castle, she had her own horse and hunting equipment, and she ordered the staff around like they were her servants. Myranda was smart enough not to prance around in silks and glittering jewels, or demand any seats of honor or extravagant gifts, so Roose tolerated her. Myranda resented her place, but she knew it. As long as Sansa was paraded out, looking fine, fed, healthy, and like a lady for the right visitors and her screams never got too loud, especially when they had visitors, and nothing permanent and extreme enough to, say, endanger her fertility, was done, Roose didn’t care a fig.

Myranda was called upon to do thoroughly degrading things on a regular basis to keep her man happy. Things that even Ramsay wouldn’t do with his wife. But the “riding” wasn’t really one of them. It was just something Ramsay only did with her.

Sansa, of course, didn’t have to ask why he never let her engage in the knife play. But the basic riding never made as much sense at first. Eventually, though, she figured it out. Ramsay may like his power games with Myranda, but there was no way his wife to experience any degree of control or
power. Or anything that would put her “on top” so to speak. Sure, he enjoyed her resistance from
time to time, but only because it would still ultimately end in her tears.

Telling Jon “No” and having him off of her--- and him springing away so promptly at her word---
was one step towards her boldness, her ability to go through this. She said no. And her wishes were
immediately granted, with no hesitation. It wasn’t even questioned. No event having anything to do
with Ramsay Bolton would have such a thing happen.

And getting on top… It was the only way she could do it, really. The act had to remind her of him as
little as possible. And Ramsay did all manner of things to her, but never like this. It also gave her the
ability to move, look, and see as she wished. She could be face to face with Jon the whole time so
she never forgot that the man inside her was in no way the man who hurt her. She could set the pace
of their movements. Her position made it easier to stare down and order the witnesses.

It also allowed her to display just now not-naked she was, how many boundaries she could still
enforce. Sure, she could have kept her nightgown on in any position, but in others, Jon’s body would
be covering her up, making it easy for others to forget that has covering of her own. She could better
control just how much they could see. The witnesses had to see genuine insertion. By pulling up and
tightening her skirt about her hips, it created a clear little window between his male parts and the arch
of her thighs. The way she grouped her skirts and sat allowed for their to be no doubt where Jon’s
cock went. They could see the insertion, his man’s staff slowly disappearing within her. Regardless
of what angle they watched from, there was no mistaking what was happening.

And once the first thrust was in and documented, she was able to release her skirts and let them
spread out, cover both of their bodies more. All while the linen of it was just sheer enough for them
to make out the outlines of her thighs and, at a certain angle, his staff as she moved on and off him.
When it finished, Sansa was able to take a corner of her shift, reach up between her legs, dab her
interior, then display the sticky product that stained it.

Yes, the witnesses saw that, without a doubt, the two of them had coupled. But they didn’t even see
so much as her bare buttocks or breasts, nor could they pretend they had. It was purposely the most
formal, composed, covered up sexual exhibition possible. And she directed all of it.

Her modesty, so to speak, clearly wasn’t born of shame, either. But to remind their witnesses that
though she had to go through with this, she was still their queen, she still got to make the rules, and
she got to decide what to reveal of herself, not them. That even an act of ultimate intimacy would not
reveal anything she did not consider their business.

Having the enemy to stand down, the point to make… It made things easier for herself. She didn’t
have to fear accidentally bringing her late husband’s ghost into the chamber, or revealing something
of herself she didn’t want Jon to know, or doing something wrong when they both were in the
process of putting on a performance. Despite the act itself, there was nothing truly intimate that
happened there. There couldn’t be.

“... But?”

Sansa realizes how long she’s trailed off. She shakes her head. “But I am afraid of failing you. I’m
afraid our bedchambers may be haunted. Not literally, of course. But… In our heads. With what we
were to one another. With what happened to me.”

“I am still Bran’s brother. I am still Arya’s. If you wish, I can still be---”

Arya. She didn’t think anything could possibly distract her from what she’s discovered today. But
she was wrong. She bites her lip.
“No, Jon, but… Before anything else, I have to tell you something.”

“What?”

“Arya has something to tell you as well.”

His eyes go heavenward. “Oh Gods, what?!?”

“I can’t tell you.” She feels stupid, phrasing it that way. “She has to tell you. And she will. I put her to bed---”

“---You put her to bed? How bad is it?!”

“It--- it could be very, very bad,” she admits. But she considers the latest update to the situation. “But perhaps not.”

She still feels like an idiot. “The point is, this is something she has to tell you. I don’t have the right. But she promise to do it before you leave, when she’s ready.”

He groans. “First you with the Vale, then Bran with this, now Arya has something.”

Sansa winces. “I thought you for---”

“I did, and I do. I’m sorry. But the secrets…”

Sansa swallows. “Well, I have another one to tell you.”

“Am I going to be able to forgive this one?”

“I hope so. Or I’ve greatly misinterpreted your behavior thus far.”

“Well, what is it?”

“You already know. I don’t want you to be my brother. I haven’t wanted that for quite a while. I would rather have you for a husband.”

He lifts his head now. “…How long, exactly?”

She wonders if she’s time this poorly. “Don’t misunderstand me, please. And don’t get carried away. Because this is serious…”

“I’d say so.”

“I mean your heritage.”

“Well, yes, but---”

“---Because you also can’t tell me that the fact that you were won’t still affect us! Not just because of how we feel, but because of how everyone else will react. We do need to care about what others think, Jon. Just because we’re actually cousins doesn’t make us untouchable. In fact---” She cringes, “---Think of how this will look to Daenerys, for instance. She warred with Cersei for months. And during that time, you were willing to marry your sister, a union condemned by the Old Gods and New, something that violated every rule in our culture, without even a precedent like the Targaryens had. But now that she’s settled into the Iron Throne and you want her to grant you over half of Westeros, you show up as a Targaryen, happily wed to your Stark cousin, despite spending the bulk of your marriage thinking she’s your sister. The only way any man might take such a risk is if a) He
knew she wasn’t his sister all that time and b) There was some kind of dynastic precedent which secretly applies to him. Now that your marriage has turned out to not be criminal, it’s just the perfect dynastic union for you to hold over half the Iron Throne’s domain. Which you had totally no idea you were heir to when you married the woman who sealed that support to you and had yourself crowned.”

His face falls. She hates this. But she feels ready to burst. That all of her confusion and fear and disappointment and shock and anger is seconds away of bursting through and she won’t be able to control herself anymore. And she can’t lose control. At least, not until she’s said some things that must be said. All of the rational, important thoughts she has left spill out of her mouth in a rush.

“Jon… Regardless of the truth, this is going to cast some very understandable doubt regarding your honor. And that matters. Some are going to say you pretended to be Ned Stark’s son to take the crown. People will wonder how long you knew. How long any of us knew. How much we knew. All the reasons we gave to justify our marriage will just sound false, made-up excuses we created to cover up that we knew we weren’t really siblings this whole time. And people will doubt the true extent of our concern for our kingdom. They’ll see it as such using caring and sacrifice, the kingdom itself, as a prop in a power-grab. One where we tried to make them feel shame. There will be talk of this within and beyond our borders. Hell, some might even suggest our marriage is invalid, since you made vows as Jon Stark, instead of your true identity. And they’ll have no reason to believe that wasn’t deliberate. That you may have deliberately married me under false pretenses to secure the North and be able to run off and make Daenerys your bride in case she won.” Her head spins.

“Are you willing to weather that storm with me?” He asks.

There’s not much more to say. She’s about to burst. “I’m willing to weather a whole winter with you. You know that. That’s one thing this doesn’t change.”

~_~_~_~

Jon:

He needs her, he realizes. He can’t even begin to address this situation properly with his head like this.

There is one thing that might grant him some release, especially as he’s been nursing a repressed desire for it for quite a while. Something far more available to him now than it’s ever been, one of the tethers that restrained his passion officially cut.

It’s not that easy, though. He can barely think straight. All that he loves and desires literally lays before him. Sansa, on her side, concerned, speculative, calculating mind whirred along by power of her heart. She wears her hair down often now that she’s back in the North. The only times she really pulls it away completely anymore is the braid she sports when riding or outside during heavy winds. It all falls now, behind the arm propping up her hair, like a shimmering curtain of red.

She wants to be his wife, truly. She doesn’t want to be his sister.

But that’s no prompt for him to embrace her in a storm of unleashed passion. Her mind is on public perception, on power dynamics, morale, conspiracies, foreign negotiations, armies, succession. Everything that this new reality may throw at them. All of the possibilities. All the things they should prepare for.
The love in her focus is evident. She doesn’t simply play politics. It isn’t about power or fear, necessarily. She wants to keep everyone safe. She knows that the personal nature of this news gives Jon more than enough to contend with. That she needs to focus and work her talents to their fullest extent to take some of the burden off of him and protect them all. Identifying problems and setting the groundwork for solutions is among the most effective comforts anyone can provide a king.

He needs to heal and adjust. She needs to spare him any and all other concerns for a while.

This isn’t just about the North. It’s about taking care of him.

Some might take it as cold, or off-putting. But if Jon wanted or needed hot cider and blankets and reassuring words, she’d be doing that now. But Sansa knows him too well. She knows his position too well. She simply understands. Hot cider and a hand on the shoulder are nice, but even if it calmed him for a while, it would only set him up for greater panic later as all the circumstances hit him all at once and he scrambles to try and address, well, anything. A panic that would be compounded by self-doubt and guilt over his own weaknesses and shortcomings.

Instead, he has Sansa, lying beside him in bed, compiling a list of possibilities, cataloguing everything this means, engaging him on this subject so he can slowly absorb and process as much as possible, all at once. Demonstrating to him that he is not failing anyone by not being able to face and solve everything at once, that all his responsibilities shall not be neglected because he has to cope. He’s allowed to cope, he’s allowed to be a person.

Knowing what she’s doing and why and how only enhances his appreciation and affection for her more.

Miraculously, she’s his. Basking in this is all he wants to do now. It’s what calms him. It’s hard to be consumed by fury and confusion when the ultimate perk of his new identity lies beside him, protecting and understanding him as no other can.

His mind is mostly chaos, a hailing blizzard of his new identity and all comes with it. But the woman beside him, all that she is, all that she does, is like furs and armor, guarding him from the cold, muffling the sound and impact of the raging ice, keeping him safe and warm until he makes his way home.

How did he ever manage without her?

The answer: he didn’t. He was murdered. He came back, and there she was, joining him, giving him a purpose, leading him home in this new life he doesn’t deserve.

Their reunion brought about the only moments he felt truly safe in years.

Still, the storm rages. And pulling one’s cloak tighter about one’s shoulders can only do so much. She’s not just his cloak and armor. She’s the warm, cozy home he’s journeying toward as well. He’s too exhausted, too distracted to do any more with the storm than trudge through it. He needs to get home, he needs to find rest, reach the one thing that makes braving the snows worth it, replace frustration and repression with comfort and joy.

But he’s not going to just burst through the door. Sansa’s not just his shelter. She’s a person who has endured and suffered much. She’s strong and stands tall, but to force that sort of entry could create the crack that finally sends these walls tumbling down. She’s his, yes, but she’s still herself. She has her own needs, desires, fears, struggles. And this area has been particularly traumatic for her.

Jon believes she may be in love with him. But that doesn’t mean she desires him the way he desires
her. She is colored by what’s been done to her. How that manifests itself is yet to be seen. He doesn’t
want to harm her, frighten her, user her, even if she is willing to be used. That can’t be what happens
here. Even if she wants a child.

If she can not truly enjoy being with a man, he doesn’t want to do that. What he feels for her, wants
from her, needs from her, encapsulates so much more beyond the physical. More than enough to
satisfy him without using her to sate these particular needs. He can and will find other ways to
resolve that, if he cannot give her what she may give him in return.

But… He cannot simply ignore it. The fire within him burns, and regardless, it’s fair to neither of
them for him not to act. She’s not going to make the first move. It’s not who she is, not what she
knows. It’s not what she desires. And to assume she is somehow unable to enjoy the flesh because of
what Ramsay did to her is insulting. It’s a possibility, yes, that his cruelty has made her permanently
incapable of enjoying physical affection. But it’s equally insulting to imagine that just because she
can have good experiences that contact like this won’t still be marked by what she endured, at least
for a while. She’s neither broken nor untouched. And healing takes time.

He could never forgive himself for rushing her.

But, Gods, how he wants her. Indulging in the banquet that is her body is the only adequate relief he
can think of that might allow him to grab hold of a solid perspective later.

This new identity means things he’s almost afraid to consider. But it also means… this.

He can have her, free from curses or guilt or dishonor. He can do right by her. He can have her.
Shame is no longer necessary.

And all he wants is to dive into all the sweet relief that she promises.

Jon reaches out and runs the back of his fingers down her arm. She shivers, their eyes meet, and they
both know it’s time. No distractions, no changing the subject, no avoidance. At the very least, they
have to talk about this now.

“As am I,” he tells her, “But I wonder how you’d feel about me keeping you warm through it all.
Through the cold, dark nights.”

She swallows. “I don’t know. He always came at night, and missed no opportunity of that to remind
me. But I have thought about it. About you and I, your arms around me, like our wedding night. And
I miss how I felt that night. I’m just afraid that at some point, I’ll be reminded of Ramsay for
whatever reason, and it’ll ruin it. Not even Ramsay’s ghost can be tolerated in our presence, and I’m
afraid I will accidentally bring him in. I don’t want that, Jon. But I do want you. I… I love you.”

He doesn’t have to ask if she means she loves him as a brother, or as a husband. “I love you well,
Sweetling.”

“Please understand, it’s not your fault. At all. I don’t want you blaming yourself. I trust you. But I’m
not sure I can trust myself. I’m just as afraid of hurting you as you are afraid of hurting me.”

Jon groans. She’s just too much for him, sometimes. But he opens his eyes.

“I don’t think two people can have what we have, love as we do, know one another like this, and
have lived as we have without hurting one another from time to time, even if we don’t mean to. But
even if that happens, I think we can get through it together. We can take care of each other. Neither
of us are perfect. Neither of us are untouched. And we have a lot facing us. But together, I think we
can transcend that, fix anything, handle anything.”
“Including my condition?”

Jon cocks his head. “Condition?”

Her lip curls mischievously, “Your words and resolve are very reassuring, Jon. Not to mention appealing. But there’s still the fact that I’m bleeding.”

Jon blinks. He’d forgotten about that. But now, she’s not in tears over it. He scoffs.

“You think that has ever stopped me before? I was a spearwife’s lover! We coupled under the furs, on the frozen ground, with our fellow raiders just a few feet from us!”

He leans in eagerly, pulling her against him and kissing her as he’s always wanted to. Heavy, deep, open mouth, tasting and exploring her mouth with his tongue.

Eventually, there’s pressure against his chest and he reluctantly pulls back under her palms. They both gasp, mouths swollen. After several pants, Sansa speaks, “That was with the wildling. Perhaps she was fine with that, but I have fine bedlinens that I don’t wish to stain. And blood is almost impossible to get out!”

Jon groans and tries to think. Not that he minds, he’d rather be focussing on something like this than almost everything else.

He has a feeling things like this will become a staple of his life from now on. Ygritte was a woman, sure, but she didn’t really give a toss about certain needs. When she did bleed, she’d stuff a rag between her legs and just replace it at the end of the day. She wasn’t discreet about it, nor did she care about it getting on anything. When Jon found smears of her menstrual blood on the lining of his cloak, she laughed at him and told him it was lucky. She didn’t bathe often, and her hair was a rat’s nest that looked like she only combed it at the change of the seasons.

But Sansa’s right, she’s not Ygritte, and they are not a raiding party traversing the wilderness beyond the Wall. She has to present herself a certain way, and that involves being clean and well-dressed, with garments much too fine for them to afford to stain them. She was in skirts, not leathers. She had to look a certain way, behave a certain way, move a certain way, speak a certain way, eat a certain way. All of this is as crucial to Sansa as keeping a full quiver of sharp arrows was for Ygritte. Sansa sleeps on a bed, and hosts people, runs things, in this castle, which she must maintain. And especially in scarce times like these, she can’t afford to get sloppy with anything.

She has particular needs. Ones he’d have to tend to. And, if and when she falls pregnant--- the thought of that makes his heart beat louder--- that would only increase.

Sansa cannot just bleed all over her bed linens. She requires a barrier. Something soft enough to lay on, but thick enough to prevent leaks.

“So you have any drying cloths? Old ones?”

She smiles and gets off the bed. Jon hastily starts peeling back the bedclothes and shedding his own attire. It’s only after Sansa spreads the cloths over the bed linens neatly and stands up straight that Jon realizes what is happening.

This may be the first time he’ll see her truly naked.

He starts to shake as she timidly begins to undo the laces at the high neckline of her gown. The slow exposure of skin at her throat and collarbone as the fabric is pulled apart is somehow the most sensual thing he’s ever seen.
To make her more comfortable, Jon makes sure he’s completely stripped before he even gets a peek at her tunic. The peek of shoulder when she begins pulling an arm from her sleeve makes him gasp. This earns him a surprised, blushing smile.

The bed between them is just the right barrier. Everything’s exposed, yet there’s enough distance. At a distance, trust is easier. His hands itch for her skin, though. But it’s a good itch.

Loud rustling occurs as the grey wool of her gown slips down her shift and petticoats and tumbles at the floor. She takes the time to step out and kick the fabric away before going for the ties at her waist. The petticoats fall next, leaving her in a sheer shift, through which he can make out her girdle, smallclothes, and stockings.

The shift, tied at the side and styled to wrap about her, practically twirls off of her body. For a moment, she holds a different end of it up in each hand, and she looks like she’s about to fly.

Jon’s cock aches for some contact, hard as his blade and leaking like a damaged cask. But he’s afraid to touch himself, not wanting to respond to his wife’s outright majestic display by pumping himself like a greenboy.

He feels the blood drain from his head, though, leaving him light-headed and feeling weak. Jon finds himself clutching a bedpost. “Gods…”

His eyes jump between the swell of her bound breasts, the darkened, moist looking patch of linen at the apex of her thighs, and the way her face seems to brighten as she observes the effect she has. Her whole form seems to gradually inflate with confidence, which just makes it all that much more devastating.

Jon once again sees the determination, courage, and self-assurance she displayed on their wedding night. It burned his blood then, too.

The King of Winter licks his lips and gasps, “Do… Do you want to be on top this time, too?”

Sansa pauses and hesitates, her fingertips resting at the center of her girdle, right between her breasts. “N-Not as before, I think. I… I want to try something different. Would you sit, please? Sit up, only lean back enough so your… your…”

He’d pay a hundred gold dragons to hear her say ‘your cock.’ But she blushes and goes, “Your… organ sticks out enough.”

Jon props up the pillows and leans back against the headboard, positioning his hips so his arse rests on the drying cloths. And he watches, and waits.

Her girdle opens in the front and when her breasts spill out, Jon almost faints.

Since their reunion, Jon noticed Sansa’s bust. And when he let his mind go far enough, he’d evaluated them. Or, at least, evaluated what they saw. That Sansa had a lovely figure was evident even beneath her thick winter-wear, and she was svelte, slender. Her bust wasn’t small, definitely prominent enough to tell she had them, but they were modest, for lack of a better word.

Not that Jon disliked this. On particularly lonely nights, he imagined them out, hanging just slightly, firm, perky, with tiny, pink points for nipples, every contour of them visible from a straightforward gaze.

Appealing in the extreme. He often imagined holding them in two easy handfuls.
But what basically erupts out of her girdle are not the cheery apples he expected. While not exactly melons, they’re fatter and fuller than he ever expected, the area of them expanding outward as much as they begin to hang. Though they appear unnaturally pale, even for her skin, but upon release it appears they flush to a more natural shade. Her nipples aren’t copper stars, but almost the size of silver stags. Their girth is enough for them to naturally and easily fall against each other, and they move with the slightest gesture, including deep breaths.

They’re far too full and round to be called “perky”, exactly. But they’re boyant, certainly. The sort of breasts one can bury one’s head in as well as nuzzle.

Jon never thought himself a devotee of large busts. After all, he’d adored Ygritte’s small, compact, teats. But now… He feels his mouth actually water, as if he’s a hungry newborn squaling for his wet nurse.

At the same time, though, it poses some questions. Her nightgown on their wedding night seemed normal, not too heavy, and it didn’t cover all that much. He could see the tops of her breasts then, and surely he’d have spotted some indicator of what was underneath then? But he hadn’t. He didn’t spot anything surprising about Sansa’s breasts that night, and it wasn’t for lack of looking.

He never would have guessed.

Where and how had she been hiding all that in all this time?

It’s only when Sansa turns the color of an overripe tomato that Jon realizes he’s spoken that query aloud.

“Forgive me!” He says quickly, “I’m just…”

“--I’ve been binding my breasts back since King’s Landing. The Lannisters didn’t buy me a lot of clothing, you see. So after a while, everything was too small. And I started spilling out of my bodices. I didn’t like the looks I got, either. Or the things people said. I had a maid, Shae, who understood. There were points in her life when she traveled, and did so disguised as a man to keep safe, so she knew how to do it. It couldn’t be too obvious, what I was doing, or they’d find out. I had to still look like a woman, and I couldn’t look undersized, especially for my height. Once the Tyrell’s arrived, deep-V bodices became the fashion. I styled my hair like Margaery’s and followed her everywhere, but no one could figure out why I didn’t start wearing gowns like hers. Shae and I had to be very careful with the dressing I wore to my wedding to Tyrion. We camouflaged my bust by padding my waist some, then tricked the eye by making the skirt very full, against the fashion. Luckily, by the time I was down to my shift, Tyrion was too drunk to notice.” Sansa snickers slightly. “I became a bit more comfortable after I escaped King’s Landing. But then…”

He doesn’t need her to continue. “How did you manage for our wedding?”

“The right manner of nightgown can do wonders for hiding things in plain sight. They just looked like they’d be pushed up really high, but they weren’t. Quite the opposite. Horizontal, straight cleavage is much easier to disguise.”

Jon gapes. “I see.” His eyes are glued to them. “You ought not to hide them, though. They’re… breathtaking.”

“I don’t want to take anyone’s breath away. With one exception.”

His heart beats faster. “Enough, please, Sansa, take off your knickers and get on here. I need you.”

Feeling charitable, she rolls off her smallclothes and stockings with some speed, clearly eager to
begin, which delights him. But just before she crawls onto the bed, she pauses, then blushes.

“There’s one more thing,” she says quietly, “You may wish to look away.”

“Impossible,” he tells her eyes fixed on the thatch of auburn curls between her legs.

And at first, he’s delighted to have declined when she props one of her feet up on the edge of the bed and spreads her legs. And when she reaches for her now-fully exposed cunny. He thinks she’s going to start stroking the pretty pink tissue that now peaks out from between her parted lower lips. That he get to see the image that was denied him the night of their wedding.

But no. Her fingers go further, into her entrance, and she starts pulling out something filthy, shiny, varying in color from brown to crimson to scarlet.

It takes him a moment to realize what it is.

“Seven Hells!”

She blushes. “I told you that you wouldn’t want to see.”

“You do that every month?”

“Yes, roughly.” Sansa nods, and goes to drop the blood-soaked rag in a bucket near the window. When she comes back to the bed, she looks at him with appreciative surprise.

“You’re still… ready. Even after that.”

Yes I am!

“Spearwife’s lover, remember? It takes more than that to make me lose interest. Now, would you please get on this bed and share it with me?!”

She crawls on, at long last, and kisses him as she straddles his thighs. She guides hands to her breasts, runs her fingers through his hair and down his back. When, at sweet long last, she engulfs him, she gives his hair a hard tug and gasps.

Sticky, quick-drying blood can soon be felt amidst the other fluids that appear between their joined, thrusting hips. She claws at his back as she moves and says his name. Not ‘Jon Snow’, as Ygritte always called him, but rather “Jon! Jonnn! Jooooonnnnn!”

At one point, his enthusiasm gets the better of him, and she stiffens and whimpers for him to be gentler, slower. It brings him back to reality, and his heart sinks. She doesn’t grip him as tightly, and her deep breathing takes on a somehow different cadence as she burrows her face in his neck. She’s tenser.

“Sansa… Sansa, Sweetling, it’s just us. It’s just me. Just your Jon. Love you. Love you.” He strokes her hair, focussing on controlling his rhythm and regaining the magic they had just a few seconds ago.

She presses gentle kisses to his neck. Jon tries to touch her between her legs, but it’s awkward with their position and he’s afraid to change it.

After a while, he has no choice. “Sansa, I’m---”

His wife tugs at his curls and he releases his seed within her. But he feels some disappointment.
“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, once he regains control of his senses.

“What for?”

“Not pleasuring you.”

Sansa pulls back. “It felt lovely nearly the entire time. There was one unpleasant moment, but other than that…”

“I bet that one unpleasant moment lasted,” Jon replies, “You didn’t peak.”

She looks at him blankly and he realizes she has no idea what he means.

“It’s… It’s the height of pleasure. You know how when a man spills, he sort of… goes rigid, then boneless, and cries out louder?”

“Yes.”

“It’s… It feels like you’ve sort of exploded from within. And something within you is released and sated. You’re supposed to feel that way, too.”

She shakes her head. “No… I mean, I know sometimes women can act like they’re feeling something like that, I saw Myranda do it. But it’s something she just did to make Ramsay feel good. Because the moment he looked away, she dropped the act. Did you want me to act that way too, though?”

Jon shakes his head. “No! I mean, yes! I mean… Maybe Myranda pretended to, but it’s real. If a woman is pleasured properly, she feels it. I did it to Ygritte plenty of times, and she would let me know if I failed to get her there.”

Her mouth falls open. “So, what am I doing wrong?”

“Nothing!” Jon groans.

“Oh, Gods, what if there is something wrong with me? What if my body doesn’t work right?!”

“No, Sansa! That’s not how it works! You know on our wedding night, when you had to make yourself wet between the legs? This is supposed to be the progression from that. But… It’s… delicate. It…”

“‘We’re very complicated, pleasuring us takes practice.’” Sansa says with a faraway look, “‘Some women like tall men, some like short men…’ Margaery told me things.” But she winces. “But you’re so beautiful and lovely and you made me feel good, even after that bad moment, once you relaxed…”

“It’s like taking the wrong turn on a journey, you can undo a lot of progress. Enough that it keeps you from reaching your destination on time,” Jon answers, pushing a lock of her hair behind her ear, “Or a storm slowing you down and halting you. But it’s nothing wrong with you, Sweetling.”

“How do you know? I’ve not… peaked… before. What if I can’t at all? What if Ramsay literally broke something?”

He pulls her into a tight hug. “No, no, my love. I just made a bad move that brought back some painful memories. Things like this happen!”

“Has it ever happened to you? Or to one of your women?”
“I’ve only had one other woman,” he says, patting her back, “And something similar happened, yes. There were times, especially in the early days, when I failed to satisfy. And Ygritte had experience before me. It’s just a matter of finding just what you need.”

Sansa sobs and pulls back again. “How are we to do that? You’re leaving in a week and may never come back! What if we never find it? Oh, Gods, what if I need to peak to conceive? I never did either with Ramsay! And he was forcing himself on me several times a night for months!”

“No, Sweetling. Women get pregnant from rape, you know that.” Speaking that fact aloud in these circumstances, as an assurance, no less, is more than a little troubling. “And regardless, you’ll peak. I promise.” He grins. “I’ll not rest until you have, if necessary.”

“You have to face Daenerys! Gods, I bet she’s perfect.”

Jon takes a deep breath. “Sansa, there’s nothing wrong with you. Just...” He gives her a coy smile, “Why don’t you just let me try that thing that always worked for Ygritte?”

She wipes her eyes. “But you’ve spilled.”

“I don’t need my cock for this.”

Her eyes narrow. “What do you want to do?”

“Well, it’s something we called the ‘Lord’s Kiss’. I put my head between your legs and pleasure your cunny with my mouth.” Even a few minutes after finishing, the thought of it makes his blood start pumping again.

She wrinkles her nose. “I’m bleeding, remember?”

He hesitates. “I don’t mind, much.”

“Well, I do. I don’t want you drinking any of my moon blood. That’s foul.”

He sighs. “Well, will you let me touch you?”

She pauses. “I... I suppose so.”

He smiles. “Get on your back and spread your legs.”

She’s nervous at first, but before long, she purs like a kitten. Her whole body relaxes beneath his fingers, and soon she’s fisting the bedclothes, crying his name, and thrusting her hips. He delights in teasing her lips (the hair of which has been stained with leaked blood) and playing with her nub. She squirms and squeals, all of her trademark composure gone. Finally, she arches her back and holds her breath for several seconds, before collapsing back, hissing, and yanking his hand away from her now over-sensitive parts.

“Nothing wrong with you,” Jon says, wiping his hand on the drying cloths with satisfaction.

“One thing isn’t wrong with me, anyways.” Still panting, she sits up, hugging her knees to her chest and resting her chin atop them. In seconds, she’s gone from a breathless peak to innocence and delicacy, almost childlike. “Would you go to my wardrobe and pull a couple of rags from the box on the top right shelf?”

He gets to his feet. “Sure.”

“Then take one of them and soak it with water from the pitcher on my dressing table, and bring both
She begins gathering up the drying cloths, carefully inspecting the bed linens for any sign of a leak. She washes herself with the wet silk, pushes the dry one inside of herself, and puts her smallclothes back on. Jon nearly gets back on the bed, but she stops him and points to his abdomen.

There are smears of blood on his cock, above it, on his inner thighs. Jon freezes, not exactly loving the image of blood being all over that area of his body. When he was with Yrgitte, he usually tugged his trousers up again before he got a chance to see the result of any of their coupling, bloody or otherwise. Tustling together in the furs, desperately racing to get each other off without exposing oneself to fellow campers, all before going on a raid rarely left opportunities for self-examination.

Another, far more pleasing image springs into existence when Sansa, still naked but for her smallclothes, gets on her knees before him.

“Cold!” He yelps when her cloth makes contact with his member. She shushes him and continues wiping him up. He quickly adjusts to the cold and finds the process rather pleasant.

She rises and deposits all the dirty things with the linens due for wash. Jon gazes at her. The sunlight from the window catches her hair and she seems to glow copper and red. He sighs.

“I can’t leave you.”
Jon:

Sansa freezes. “What?”

As he’d hoped, everything is now all too clear. Exhausting his passion forced his mind to compartmentalize so much. He can think clearly. And there’s something unavoidable now.

His wife turns and comes close to him, crawling onto the bed. “Jon, you have to.”

“No, I don’t. And I am not going to run to Daenerys when she calls like some sort of lap dog. If she wants to parley, she can do so. But she is not going to make me leave my home, my family, and my people just to put myself at her arguable mercy. I am King of Winter.”

Sansa stares. “Jon, you can’t try to bring her to Winterfell.”

“I won’t. Like Hell I’d bring her here. I’ll move, but so will she. And we meet on more neutral territory. Together.”

“Jon, if we both leave Winterfell, who is going to stop some ambitious courtier from snatching up Bran and trying to stage an insurrection?”

“It will hard to have a proper coup when the court is with the king and queen. We bring the court with us. And we travel, but not outside our own borders and not without full support behind us.”

“And where are we to go?”

Jon smiles. “Since Littlefinger was executed, Harrenhal has been the custody of the crown.”

“You want to parlay with the Mother of Dragons in the castle her ancestor’s dragons reduced to a burnt ruin?”

It's with a certain mischief that he answers, “What’s she going to do, burn it down?”

Sansa stares at him for a long moment. “Moving the court there, along with any sort of adequate guard, will take an absurd amount of time and cost a fortune.”
“Yes. But I can offer Daenerys the option to sign a temporary truce to ally against the White Walkers instead. I’ll even send her a wight’s hand, if she needs evidence of the enemy we face. But, if we can receive her at Harrenhal instead, well, it’s the ultimate bluff.”

“How are we supposed to actually pull off that bluff if she says no?”

“Well, many of the Trident lords owe us debts for rescuing them or granting them clemency. Littlefinger’s property comes with Littlefinger’s income----”

For reasons that only become clear to him later, she immediately changes her mind.

Sansa’s eyes widen. “And you might incentivize many lords to contribute. Just tell them if anything, you still need to survey Harrenhal to try and choose a new lord for it. As long as you make no promises… You could even end up offering it to Daenerys!”

He hadn’t thought of that. But it makes an absurd amount of sense. “We gather more and more of our retinue as we move south…”

“Jon!”

“What?”

Sansa bites her lip. “What if we keep your heritage a secret?”

“Hmm?”

“We don’t let it out. You meet Daenerys as her nephew, and you’ll be making your introduction as a pretender to her throne who already calls himself a king. But, you have Howland and Meera Reed with you to verify who you are if necessary. When or if things get heated--- figuratively, of course--- you tell Daenerys the truth and give her a choice: she can ally with you under the same terms she made with Yara Greyjoy, save Westeros and sit on the Iron Throne as the only true claimant in existence. Or, she can try to go to war and have everyone find out that her older brother has a surviving son with the blood of the dragon who also just happens to have over half of Westeros following him.” She licks her lips. “A king who, per his heritage, may even have the ability to control dragons.”

Jon’s eyes narrow. “We offer Harrenhal to sweeten the pot, promise to aid her in any other conflict-- -”

“---From how things happened in the East, that’s not something she can turn up her nose at---”

“We offer friendship from the beginning, all while making it clear that there will be a cost to turning us down.” Jon bit his lower lip and leans back, hands behind his head.

Clearly, he’s not the only one whose mind has been cleared by their carnal exercise. Perhaps they’re suited to come up with their best ideas in the afterglow. He smirks and hopes so, out loud.

“Oh, you’re filthy,” Sansa retorts, but teasingly. She snuggles up against him, resting hand and head on his chest.

“All the more reason I can’t leave without you, though.”

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Daenerys’s response to his petition to move their meeting to Harrenhal is crisp, sharp, and
begrudgingly cooperative. They shall parlay at Harrenhal, they shall discuss terms, but she shall bring her dragons. They reply that she only bring one of her dragons, and only the smallest. Daenerys agrees, but she makes a sharp condition: his wife must be present as well.

Jon shudders at this; yes, he wanted this, but it being ordered by Daenerys makes him reconsider. After all, one of the points of their marriage was to keep the government stable. That if one of them was captured or killed prematurely, the other could simply carry on business as usual. But if Daenerys wants them both at Harrenhal...

Neither of them are pleased, but they can’t exactly refuse completely. They consult Bran, who struggles to focus and control his visions. He says he sees Targaryen and Stark banners joined at The Wall.

It gives Sansa some confidence. “Tell her that she must bring her smallest dragon, and that the beast must stay five miles from the walls of Harrenhal itself, and keep away from any populated areas. We will have our strongest vassals gather forces, ready to unite and march at once under Arya if we are taken. And we need to make an agreement in terms of the size of our retinues. Then there is the matter of watching Winterfell while we’re away...”

They decide the best way to compromise the possible factions is by side-stepping the full regency issue entirely by bringing nearly the entire small council with them to Harrenhal, thus keeping the official court with them. Since they’ll technically be within their own borders, and even at a castle they still technically in control, there’s no real “regency” to be had for the country. For Winterfell, they name both Bran and Arya as acting Lords of Winterfell, name Arya as official castellan of Winterfell, and enlist several lords particularly close to Sansa and Jon—Lady Waynwood, to whom Sansa granted Littlefinger’s settlement in the Fingers upon his execution, one of Lady Mormont’s advisors, higher level Winterfell staff who are especially loyal to the king and queen—-to be advisors. They also arrange for groups of men from various Houses to join the royal retinue as they journey to Harrenhal.

Jon doesn’t like it, even after they settle on terms.

“We even have to negotiate our negotiations,” he says, shaking his head. “With our own people!”

Sansa chuckles.

“Welcome to international politics,” she tells him, running a finger down his bare chest.

Complications in their relationship do not cease over three moons. Despite the personal release and bliss they enjoy, that comes with its own issues. As agonizing as it was to be purely political, pretending to be proved even more difficult in some ways.

At least the repression was a simple directive on how to operate around Sansa. Sure, there was always a personal bond they shared; Sansa has been the one closest to him since he left the Watch. And she knows everything, more than anyone has ever really known about him. But it’s different now.

Their marriage was, from the start, a political arrangement, and that aspect of it does not change, even as it becomes more. In keeping Jon’s parentage a secret, they must maintain the pretence of a lack of passion between them to the public. But things have altered utterly behind closed doors. And it’s revelatory, in its own way. But also hard to conceal. He wants the world to know how they feel. And he can’t.

More than ever, Jon is aware of how closely the personal and political in his life intertwine. There’s
always been an element of that, coming from a Great Family, and especially when he took command of the Watch. But at least as Lord Commander, he was compelled to stay impartial to the conflicts and politics of the realm. Sure, it came with difficulties as well as reliefs— he had to write to Lord Bolton for aid, after all— but he had precedence and a position on which to avoid certain burdens.

He’s a king, now. And his life is not for The Watch and The Watch only. He is obligated to get involved in everyone’s affairs, be the ultimate authority and handler of everything. The Watch, at its heart, was a military order meant to be provided for by the Lords. And while administrative duties were inherent in his role there, his focus was purely grounded in the practical.

Being king, though, it’s all manner of personal issues. Histories, characters living and dead, border disputes, trade, hierarchies, etiquette, customs, religion, culture, ambitions, personalities… At the Watch, regardless of where you came from or what you worshipped, you put on a black cloak, said your vows at your place of worship, and followed your orders.

And he’s not merely sworn to the realm. He’s a family man. He’s sworn to a wife, as well. He has a sister and a brother. And all gets tangled up, leading to some surprising conundrums.

Arya’s revelation hardly helps.

Two days after Jon learns of his identity, Arya is ready to tell him her secret. The confession is made in Sansa’s solar. They all sit by the fire, Sansa sitting beside her sister and clutching her hand.

Arya can’t even say it out loud. She eventually just pulls up her tunic and shows him.

As it turns out, Sansa had a reaction very similar to his. Jon leaps to his feet and begins shouting and stomping about the room, vowing vengeance on the person responsible. The news that Arya already disposed of her attacker, if anything, only infuriates him more.

His heart breaks when she tells him why she never said anything. He’s ashamed of himself, wondering what he did to make his little sister think he would ever, ever hold this against her.

He stops railing, ruffles her hair, calls her little sister, and embraces her. He asks Sansa to give them some time alone. The two of them abandon their chairs, sit, cross-legged, on the floor in front of the fire, and just talk for a while. She tells him more and more about her time on the run. Some things, she recounts with shame. Other things, with pride.

His response is to congratulate her on remembering to stick them with the pointy end. And she laughs, truly laughs.

He has to tell Arya the truth, of course. And when that happens, she embraces him and insists they’re still brother and sister. But she’s furious with her father, and with Bran. She understands wanting to keep Daenerys in the dark, but expresses qualms about hiding it from their people.

He understands. Arya’s experiences make her averse to deceiving the common folk.

When Jon insists that it’s in the best interests of the Northmen, she responds that history is littered with nobles deciding they know what’s in the best interests of the smallfolk, playing dynastic games supposedly to that end, and ultimately getting them killed as a result.

“But it’s not my decision to make. It’s yours.”

This is something his sister seems to understand better than Bran: the boundaries of what should be decided by whom. And for all of Arya’s rebelliousness, she seems to respect the chain of authority and burdens that he and Sansa are burdened with. It’s perhaps for this reason that he goes further
“I want you to understand something,” he begins, reaching out and ruffling her hair affectionately, “No matter what, you are always my little sister. That doesn’t change. You know that, right?”

“Of course.”

“And the reason I didn’t tell you until today was because Sansa told me you had something important to tell me, and I felt, given what I heard from her, that you deserved to have your confession unburdened by, well, this.”

“No, I understand that,” Arya nods, “I’m not sure how I would have handled telling you if I knew beforehand. Besides, you found out what? Two days ago? It’s not like you didn’t have to process it yourself. And even if your intention was to keep it from me, it’s not like I would have room to judge.”

Jon smiles. “Thank you, Little Sister. But there’s more.”

“Oh?”

“Upon learning of my… hereditary situation, Sansa and I decided to… alter our relationship. Like, I said, you’ll always be my little sister. Bran will always be my little brother. But Sansa… Sansa is truly my wife.”

Arya’s eyes widen, she freezes and stares at him. “You… certainly have made that decision quickly.”

Jon squirms and cracks his knuckles. “As it turns out, the two of us have been… harboring some feelings for one another for many months now. Ones which we obviously tried to repress on moral grounds. But now that we know that’s no longer an issue—-

“---I don’t understand, though,” Arya says, her voice a little rough, “Bran and I are still your siblings to you. How is it you can feel that for us but for Sansa…?”

“That’s something I’m trying to understand as well, Arya,” he confesses, “I mean, if you want to get technical, you and Bran are technically my younger siblings, in a legal sense, even now. I married your sister, after all. That makes me your good-brother, even though I’m not your brother by blood.”

“That’s irrelevant, and you know it,” she replies, sounding irritated.

“Yes, I do, I’m sorry. I’m not---” Jon shakes his head. “Part of it, I think, is… well, I was always so close with you and Bran. Closer than I was with Sansa. Not that I didn’t think of her as a sister then. I did. But…so much has changed and stayed the same. Bran---”

“Bran came back to us with magical visions---”

“Bran was always a dreamer, though. Even as a regular little boy who loved climbing and dreaming of being a knight. And he still has that sort of… macabre attitude from when he would beg for the scariest stories. He still has the vulnerabilities from when he used to hide under the covers after hearing the scariest stories…” Jon smiles wistfully. “Not to mention, he was still so young when we parted. Sansa was at the tail end of childhood when we all parted. So much more of who she was seemed formed, entrenched in her.”

“And me?”
Jon glances at her with a sheepish smile. “You’ve grown so much, but so much about you is still the same. You’re still sharp-tongued, blunt, clever, wild. You’re still a bit of an outsider. You’ve grown, yes, but you haven’t changed in the same way. You’re still an explorer. You still defy every standard of what a ‘lady’ is supposed to be—”

“---And Sansa still adheres to them---”

“---That’s just it, she doesn’t.” Jon groans. “Arya, you didn’t see her when we were rising against Ramsay. And you don’t always see her now. But surely, you have seen her engage in governance--”

“---Yes, but so did Mother. And she always seems to be behind you---”

Jon smiles. “In public, we always take care to present a united front. But how often did you see your mother attend Father’s council meetings?”

“It happened!”

“Not every day. Not that your mother was ever uninvolved, but she usually contributed through private conferences with F--- your father. Sansa is at every single one, and she and I have clashed before on issues. We don’t argue or oppose each other publicly, per se. But we have done so in front of our ministers. Sometime I win, sometimes she does. Whatever is said in public is often the result of hours of argument between us. And half the time, I’m declaring her position over mine. In fact, if I’m the one declaring it, it’s more likely to be her position. When she’s declaring something, if we’ve argued, it’s more likely she’s the one delivering my winning position. It’s one of the ways we assure and maintain our unity as regents. So even those who are privy to our oppositions know we trust and support one another.”

Arya cocks her head. “So she openly questions you at every council meeting?”

“Just the ones where we haven’t reached a decision beforehand, and those are rare. And this is not something that started when she became queen, Arya. When Sansa and I reunited, I wanted to just escape and take us somewhere warm. She’s the one who decided we go to war. And she was present at every council, demanding to be heard, all while she was making plans and deals of her own to gather armies. She’s the one who originally suggested that I could convince the wildlings to fight for us. The one who determined we’d tour parts of the north to personally parlay with any possible allies. When your Tully uncles let us down and I decided we’d march at once with what we had---”

“---She went behind your back to enlist the knights of the Vale.”

Jon nods. “Does any of that seem like something a ‘traditional lady’, let alone the Sansa we knew as children, would do?”

“No.” Arya shakes her head.

“And the Sansa we knew would assume she’d have the highest title when we won, especially since I was the only other member of the family there. But she didn’t. She assumed I would take the Lord of Winterfell’s chambers. From the beginning, she posited that I’d be the new leader of the North, not her. When I said I wasn’t a Stark, she insisted that I was to her. When I was declared king, she smiled. When we took the North, she still wasted no time in establishing her authority, racing to seize the Boltons’ property to bump up our treasury, monitoring the situation in the Riverlands. The titles and honors mattered less to her than the actual duties of governance and the power itself. She’s really been queen since we returned, Arya. She just didn’t see the crown itself as anything but a status symbol she might need at the right time. She tutors herself in war and tactics now. She’s been
preparing for war. What would the Sansa we knew think of that?”

Arya snorts. “I see your point.”

“I can’t help but see her differently, Arya. We fought a war together. She was the last person in the world I ever thought I’d be able to say that of. And it’s one of the most significant things two people can do together. One’s entire viewpoint cannot help but be altered radically by such a thing. I love, trust, and believe in you and Bran greatly. You’re my little sister and brother. But Sansa came to me not as my little sister, but as a partner. And she’s been my partner ever since. The fact that she still dresses all that up in a refined, ladylike package, quite frankly, rather ups the appeal—”

“---Alright! Alright!” Arya holds up her hands. “I get your point. But gods, it’s still uncomfortable enough thinking of you two… I… I need to process this. Preferably alone.” She pauses. “And I imagine there are things you may need to process as well.”

Jon’s stomach sinks, but he nods.

After she departs, though, the reality of everything returns, especially in regards to Arya. He and Sansa must conceive more than ever now. There are no contingencies. There never were.

And it’s not just pressure on them. Every day they go without an heir, Arya is reminded of her “failure”. Of the need she can’t meet.

Arya chooses to tell Bran of her secret alone, and it mostly serves to intensify his own guilt. To the point that, when Jon and Sansa tell him of their decision to have a true marriage, his reaction is more weary than anything.

“As if there’s any other choice!” He snaps before refusing to discuss it further. He spends more and more time in the godswood.

Sometimes, Jon thinks dreamily of years down the line, when the war is won, when winter is ended, when he and his wife have had a babe or two. Arya feeling her infertility less keenly since House Stark won’t ever depend on it. Sansa’s “duty” complete. Everything secure and peaceful. No shame or desperation.

But that future isn’t just for him.

There is his wife.

Truly, truly his wife, a fact he revels in at every spare opportunity. He’s sworn to her as much as he is to the North. She’s made the same vows.

They’re a better arrangement than the ones he made as a lad. The Wall was never going to promise him anything, it was never going to give him anything, let alone the same things he was prepared to give. Even the closest of his brothers never really understood him. He was still so often alone in his duties. There was never another Lord Commander to lead with him, no other Watch spy among the wildlings. And his “brothers” eventually killed him anyways.

But this is so very different.

He’d be undone if he didn’t share the burden of sovereignty with her. But that adds an interesting dynamic to their marriage. Their personal time together so easily diverges into discussions about work. Once they’ve regained their breath and recovered from their mutual peaks, their conversation turns to matters of state.
Jon grew up never expecting to have a wife of his own, let alone share a kingdom with her. And he’s not quite sure how to handle this. He wonders if he’s failing as a husband, letting their responsibilities permeate what private time they get.

There are supposed guidelines for how a husband is supposed to act towards his wife, most of them written by members of the Faith Clergy. But they are for traditional Lord Husbands and their Lady Wives who follow the New Gods, who adhere to a certain dynamic.

One which is not theirs.

Jon’s knows, because he researched the subject of marriage and notable couples, hoping to find some appropriate guidance. While there have been some precedents of husbands who serve as consorts to reigning ladies, even that dynamic doesn’t exactly apply to them. So it’s not as if they can just flip the roles.

In his research he’s found that as powerful as queen consorts have been throughout time, their defined roles have usually been strictly relegated to the acts of any other lady wife: bear the children, run the household, educate the girls, tend to her husband and children, etc. Even the accounts of queens like Good Queen Alysanne usually tried to emphasize her more traditionally feminine role and downplay or be vague about her rulership, mostly in order to appease the traditionalists of the world. When it came to the rare exceptions of a woman officially ruling alongside a husband, like Nymeria of the Rhoyn, historians are stoic and unhelpful, merely listing accomplishments and not detailing much or anything about the personal dynamics of their marriages.

Powerful ladies today, consorts who are considered as much an authority as their husbands in their domains, are still ultimately dependent on their husband’s will to exert power, and are usually compelled to downplay it. Female rulers have husbands of lower status. And besides, no one wants to get personal.

But Jon is king in his own right, and Sansa is as well. Neither are consorts, neither are dependent on the other for their authority. They grew up together, thought of one another as siblings for so long. Those feelings only began to change when they waged a war of insurrection together.

While Sansa embraces power and authority, and while both seem pleased with their equal standing, Jon cannot help but wonder if he overdoes it. If he still treats her too much as a political peer at times when he should just be treating her as a wife.

They discuss negotiation tactics as they disrobe, then go over court petitions post-coitus. During the act, part of her mind is always on the succession. And thus, so is his. Even when they’re massaging each other after a long day--- her sore shoulders, his aching back--- they speak of responsibility.

He’s pretty sure it’s considered unseemly for a wife to mention other men as her husband hitches up her skirts or thrusts. But sometimes they’re seeing to the succession between meetings, and have to make sure they’re on the same page as to how they’ll handle this vassal or that once they return to their non-marital duties. It’s how their lives work.

That’s another issue: the children.

Their children don’t even exist yet, but already are trapped in the jaws of dynastic politics. Jon looks at Bran, Arya, and Sansa sitting at the dinner table in the Great Hall, thinks of the places where Robb and Rickon should sit. He remembers how and why Sansa came to be forced into marriage twice. They weren’t even considered princes at the time. All of them are so young. Jon thinks of the lives his own children would lead, the positions they’ll be in, and he feels sick with fear.
It’s sometimes hard to concentrate with so much pressure. He wishes Sam were around to research marriage and family life for him.

Sansa’s incredible. Jon often has issues keeping track of whatever matter they have to settle in the midst of a tryst. How is he supposed to think about the phrasing within new edicts when her bodice is open?

But his wife is the ultimate multi-tasker. She even suggested at one point that she try to get used to him taking her from behind so she can go over documents as he does.

He drew the line there, firmly, sharply, in the harshest tone he’s ever mustered in her presence, and she’s not brought it up since. His reaction is not out of wounded pride.

She loathes that position, it terrifies her. They both know this. There are limits. That limit is making her suffer.

What they have is nothing like what he ever expected of a marriage. And in many ways, it’s wonderful. But in others… Less so.

When he did imagine a lady love for himself, he dreamed of feasting her in the Great Hall, picking flowers for her in the glass gardens, surprising her with gifts the way Ned Stark sometimes would with Lady Catelyn, saving her from a great peril, loving her in the godswood. Even with Ygritte, he fantasized about these things.

But with Sansa… The glass gardens (the ones that aren’t still being rebuilt) are all devoted to the production of fruit, vegetables, and herbs. All coin goes to construction, arming, food, supplies, men, public works, household maintenance. And Sansa holds the majority of their purse anyways. She’d feel nothing but guilt and shame if Jon were to one day randomly plop a glittering bauble in front of her, given how in need their kingdom is. Any and all frivolities must be purely for symbolic and public use to assure the world that House Stark is as strong and equipped to handle the winter as ever.

With nearly everyone believing them siblings, they don’t dare engage in any sort of intimacy outside their private chambers. And it was actually Sansa who ultimately rescued Jon from great peril by leading the knights of the Vale into battle.

Few indulgences are available to them. And even what few they have are compromised by their obligations.

While he always fostered a secret longing for children, from his earliest memory he considered it an impossible fantasy. From the beginning, he also always had his eye on The Watch, idolizing Uncle Benjen and all the stories of their bravery. He was a Snow, not a Stark. Continuing a line would never be for him. But he could earn his honor through service to the realm. So he always focussed on that dream. Fantasies of holding a son in his arms could only ever be bittersweet at best.

Sons are and were always a popular source of pride. And he was old enough before he left for the Wall to perceive and understand the glory virility brought to men. As he began to see women and girls in that certain way, he also came to understand what Theon Greyjoy was bragging about, why “many sons” was always listed among a great man’s accomplishments.

And he’d always loved being a big brother, looking after the younger siblings. Sansa claimed that she was always “awful” to him during their childhood, but that’s not the case. She was certainly the one he was least close to, but he still has fond memories of her. One of his earliest memories is of ‘tickle-fighting’ with her and Robb. He absolutely doted on Bran, Arya, and Rickon. They came to
him with their problems, something he always treasured. He rarely found them annoying the way Robb often did.

He now wonders if his blindness regarding Olly was out of a sort of paternal yearning. When he reflects on what actually transpired between himself and the lad, he realizes all the warning signs he missed, and all the things he glorified in his head. The boy had seemed so promising to Jon when he arrived at the Wall. But looking back with fresh eyes, there was really nothing exceptional about him whatsoever. No justification for Jon to see him as a possible successor.

But he was a boy Bran’s age, who needed guidance and a father figure. And Jon wanted to be that. So he ignored the remarks from people like Sam and Stannis, convinced himself of qualities that did not exist, and blinded himself to all the (plentiful, obvious) negatives.

He’s told Sansa about this. All she did was nod. “Like Joffrey and I.”

Now, he’s in the opposite situation and it’s comes with its own unpleasantness. He’s not only free to become a father, he’s obligated to be one. And none of it relates to the joy he experienced in nurturing his younger siblings.

Indeed, it’s only made him, for the first time, hyper-aware of all the trial and pain that comes with even producing a child, let alone raising one. And he’s not even the one to be burdened with the pain.

Jon’s a quick learner, and it doesn’t take him long to find the right rhythm, the right pressure, the right spots, the right approach needed to pleasure his wife correctly. It turns out, his suspicions were correct: while there were many things women had in common, they were all different, especially in the area.

Sansa liked the Lord’s Kiss as much as Ygritte did, but Jon couldn’t go about it the same way. With his lover, he could and would often just get right to it with little to no preamble--- often because Ygritte would waste no time in shoving his face between her legs. Sansa, on the other hand, needs to be eased into it. She’s shy about it, nervous.

She doesn’t allow him to try it until her blood stops, and even then, she insisted on scrubbing herself beforehand and kept interrupting him as he tried to start, usually with some worry. “Does it smell odd?” “If it looks strange, you don’t have to do this.” “What should I do with my legs?” “What should I do with everything else?” “How will I know that it’s working?”

He eventually gets her to relax enough to let him get to work, and she succumbs, but it takes a while.

If he wants to get her to go along with it, he has to spend some time touching, kissing, whispering to her, and work his way down, so to speak.

Ygritte always liked him from behind or on top. Sansa is suited towards being on top. Ygritte liked giving instructions, Sansa prefers questions. Ygritte didn’t care to hear much from him except moans, Sansa loves for him to speak to her during the act. Ygritte liked direct, hurried, bursts of passion. Sansa prefers to take her time. Ygritte seemed to almost grow more aroused by dirtier, riskier settings, Sansa is almost fanatical about cleanliness. His wife doesn’t mind some roughness, as they’ve grown more used to each other, but she always requires that in such situations she be able to look into his eyes and hear his voice.

He’s managed very well to adjust his approach. And he finds himself discovering things about himself as well. For instance, now that he’s older and less desperate, he finds that he delights in teasing his wife. He enjoys taking his time as much as Sansa does. He’s further aroused by the
intimacy and propriety of their couplings. As a greenboy, he’d feel some embarrassment about the brazeness of his activities with Ygritte after the act, and often before. They’d couple beneath their furs in the middle of their camp, or against a tree or rock. The others would offer advice and joke about dumping pales of water on them to “calm them down.” Everyone knew.

In the bedroom with Sansa, everything careful and deliberate and concealed, it feels wicked in only the best ways. They’re sharing a special secret. Their lives belong to the whole world, it seems, but this is only for them.

Almost.

Within a week, he’d mastered the art of reducing his elegant, composed, sophisticated wife to a boneless, babbling puddle.

But still, something hangs over them. And even when consumed with pleasure, Sansa still seems distracted sometimes. As much as she enjoys their couplings, her duty is still lurking somewhere in her head. Part of her is not with him, but in a nursery that does not yet exist. There’s a voice that goes, “Must get pregnant. Must get pregnant. Must get pregnant.”

Though he’s certain she would have them only engage in their intimate, languid lovemaking, that is not the extent of their activity. Whenever a spare moment is to be had, she tries to lead him somewhere private, bars the door behind them, and begins pulling up her skirts, urging him to hurry.

Sansa likes to take her time, likes to ride him in their bed, but she doesn’t just do what she likes. She has a duty, and she does not expect or require satisfaction. So, even though it is at odds with her nature, she will act like Ygritte in some ways pretty frequently.

Not because she wants him, but because they need a child.

Jon doesn’t doubt for an instant that she loves and wants him. But that isn’t what drives all their interactions. They’re not just in love. They’re not regular people. And even when they do give themselves to each other in the way they wish, it’s there. She can strip off every inch of clothing, but she is always wearing the crown.

He fears for her. And he can’t help but resent their circumstances now. The need for an heir stresses both of them.

Even once she conceives, Jon’s still afraid. So much can go wrong, and there will be nothing he can do about it. Pregnancy and childbirth are every bit as dangerous as any war. But there’s no armor one can wear, no strategy one can employ, no training for this. It’s more like a violent storm than anything.

He can’t imagine how she must feel.

The fact that his wife is one of the most romantically-inclined people he knows almost makes it worse. He can’t give her the affection that either of them dreamed of when they were younger.

Relations with his wife serve as a sharp reminder of just how intertwined with politics his life really is. How he’ll never truly be able to remove their crowns, even when they’re otherwise completely naked with one another.

Of course he can’t. Especially not now, with all that faces them.

But it still isn’t fair. He’s still a man, damn it. She’s still a woman. They’re only people. And he wants them to be able to love one another without every moment tied to everyone else.
It’s not to be.

Every step from Winterfell to Harrenhal, every bridge crossed and village passed, reminds him of this. Countless faces, gaunt but hopeful, appear. They call out to their king, their queen. All of them his responsibility.

Jon and Sansa set aside funds and implemented a road-clearing project from almost the moment they took power, and Jon is thankful for it as they journey south. He insists on having a carriage made for Sansa, not wanting her to risk riding should she conceive. It gives rise to whispers and careful eyes upon Sansa’s midsection.

Harrenhal is a vast complex of blackened spires, half-formed structures, immensely thick yet decaying walls, and roofless towers, stretching farther than the eye can see. The lands beyond the wall may have been frigid, but they sparkled. This place is death. Jon could feel the screams of the voiceless through the mostly-silent grounds. The faces of the commonfolk are mostly ashen and thin. With what Arya has told him of what she witnessed here, he’s not surprised.

They’d sent ahead blankets, bread, salted meats, and turnips for the people, and the smallfolk gather along the roads and cheer as well as their hungry bodies can allow. Jon actually prefers it to some of their most uproarious crowds, and he waves and smiles appreciatively. Flowers are thrown.

The status of Harrenhal is complicated. It’s changed hands countless times over the generations, bouncing from one House to the next. The eventual extermination and disenfranchisement of so many of its owners has only contributed to its reputation for being cursed. It was occupied by the Lannisters during the War of the Five Kings, during which the smallfolk were tortured and subjugated, and ultimately was granted to Petyr Baelish, who never bothered inhabiting it or taking care of it at all, especially in the wake of its former occupants. The castle and its domains were overrun with raiding and crime, the citizens’ only protection seeming to come from a mysterious pack of wolves.

Baelish was quickly tried, convicted, and executed for treason, departing the world with no heirs. House Baelish only went back two generations in Westeros before Petyr, and both he and his father were only children. So all the Baelish holdings, including Harrenhal, technically reverted to the crown.

Sansa, Bran, and Arya actually had an arguable blood claim to Harrenhal. And Sansa’s the only one who can sustain it now. Their grandmother on their mother’s side, was Minisa Whent Tully, wife of Lord Hoster, daughter of Lord Whent, and sister of Lady Shella Whent, who were the last holders of Harrenhal before the Lannisters took it.

But they did not claim Lord or Lady of Harrenhal among their titles. Not yet, anyways. Sansa thought it damaging to be associated with the supposed curse, and with her absorption of the Bolton domains, she didn’t want House Stark to be seen as hoarding property. Not to mention, it made for a good bargaining chip.

House Stark is in an odd position where Harrenhal is concerned, professed as stewards but more or less the lords of it in all but name.

It’s their property--- temporarily. As temporarily as they wish.

Apparently, the people here take it as an omen that bandits are often destroyed by a pack of wolves. And they’ve made provisions to ensure that the people are better off than they were under Baelish and the Lannisters. It’s worked in their favor.
So does Sansa’s Tully hair, eyes, and cheekbones. A silver clip in the shape of a Tully trout pins her hair back at one side. She waves eagerly, smile plastered on her face. If the sinister appearance of their surroundings disturb her, she gives no sign.

When they reach the entrance for Kingspyre Tower, she alights from her carriage clutching a sack of coin. Jon helps her out and leads her up the steps overlooking the courtyard. The people gather. Jon swallows.

He’s still not gotten used to speeches. Sam spoke for him at his election for Lord Commander. Lyanna Mormont spoke for him when he was declared king. He had no time to give one to his troops before the battle with Ramsay. His expressions during the battle at the Wall were more barked orders and occasional encouragement. His only proper speech was to the Free Folk at Hardholme, and even then he required Tormund’s help.

Sansa squeezes his hand.

“People of Harrenhal,” he calls out, “We are Jon the White Wolf and Sansa the Red Wolf of House Stark, King and Queen of the North, the Trident, and the Vale, Lord and Lady of Winterfell and the Dreadfort, Wardens of the North and Protectors of the Realm. We come to you this day knowing you have suffered much in recent years at the hands of our enemies. We wish we could tell you that your troubles are over. That we can wipe away all you’ve endured and make everything well for you at once. You, of all people, know the cost of these unfathomable years--- the violence, the fear, the oppression. But as much as it pains us to say, Winter is no long coming. It is here.

“In the midst of our politics, we, the very people meant to protect you, often forget our duties. Some even abused their authority. And you are the ones who bear the cost of that. It is our wish we could have done more sooner, protected you from the terrors you’ve known recently. Please know that we are here now, not to foster soldiers and turn your farms to battlefields once more, but to foster peace and ensure as much safety for you and as little bloodshed as possible. After years of being a checkpoint in the midst of the worst of wartime behavior, this place deserves to be a building ground for peace. You deserve to be the ones to bear witness to it. Winter came for you years ago, it seems. But if there is one thing you all have proven, is that there is nothing that can truly defeat you. You are all still here. Still living. Nothing, not winter, not dragonfire, not lions, not Mountains that Ride, could end you. You deserve the best of care for your strength, your endurance, for the kind welcome you’ve given us. We thank you for it, and promise you that we shall make sure that you are not forgotten, neglected, or abused again. Thank you.”

He stumbles over a few sentences. And he doesn’t realize how hard he was squeezing Sansa’s hand until he’s finished. The people cheer, louder than they did before.

They raise their joined hands, and Jon waves with his free one. Sansa eventually pries their fingers apart and steps forward, holding up her bag.

“Good People, as gesture of my good regard, I ask that you assemble and allow my ladies and I to distribute alms so that you might pay to feed yourselves.”

There’s more cheering, and the people line up in columns. Sansa moves through the center aisle created, ladies behind her with identical sacks.

It’s not much--- Copper stars. But it’s enough to feed a family for a couple moons and more than most have seen in a long, long while. They’re newly minted, as well--- engraved on one side with their profiles, side by side.

Jon fears rioting, but aside from a few pushes, the people receive their coin graciously. When the
sacks are emptied, more are brought. Enough for every adult in the courtyard.

Their names are cheered and Sansa returns to the doors. The two wave before entering the tower.

The place is predictably gloomy. Only the lower half of the towers are usable-- the others are decaying, dangerous, and filled with bats, rats, and other vermin. But even half a tower of Harrenhal is cavernous. Jon feels as if he’s falling into a deep abyss as he enters.

“You were wonderful,” Sansa whispers to him, and Jon goes red. But it distracts him from his unease being in this castle.

The castellan, a wiry man by the name of Hamish, welcomes them. “The best chambers have been prepared for you, Your Graces.”

“Have rooms of equal comfort been set up for Queen Daenerys?” Sansa inquires.

“We’ve set them aside and they’re almost ready, Your Grace,” Hamish assures her, “Queen Daenerys is due to arrive in two days, and we shall be more than prepared to accommodate her by then. But all the lords’ chambers are ready.”

Jon and Sansa exchange looks. The journey from King’s Landing to Harrenhal is a quarter of the length between here and Winterfell. By all logic, she should already be settled in here. She’d clearly taken her time in departing, and meant to send a message in doing so.

“What remains to be done?” Sansa asks.

“Madam?”

“For the queen’s chambers.”

“Well, we haven’t seen many grand guests since Lady Whent’s days. The grounds have mostly been set aside for soldiers and prisoners. We had to empty the other fine rooms, sterilize them and the furniture, replace draperies and such. The furniture is almost finished being cleaned and then all we must do is re-assemble it.”

“Please do your best to make sure they’re done as soon as possible, just in case the queen arrives early,” Sansa tells him.

“Of course, of course, My Lady. Now, if you’d allow me to escort me to your chambers—”

They’re given separate suites on the eighth floor, with bedchambers, solars, a study for him and a dressing room for her. Their accommodations are surprisingly comfortable, the braziers and fireplaces lit, the beds and windows hung with fresh drapes, the metalwork and mouldings polished, the woodwork shined, and much of the padding and cushions freshly stuffed. The chambers smell of soap, rosewater, and vinegar.

They assure Hamish of their satisfaction with their work, thanking him profusely. He doubles down on his success by informing them that baths are ready to be brought up to them if they wish for them. Both of them do, and they part for their respective soaks.

It’s when Jon is waiting for the tub and water to arrive, whistfully thinking of how much he’d like to share the tub with his wife, or at the very least observe her, that he hears something from outside that eerily reminds him of the screech of a White Walker. A page bursts into Jon’s solar.

“Your Grace, Queen Daenerys and her retinue have arrived!”
Chapter End Notes

Hope I kept you eager. :) please comment on what you liked!

(Also, I had to change the date on this posting due to a technical issue!)
The dragon queen arrives. And already, the king and queen have a lot to discuss.

Thank you again to sassy_classy_ass for beta-ing!

Jon:

Jon hurries to his window and indeed, high up above, a white dragon flaps its immense wings. He’s transfixed for a short while, his mouth suddenly dry.

But he’s a man who has faced down the Night’s King in battle. He recovers from shock quickly and spins around.

“Does the queen know?”

“I’m pretty sure the Dragon wo---”

“---Queen Sansa!”

“Right! Sorry, M’Lord. A page is informing her as well.”

Jon scowls and shrugs his cloak back on, hurrying out of the chambers to that of his wife. He finds Sansa open-mouthed by her window as maids scurry around.

“That’s a dragon,” she says in an oddly blank tone. Even without seeing her face, Jon knows her eyes must be the size of gold dragons by now.

“Aye, and we have to go and greet its mother,” Jon says, motioning for one of the women to bring her cloak with one hand and reaching for her with the others. “The blasted beast is supposed to stay five miles from the castle. And she’s early. I doubt these are accidents.”

“No…” Sansa says, reluctantly turning away from the view, “No, they wouldn’t be.”

She seems to recover once she’s turned away and donned her cloak. She glances around at the servants unpacking and commands them to stop.

“Why---?”

“Her chambers are not ready yet, and we can’t be seen as unprepared.” She glances around and calls for a woman named “Larra.”

A portly, middle-aged figure appears. “Yes, Your Grace?”
“Have all of my things moved to the king’s room at once. Do the chambers you prepared for Queen Daenerys have different drapes?”

“Aye, Madam, black ones.”

“Have them moved here. These are her chambers now.”

“Sansa---” Jon says, indignant at the idea of his wife uprooting herself so soon after their journey.

She holds up a hand. “She’s trying to catch us at unawares. We must seem as prepared as possible.”

He nods and sighs.

Daenerys’s retinue proves an unpleasant reminder of the Baratheon court’s arrival at Winterfell. It seems a lifetime ago now, and it was a day that changed everything. The banners are now black and scarlet instead of the Baratheon Black and Gold or the Lannister Gold and Scarlet, but there’s enough similarity in the scale and sumptuousness on display. There’s an exoticism to it, however, with the procession flanked by what are clearly Dothraki riders, wincing against the chill and riding in an unfamiliar style. The procession parts and a magnificent white mare with a hooded figure ride up front and center. The horse’s bridle is studded with garnets and onyx, it’s head bearing black and red plums, crimson velvet draped under the saddle. Its rider, a surprisingly diminutive figure, wears plum and gold brocade lined with silver fox fur.

Riding just behind the figure is a pretty woman with darker skin that he’s ever seen, and another person, a man judging by his build, head covered by heavy green silk.

Sansa leans over and whispers, “The woman will be Missandei, the herald. She was a slave captured from the Summer Islands and eventually freed.”

“And the other one?”

“If I had to guess, Varys, the Spider.”

“The Eunuch?”

“Careful,” she warns him, “He’s immensely dangerous. Littlefinger considered Varys to be his greatest rival.”

The man lowers his head, revealing a shiny, spherical, bald head.

“That’s definitely him.”

There’s a moment of silence when at last, their guest of honor lowers her hood. White-gold tresses tumble down her slim shoulders and Sansa gasps.

“Gods, she’s every bit as beautiful as they say.”

Jon studies her face intently. She’s indeed fine to look upon, with large, almond-shaped eyes of violet, high cheekbones, full lips, clear skin, and a delicate nose. Her expression is focussed, challenging, and confident. His eyes meet hers, and her lip curls.

Jon and Sansa join hands and descend down the steps as the herald calls out, “Announcing, Her Grace, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Realms, Empress of Dragon’s Bay, Grand Khaleesi of all the Dothraki Nations, Princess of Dragonstone, Protector of the Realm, Breaker of Chains, and Mother of
Dragons!”

In contrast, the Northern royals do not have their titles declared. Instead, Jon moves to Daenerys’s steed and smiles up at her, hand extended.

“Your Grace, if I may?”

She looks surprised, to say the least, especially as she eyes the crown atop Jon’s head. The Mother of Dragons hesitantly allows him to help her dismount, and once her feet are on the ground and Jon has kissed her knuckles, Sansa hurries forward.

“Queen Daenerys, it is an honor to meet you at least. You are most welcome here at Harrenhal. I am Sansa Stark of Winterfell, Queen of the Three Realms, and this is my husband, King Jon.”

Her tone and smile are all warmth and kindness, but she does not bow or curtsey. She shows humility, without the slightest hint of subservience.

It doesn’t hurt that Sansa’s at least half a foot taller.

It’s as perfect as possible. Daenerys’s pomposity and pretensions were writ large within her missives, from the gold-edged parchment to the repetition of her various styles and titles throughout her discourse. She was not going to arrive discreetly.

Tywin Lannister arrived here with quite a bit of pomp as well.

In contrast, Jon and Sansa decided they’d present themselves publicly as humble, down-to-earth, unextravagant, and welcoming in contrast. Well, humble enough without casting doubt on their position. They’d arrived with food, supplies, and alms, with a speech to the populace, walking among them and showing themselves. Daenerys appears with Lannister-esque trappings, having another introduce her, dripping with finery, and a terrifying beast much like the one that reduced this place to ruin centuries ago flying overhead, against the terms of an agreement made.

Which would go over better with the citizenry?

Jon can tell that the Dragon Queen is not used to this manner of welcome, especially not from people who lay claim to entire kingdoms.

“I thank you, My Lady,” Daenerys said, stressing her manner of address. It’s a breach of protocol. One addresses a queen as ‘Your Grace’ first. But the deviation is weighted: Daenerys doesn’t acknowledge either of them as royalty. “It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. I was told to expect a woman as sweet as she is beautiful. I am not disappointed. And I am also pleased to find that your brother fits that description as well.”

That’s also meant as a slight, but Jon must stifle a snicker at this. Sansa also looks as if she’s holding back some amusement when she replies, “You are too kind. And prescient, it seems, for Bran is indeed both handsome and gentle. It is a shame you could not meet him in person.”

Daenerys’s mouth twists. “I meant your other brother.”

Sansa lowers her eyes demurely, but the magic of it is that in doing so, she’s still somewhat looking down on the other queen, given their respective heights. “I am afraid my other brothers are no longer with us, My Lady. I’m sure you can relate. It’s a terrible shame, isn’t it? No doubt one would be by your side today, in true Targaryen fashion, if it were otherwise.”

The Dragon queen looks like she wishes to push this further, but stops herself. She looks more petty
by the second.

“Indeed,” she says through gritted teeth. “But I manage on my own, without a king. But I appreciate
your kind words and your welcome.”

Before another word can pass between them, there’s another screech from the sky.

Jon seizes upon the opportunity. “Speaking of welcome, I’m afraid there’s been a misunderstanding.
I thought we agreed your dragon—”

“---Viserion---”

“---Viserion, was to stay away from heavily populated areas while we meet?” Jon asks. “Pardon my
rudeness, but the safety of the people here is our foremost concern.”

“Of course. I just believe everyone should have the chance to see a dragon at least once.” She looks
up and yells out something in Valyrian. The circling beasts begins to hover in place. She shouts
something else, and the creature takes off among the clouds.

It’s an awe-inspiring display of power. Daenerys looks back at him, grinning widely. “I do hope
you’re satisfied. He won’t hurt a fly.”

“Thank you, Queen Daenerys.”

“You must be so weary from your journey,” Sansa interjects, “Allow us to escort you in. Your
rooms are waiting for you on the eighth floor.”

“Are they?”

“Indeed. I inspected them myself.”

Daenerys seems unfazed by this. “That is most kind of you to anticipate my needs. I just hope it’s not
too much trouble---”

“---Oh, n---”

“---Because my Hand has come with me as well, and given his rank, he shall require equivalent
accommodations.”

Jon balls his hands into tight fists. No, she didn’t. She couldn’t have---

“---I thought I recognized that litter!” Sansa replies, as if nothing is amiss. “Of course, we assumed
Lord Lannister would be remaining behind in King’s Landing to govern the capital for you---”

“---I thought you might want to see an old friend---”

“---But just in case, we did put in a special order, just in case he accompanied you. I do regret to
inform you that his chambers are not quite ready yet, but I’ve been assured by the castellan that they
shall be soon.”

Daenerys has the nerve to look annoyed. “I see. Well, Tyrion may be disappointed. He’s especially
weary, you see.”

“I’m sure he’ll be comfortable in one of the courtiers’ chambers until his furniture is re-assembled.
One can only do so much, so quickly, with a ruin. Please don’t take it out on the staff, they are doing
excellent work to the best of their ability.”
There’s an awkward pause. “Indeed.” Her eyes narrow, “It’s really too bad we couldn’t meet in King’s Landing then, considering. The Red Keep is still in fantastic condition.”

“I’m sure. But it can’t compete with Harrenhal for history,” Jon interrupts.

“But thickness, I’d say.”

They all turn to see Tyrion Lannister, face scared and aged, extracting himself from a Lannister litter. He grimaces slightly, and strides over to wear the royals are gathered.

“Might we take this inside, I’m sure your riders are sick of the saddle by now, and I could use some wine.” The dwarf looks at the two Starks. “You’re a man now, Snow, I can’t believe it. And Sansa! I didn’t think you could get more beautiful. Yet here you are. Seeing you like this, I’m consumed with regret that I didn’t manage to hold onto you when I had the chance.”

Jon takes his wife’s hand and looks over Lannister. They’d last parted as friends, but people and things change. They’ve all seen things, suffered things, done things.

“Charming as ever, Lord Lannister,” Sansa says, her tone unreadable. “I hope the delay with your rooms isn’t too distressing.”

“I’ve spent nights in a sky cell, courtesy of your mother and aunt. I can handle some delayed luxury for a few hours.” He cocks his head, “I’d probably be more comfortable in a tavern or brothel, anyways.”

“You’re free to patronize one, if that is your wish,” Jon snaps.

“He is most certainly not,” Daenerys interjects, with the tone of a disapproving mother, “My Hand acts respectably.”

“What a comforting development,” Jon responds as Lannister reddens.

“Indeed, Your Grace. My service to you has turned me into the soul of good behavior, of course. And every moment I now spend at work servicing the queen and the Seven Realms.”

Sansa looks at Lord Tyrion sympathetically. “Well, I dare say that such a life should suit you. I myself have adopted such a role, and thus empathize with those in a similar position. As I remember it, you always excelled at matters of state, even more than you did at drinking and debauchery. Your family, for what they were, had a great asset in you, my lord. I am just happy you’re now employing your talents to a more deserving authority.”

Their eyes meet, and his twinkle with appreciation. A look identical to the one he’d given her at Joffrey’s wedding, when she fetched the king’s thrown cup so Tyrion would not have to crawl anymore to retrieve it.

“As am I, My Lady. And I could not serve a more righteous cause. There is no authority, no figure, no leader I admire, respect, and believe in half as much as I do Queen Daenerys. Serving and serving her is the greatest honor I could hope to---”

“---Yes, yes,” Daenerys snaps again, clearly irritable, “Pardon me for interrupting, but I truly am exhausted from my journey. So, if it pleases everyone---?”
Sansa:

She sinks into the steaming water with a deep groan and dismisses her maids, leaving them alone in the solar. Jon soaks in the tub beside hers, silent, though after all that riding he must be far more sore than she. He stares determinedly at the surface of his water. Sansa laughs.

“You may look at me, if you wish.”

Jon lifts his head, sheepish. “Sorry, I know. It’s just… I feel guilty. You were supposed to have your bath in private.”

Sansa realizes that despite their intimacies since Bran’s revelation, they’ve never bathed around one another before. At least, not since they were very small and splashing around in the Hot Springs. “I don’t mind.”

“You don’t think it’ll raise some suspicion, us sharing apartments?”

“I’ve already called for a pallet. Daenerys thinks she’s caught us off-guard. She’ll have found out by now that her rooms were supposed to be mine. Now, as far as she knows, she’s forced two notoriously passionless sibling-spouses to share rooms. And we’re still sleeping separately. It’ll just seem like an awkward situation she’s forced on us.”

Jon smiles. “You’re fantastic.”

Sansa beams. “I like to think so.” She dips her head back and soaks her hair. “Still, she isn’t to be trifled with. Even I didn’t imagine she’d have the nerve to bring Tyrion here.”

She isn’t sure if the Dragon Queen is aware of all the complications of this act. It’s not just a matter of Tyrion’s personal history with her and Jon, but also his family’s recent history with the region. The people here would not take the reappearance of the Lannister Lion well. It would win Daenerys no popularity.

Tyrion’s own behavior, particularly after the comment about brothels and taverns, seemed off, too. She’d never witnessed the man show anyone or anything such reverence. It was tinged with some fear, too. There are clearly tensions between him and his queen.

That could be just as much a problem for them as for her.

“Well, it tells us one thing,” Jon remarks.

“Oh?”

“She’s well and truly threatened by us.”

“Something’s happening,” Sansa replies, considering this. He’s right. But all creatures, man and beast, were most dangerous when scared. “Something that’s making her reign less secure than she’d like us to think.”

“More problems in the East?” Jon suggests. “I know she dealt with some unrest when she took Meereen. She and her dragons are gone.”

“Possibly. But we can’t rule out local issues…”
“She has the Reach, Dorne, the Stormlands, the West, the Crownlands, and an alliance with the Ironborn.”

“Yes, but I think the crownlands may be vulnerable.” Sansa purses her lips. “It’s just so unbelievable that she wouldn’t leave her Hand behind to rule in her absence. That’s what the Hand is for. But Tyrion being here is just odd. If he isn’t in King’s Landing, he should be at Casterly Rock. My spies say that the Lannister fortune isn’t what it once was, and you’d think he’d be there, dealing with that if he’s not in the capital.”

“You think it may not just be about upsetting us?”

She nods. “I mean, I cannot be sure. But it’s just such a risky, illogical move for very little gain. But the thing is… I was in King’s Landing with Tyrion. I saw firsthand how much the people loathed him. They blamed him for all of Joffrey’s misdeeds. He had to hide away within his litter when he went out so that people didn’t throw filth at him. People would make speeches in the marketplaces decrying him as corrupting ‘Demon Monkey’. Even the method by which he beat Stannis at Blackwater ended up burning down many peoples’ houses. The Crownlands have every reason in the world to hate all Lannisters now, but they always hated him especially. Even if they view Daenerys as a savior, I can’t imagine Tyrion’s popularity has improved.”

“Not with the city or the queen, I think.”

Sansa shakes her head. “Right? It was so… odd. Granted, his remark was hardly genteel, but surely she’d be used to that by now? If she didn’t want that behavior, then she didn’t need to bring him here.”

“So she brought him here to prevent riots and uprising while she was absent.” Jon considers this. “I doubt he’s popular elsewhere, either. I mean, he may be with Daenerys now, but he’s still a Lannister. There are many of Dany’s allies who have good reason to hate his family. Dorne alone is unpredictable.”

Sansa actually snorts. That’s the ultimate understatement. Ellaria Sand and her Sand Snakes decided to avenge Prince Oberyn, Princess Elia, and her innocent children by… murdering Oberyn and Elia’s brother and nephew, destroying his House, and killing an innocent child. The Sands are utterly mad, violent, irrational, and uncontrollable. Their reputations have even reached Winterfell. And despite the body count they’ve accumulated and their victories, their reputations are not good. So strong was their lust for “revenge” that they killed innocent, harmless Myrcella for being a Lannister. What if their lust was not still quenched? Tyrion isn’t harmless, he’s clever, powerful, and he did much to preserve his family’s hold on power. On top of that, it was representing Tyrion in a trial by combat that killed Oberyn. The relations between him and the Sands couldn’t be easy.

Their behavior, if even a quarter of the stories are true, is the sort that Sansa cannot imagine Lady Olenna tolerating for very long. The Famed Queen of Thorns didn’t even like her House allying themselves with Renly or the Lannisters. Tolerating a bloodthirsty lunatic and her rabid daughters right at her border, especially after what happened to her family? Tensions had to be mounting already. Then there’s the Ironborn alliance, after what Euron did in the Reach…

Upon proposing these theories to Jon, he seems surprised. “I suppose it makes sense. But this soon?”

“Perhaps. Think how quickly things changed for us. Or maybe Daenerys has enough to foresight to fear such a thing. After the agreement she made with Asha Greyjoy, what’s to keep other nations from seceeding? Especially a place like Dorne, which rebelled against the Targaryens for so long. Ellaria Sand murdered Myrcella because of the actions of Tywin, Cersei, and Gregor Clegane. What’s to stop her from deciding that Daenerys should pay for the fact that Aerys kept Elia captive in
the Red Keep in the first place? She exterminated her supposed love’s family, for pity’s sake. And his own daughters helped her.”

“And you say Olenna never liked being drawn into affairs outside the Reach…”

“...And she was proven right. Tragically right.”

Jon ducks his head under water for a few seconds, then emerges. “Still, would Olenna risk provoking the crown? Daenerys still has Casterly Rock, Storm’s End, the capital, all of the Dothraki, three cities, and three dragons.”

“Even three dragons can’t subdue everything, especially across such vast distances. And she has a monstrous enemy charging right for her borders. Meanwhile, we were chosen by all of our constituents.” Sansa glances at Jon. “And we have a potential dragonrider of our own.”

Jon swallows. “I think it’s best if I approach the beast myself before we play that card.”

Sansa shifts uncomfortably. “I’d rather not have you anywhere near it.”

It’s bad enough she eventually has to see him off to fight the White Walkers. But until then, Sansa doesn’t want to allow her husband to be in any greater danger. She’s been trying to process and prepare herself for the possibility of Jon dying in the War for the Dawn, and that’s still something she’s working on. But losing him even before that? No. Putting him close to a literal fire-breathing monster was something she’d prefer to avoid, if possible.

Her husband sighs. “If we tell her, she’ll probably force the issue anyways.”

He’s right again. Sansa clutches her brow and reaches for her hair-soap. She lathers up and rinses out her locks, all the while feeling his eyes on her.

When she’s finished, she looks over at her husband. “What?”

“Promise me that whatever happens, you’ll let me do that some day.”

“What, wash my hair?”

“Aye.”

She blushes again. “I promise.” She smiles. “I’ll let you rub my shoulders now, if you wish. Travel was rough on my back.”

He gets out of the water, and she leans into his hands, groaning at his touch. His hands were incredible: strong, careful, nimble, gentle. Nothing got the ache out of her bones like him.

A moment later, his lips are at her hair and his breath teases her skin. “I’m enjoying the view.”

Her whole body flushes. There’s an edge to Jon’s voice, one he only adopts when in... very particular situations. It lights a fire within her that manifests itself with a sense of mischief and in a hyper-awareness of the fact that they’re both nude

She stretches her arms out and arches her back very deliberately, so that her breasts stick out as much as possible.

Intertwined atop the bed twenty minutes later, they stare up at the canopy, Jon running his fingers down her hair.
"When this is all over," he says after a while, "All of it, I mean. Harrenhal, the negotiations, the war… I want us to do things together."

"Oh, certainly. I was just thinking about how we don’t spend enough time with one another."

He pokes her. "I mean other things."

"Like what?" She asks with an affectionate smile, knowing she’ll enjoy her answer.

"Lots of things. I’d like to become better in the lists, host a tourney on your Name Day, and win it for you. Crown you Queen of Love and Beauty. I’d like us to take a tour of all of our domains, visit vassals, see everything from The Wall to Stoney Sept, from Bear Island to Gulltown."

She sighs wistfully. "Me too. I’d like to have all of our portraits painted. Have some made into miniatures so that whenever we’re parted, we can see one another’s face. I want us to build tribute to those we’ve lost and….”

"...And what?"

The Queen of Winter turns onto her side, resting her weight on her bent arm. "I was thinking, if we never tell the world who you really are, what if we made something else up? What if we claimed you were actually Uncle Brandon’s son? I’ve heard stories that he knew many ladies. You’d still be a Stark. You’d be a cousin, not a brother…"

Jon’s brows rise. "Sansa, we’re not even sure how we’re going to plan that yet."

"No, but it’s an idea. I’d like for us to show our love to our people without there being any… stigma. It may make things easier with Uncle Edmure, as well." She hesitates. "But if the idea hurts you, that’s fine. …It was just an idea."

"Ideas are fine. And you haven’t hurt me." He still looks up. "To be honest, I’m still not sure how I feel about any of this."

She presses her hand to his chest. He’s not lying. She knows this. Jon has never been good at lying to her, and gave up trying months ago. If he were being dishonest, he’d say he’s completely fine. He’s not. But he’s not destroyed, either. Sometimes, people need time to figure things out. She just wishes she knew how to help him. That he could tell her how. But she can tell he doesn’t know any better than she does.

He puts his hand over hers, then brings it to his lips to kiss her palm. "Forgive me if I’m spoiling the ambiance, but…"

"I think I’ve already done that. What?"

"I thought of another reason for why Tyrion might be here," he states.

"Oh?"

"I fear she might have him claim you. So I don’t think you should have more rooms assembled for yourself. And I’d like it if you kept Ghost with you when I’m not around."

Sansa frowns. She hopes he’s wrong. That Tyrion wouldn’t do that.

Jon had made a friend of Lord Lannister at The Wall, but that was before Father’s head was taken, before the War of the Five Kings, before… everything. Today was the first time Jon had seen the
man in six and a half years. And since then, Tyrion had, in fact, served his family’s interests. He’d helped them win the War of the Five Kings, helped them keep Joffrey’s regime afloat, helped them in various schemes, many of which hurt the Starks.

Sansa, for her part, never came to complete peace with this, especially after The Red Wedding. She believes that her former “husband” truly had no idea of it, but the fact is that his family never would have been capable of such a thing if he hadn’t helped them succeed in so many other things beforehand. If not for Tyrion’s tireless efforts on behalf of his father, sister, and nephew, they’d have lost at Blackwater, the Lannister army would have been destroyed, Sansa might have been returned to her family long ago, no clandestine deals would have been made between Lord Tywin, Lord Bolton, and Lord Frey, and none of them would have dared act against Robb. Robb, Rickon, and her mother might still be alive. The Boltons would have never taken the North. She’d never have ended up with Littlefinger and been sold to Ramsay.

But she’d also witnessed all of Joffrey’s reign, when Tyrion served his family. He’d been kind when he could, and clearly loathed his family’s actions. He’d defended her in his own ways. He was always clearly opposed to them on moral grounds.

She’d said as much to Jon. But that didn’t improve her husband’s feelings on the whole thing. In Jon’s mind, Tyrion’s ethical opposition to what his family was doing only made his service to them worse. He knew better, but did what he could to keep those cruel tyrants in power anyways. When Sansa argued that he was desperate to be accepted by his family, Jon retorted that he’d always been desperate for acceptance, too, but he never aided tyrants in their atrocities to gain it. “And I had many, many opportunities.”

Jon, if anything, seemed to feel betrayed by Tyrion’s actions during the war. “He called me friend, then went off to help people he didn’t even like kill my family, keep you hostage, and steal our home.”

When Sansa reminded him that Tyrion defied his father by refusing to consummate their marriage, Jon said that was the only reason he’d let the man live. “Showing the most basic level of decency by not personally raping a terrified, hostage child does not wipe away everything else.” He reminded Sansa of the atrocities Gregor Clegane committed in the Riverlands under Tywin Lannister’s order. “And he still supported their cause.”

“Well, ultimately, he killed his father, and now at war with his siblings,” she’d replied. Jon only scowled.

“Yes, by supporting the woman with dragons. And only after he had to flee from his family for his life. If he wanted to repent, he could take a real risk and try to help some of the people his family has actually hurt. Now, instead of helping his family try to subjugate us, he’s helping Daenerys try to subjugate us.”

That conversation had been weeks ago, and Sansa tried not to bring it up much since. They’d thought Tyrion would be in King’s Landing, ruling in Daenerys’s absence during the parlay anyways. But now…

She understands Jon’s point. And given what she has witnessed thus far, she can’t deny it could be a possibility. Sansa believes Tyrion’s kindnesses were always genuine, and that he didn’t want to marry her. Not now, not ever. But that didn’t mean he necessarily wouldn’t ignore his conscience when pressured. He’d been terrified of Tywin, and desperate for the love, respect, and acceptance of his father and entire family. Now, he seemed to be afraid and/or devoted to Daenerys. Perhaps the tension between the two is over this. Perhaps she has ordered him to take Sansa, perhaps he protested, but is doing so reluctantly.
Like with Tywin. He’d ultimately defied the worst of his father’s orders, but that didn’t mean he’d defy Daenerys. Even Tywin didn’t have dragons. Nor did he seem to have any of the genuine loyalty and admiration Tyrion seemed to hold for his queen.

If Daenerys and Tyrion came to Harrenhal intending to take her and, consequently, the North and Winterfell, though, they’d be in for a rude surprise. She and Jon, even before their marriage, had made and ratified significant adjustments to the Stark succession laws, and even had all their vassals swear to uphold it for good measure.

Laws engineered to 1) give people further protection against forced unions and/or ones designed to seize their property and/or ones designed to make sure Tyrion and any of his children with Sansa could never take possession of the Stark titles even if they were legally married. If she were to be made “Lady Lannister”, everything Stark would immediately be passed to Jon and Arya.

It officially applied to everyone the moment it was signed. Jon and Sansa even adhered to a number of the clauses and requirements they’d outlined before their wedding to further legitimize the law.

So, if Tyrion chose to claim/steal Sansa as his wife, he still couldn’t claim Winterfell through her. Daenerys couldn’t claim connection to the North. Even if they declared that they somehow acquired explicit, non-coerced consent from Sansa and had the marriage consummated, it wouldn’t matter. If Sansa declared herself Lady Lannister in accordance with Northern law, her titles, claims, and rights to the North would be forfeit, and all of it would either be acquired by Jon alone or, if he was dead, Winterfell would be Arya’s.

Any attempt at disputing this would be met with revolt from every lord who had sworn to uphold this.

That was every lord in in the North, Trident, and Vale. Not that trying to steal Sansa in the first place wouldn’t do that as well.

But as protected as Winterfell might be, that didn’t necessarily help them. If Sansa gets kidnapped, she’s kidnapped, and there will be only so much she can do to protect herself once she’s taken.

Still… She finds it hard to believe such a thing would happen. Surely, Daenerys realized how destructive such an act would be?

The problem is, she can’t be sure, because she isn’t yet sure of Daenerys’s character. Sure, the woman had been less than pleasant during the introduction, but Sansa could understand her weariness. Daenerys defeated Cersei, and by all reports, her foes and hostages were treated well. Cersei Lannister had been strangled to death by her twin by the time Dany made it into the Red Keep, but all those who were taken didn’t suffer needlessly. Most of the Lannister soldiers were allowed to return home unscathed. The regular subjects were fed. Even the people Dany had executed were dispatched as painlessly as possible. The woman had also spent the prior years freeing thousands, if not millions, from the the horror of slavery.

But there were other reports, of the woman being less merciful with other foes in the past, of many innocents in her domains still suffering after her “liberation”, of her being feared as much as she was loved. Of her brutalizing innocent people.

Even her commitment to “freedom” is suspect. If Daenerys is so committed to freeing slaves, why has she come to conquer Westeros, and not the many, many places, including a number of the so-called Free Cities, that practiced slavery? Slavery in Westeros has been illegal since the Age of Heroes. Why not first fly her dragons and sail her ships to the much-closer city of Volantis, where thousands of men, women, and children were in bondage?
If she cares so much for freedom, then why doesn’t she just accept their independence? That was the express will of the people, after all. Why would she even want to impose her authority on the unwilling?

If she were truly benevolent, why push this issue when she knows the White Walkers are coming? Why not at the very least declare a temporary truce, save her intended subjects from the monsters coming their way, and then address the matter of independence? They’d extended that offer to the queen, and it was refused. Why take the risk of so many lives if she truly cares about people?

Why continue to ally herself and tolerate the vicious criminal activity of people like Ellaria Sand? If she cares so much for justice, why not seek justice for Myrcella, Doran, and Trystane Martell by now?

Why do things like have Viserion swoop down over the castle in violation of her promises?

Why be so hostile towards the North, especially after she’d already granted a crown to Yara Greyjoy? Why bring Tyrion here, despite knowing the uncomfortable history? She had other advisors.

Still, Sansa wants to believe this woman is good. Westeros needed good leaders. And she wants Tyrion’s presence here to be harmless. She wants to put all that behind her, move on. She wants to believe he’s gone on to better things, that he’s no longer complicit in any tyranny.

And she’s not sure she wants Ghost protecting her all the time. She’d prefer Ghost follow Jon, especially if he might be meeting a dragon soon.

“I already have a guard.”

“Father had a guard, and Jaime Lannister still managed to kill them all.” Jon shakes his head sadly, “And maybe we should summon some people from your uncle and cousins’ household. Remind Daenerys and Tyrion just how many forces have an interest in protecting you.”

That seems fair. “Very well, but I don’t think that Tyrion is here to abduct me. I doubt either he or Daenerys are stupid enough to spark a war on that scale.”

“Just in case, though… We did pack your…” He grimaces, “Marital evidence?”

He means the maesters’ accounts and the bloody sheets and dress from her wedding night with Ramsay. She nods and sits up.

“Are they safe?” Jon asks her.

“They’re in my mock-box,” she tells him as she gets out of bed.

Among her trunks of things is one she inherited from Littlefinger. It had since been repainted and redecorated to be a Stark chest rather than a Baelish one, and wasn’t particularly big, but very heavy. Sansa had pawned off all of Baelish possessions after his execution, but she’d kept this.

The box was imported specially from Braavos, and was made with a wondrous little it device. Other trunks, padlocked, even the ones with built-in locks, could easily be broken into. Molds of the right key could be made, the lock could be broken apart, and Sansa even knew of tools and kits that were designed to unlock things without a key. But this device wasn’t opened with a key.

No, to open this, one need to know a special number. One combination of six numbers out of a million. If you tried to break the lock, it permanently jammed. The rest of the thing was lined with
steel, so it could be otherwise broken into, and would even survive a fire.

She’d found the box when he’d been imprisoned and had it examined by the best artisans and craftsmen in the area. When she realized what it must be, she knew she’d found great answers. Even the most careful, devious schemers needed records, evidence, and a place to put some of it.

She’d gone to Baelish in his cell to learn how to open it. And she offered him a choice. He was going to die. If he told her truthfully how to unlock the box, he’d be ended by a quick, clean, painless beheading. If he refused, he’d burn to death. If he tricked her, he’d have a slow, slow death that combined every type of pain imaginable, and lots of it.

“You have a gentle heart,” he told her.

“I fed the man you sold me to to his own dogs,” she reminded him.

He told her at once. And inside, she found a treasure trove of plans, secrets, names, numbers, location. Enough information for her to set up some very advantageous trade agreements between the North and some merchants overseas, track down mountains of laundered gold, set up a longer-range spy network, gain a better understanding of the current situation, root out several traitors, secure the loyalty of key vassals and allies, and create insurance for herself and House Stark.

She kept her agreement with Baelish, and once she had the trunk open, she memorized the combination and had it reupholstered and redesigned. It looks like one of her regular, smaller trunks, with a false padlock and everything.

Jon smiles at this. “Good.”

“But you’re right, I suppose we can’t be too careful. If Daenerys is anything, it’s bold.” She rests her face against his shoulder. “I’ve been also thinking… Do you think there’s a possibility that we could convince Daenerys that we might truly invade?”

His smile drops and his eyes narrow. “Where are you going with this?”

“Such a threat might encourage Daenerys to make peace with us, if she means to threaten us, as well. Especially if we tell her about your lineage. Make her think that trying to seize our half of Westeros could end up losing her both halves. I mean, it’s not like we haven’t offered compromises. And she might be willing to see sense once she recognizes that we are not willing to accommodate her forever…”

She goes into more detail. About how they might pose a true threat by undermining Daenerys’s relationships with her followers and convincing factions like The Reach or even Dorne to switch sides— After all, neither Olenna Tyrell nor the Sand Snakes were likely to appreciate Daenerys not only appointing a Lannister to the highest office in the land, but possibly trying to make him Lord of the North, as well. How they might imply that they’d offer her allies independence and crowns of their own. Or convince the rest of Westeros that King Jon was preferable to Queen Daenerys. Especially if he might be able to ride the dragons as well. Or even convince them that they’d all be better off if there were no dragons at all… Those beasts had been slain before. House Uller had famously brought down Queen Rhaenys and her dragon, Meraxes. And Ellaria Sand just happened to be an Uller herself. That they had sent a wight’s hand to King’s Landing, and could send similar packages to every family in the South, telling them that their queen would rather they fall to these monsters than respect the wishes of half the continent. That she only would grant liberty to the Ironborn, of all groups, and would subject them all to brutal, icy undeath in order to subjugate everyone else.
Jon’s face wavers. When she finishes speaking, he looks up at the canopy. “It’s a dangerous play to make.”

“One we’d use only if absolutely necessary.”

He looks at her again. “You’re really determined not to bend the knee, aren’t you?”

Sansa frowns. It’s something she’s only starting to come to terms with, but it’s true. Any and every thought of kneeling before that awful, hulking Iron monstrosity in the Red Keep makes her skin crawl.

“Rhaegar Targaryen seized Lyanna away from her family. When our grandfather and uncle went before the Iron Throne to protest, they were burnt alive, and the Mad King demanded Father and Robert Baratheon as well. The Targaryens did these things and plunged all of Westeros into a bloody war. Baratheons and Lannisters replacing them on that thing yielded the same result. And… You know how Cersei blew up the Great Sept of Baelor?”

Jon cringes. “Wildfire.”

“Aye. It’s why Daenerys took so long to finally take the throne. Cersei threatened to burn the whole city if they tried to sack it. Dany hesitated for a while, though she ultimately took the risk.” Another count against their fiery neighbor. Sansa caught glimpses of only a fraction of what that substance could do during Blackwater, and she loathed it. But she’d also researched it when she got the opportunity, as she’d considered it as a potential weapon they might use against the White Walkers. The conclusions she’d drawn from her research and just a bit of logical thinking painted an even more troubling picture.

“I don’t think Daenerys would have hesitated as she did if she didn’t have reason to believe it. Reports say that Cersei was serious, but the Kingslayer got to her before she could...” Sansa pauses to shudder, then continues.

“Cersei didn’t get that much wildfire from nowhere. The Lannisters used it before, at Blackwater. It was a decisive part of their victory. And after setting the whole bay on fire, they still had enough for Cersei to blow up the sept and possibly the whole city. Tyrion was with your aunt at the time, and he was the one who engineered the use of the wildfire against Stannis at Blackwater, so he would have known what his sister was capable of. I researched the stuff myself. Wildfire is hard to make, even harder to preserve and handle. The materials and labor is expensive. It takes a long time, too. Years and years to produce a few barrels’ And Cersei had enough of it to make Daenerys hesitate on invading King’s Landing. How do you think she got so much?”

Jon takes a couple second, furrowing his brows. “She wasn’t the one who had it all made. There was plenty already there, she just found it and had more made.” The King of Winter swallows. “You think Aerys was storing it all?”

Sansa nods. “Aerys was considered a madman for a reason. So much of such a rare and dangerous substance has to be gathered and stored for a long time. We all know what sort of monster that man was. Cersei blew up hundreds of people in the Great Sept and threatened to do the same to the entire city. I think she took a lot of inspiration from her husband’s predecessor.

“Under the Lannisters, Father was killed, Mother and Robb and countless others were butchered in violation of our most sacred laws, I was beaten and tortured and pursued, the North was put under the rule of House Bolton. And long before that… With the Dance and the Blackfyre rebellions and ninepenny kings and so much more… House Stark has lost so much under the Iron Throne, been ill-used and exploited, and had their loyalty repaid with every violation of a liege’s promises possible.”
“The court there was always mostly dominated by southerners, despite our service,” Sansa remarks bitterly, a lump rising in her throat. “And that led to the Watch being neglected, the Riverlands being made the first-choice battleground, and no progress. What has the Iron Throne done for us, ever?”

Her voice cracks a bit on that question. It’s so hideously true. And unfair. Unjust. There’s no justice but what they could make. And she cannot see how she could give their people the justice they deserve if she relinquished their independence and made them subject, once again, to the whims of that jagged symbol of tyranny.

But she tries, and manages, to regain some composure, and continues with a level, even tone.

“Even if Daenerys turns out to be a just ruler, how can we know how her descendents will turn out? Dragons are back. If we bend the knee, we’ll make that family more powerful than they’ve ever been. That throne more powerful than it’s ever been. Even Aegon and Maegor had to deal with The Faith, but Cersei’s ended that, they struggled to take Dorne for generations, but the throne has it now, Daenerys also has her holdings overseas…” It’s utterly dizzying, really. “It’s too much power for one person or family to have. And someone will abuse it, at some point. And it could end up being more powerful than ever.”

Sansa closes her eyes, trying and failing not to shake. “I’ve stood before the Iron Throne, kneeled before the Iron Throne, begged before the Iron Throne. And I can’t stand the thought of any of us or the people we’re supposed to protect doing it ever again.”

Jon’s arms are soon around her, and she rests against them for a while. She doesn’t cry, but she does shake. And she does imagine another Joffrey atop the throne, not pointing a crossbow but a giant chain leash to an even bigger dragon, ordering her to be stripped naked, beaten bloody, and, eventually, ordering his dragon to fire. She pictures Winterfell burning, being reduced to a ruin just like Harrenhal. She tries not to. She represses these thoughts, just as she has so many times before. And she calms herself.

Eventually, Jon speaks. “I take it this means you don’t intend for us ever to threaten an invasion sincerely?”

Sansa pulls back and looks at him. “Not to take the throne ourselves, no.”

Jon snorts. “Oh?”

“Maybe I could see us invading to destroy the thing… Actually grant the other realms independence, make Westeros like it was before Aegon. But no way in Seven Hells would I want to see you on that thing.”

Mock-offense is Jon’s response. “Oh, so you don’t want your husband to have his birthright, then?”

Sansa knows he’s joking, but she’s still serious. The only thing that could be worse than an all-powerful Iron Throne would be becoming the people responsible for it. “Aerys. Robert. Joffrey. Tommen. Cersei. After how they ended up, you honestly think I want you on that blasted thing? No. I love you, remember?? I want you to stay home and for us to have as little to do with that place as possible. This isn’t about wanting power or a crown. It’s about freedom.”

Her husband leans over and kisses her on the mouth. When he pulls back, he keeps his face hovering an inch or so over hers. “You realize that we may end up having to bend the knee anyways?”

Sansa cringes. “I’ll only accept that after every other peaceful resolution is off the table.”

“So you don’t want a war over this. You’re not determined to destroy the throne if Daenerys denies
“That’s the only thing I want less than that hideous, looming chair in our lives.” She groans. “The destroying-the-throne thing… That would only be if Daenerys turns out to be another Joffrey or Aerys. Even subjugating us wouldn’t quite put her on that level.”

“Just wanted to make sure we’re still on the same page.” Jon gives a sigh of relief.

Sansa nods. She can’t have another war. Especially not now.

“Jon…” She says suddenly, hesitant. Her plan wasn’t to tell him now, but given the morbid turn this conversation had taken, she feels a bit compelled. And perhaps it was better for him to know, now. Maybe the knowledge might help with the negotiations. Or not. It’s so early, after all. Sansa knows she’s just trying to come up with practical reasons to tell him now, and not after another couple of weeks have passed. But...

“What, Sweetling?” He clutches her face with an irresistible tenderness.

“There’s… There’s a chance I may be… in a condition.”

It’s been three months since that heartbreaking blood appeared between her legs. She’s been sick and tires easily. Her breasts have ached.

The hand on her cheek falls, Jon’s eyes widen and he moves back, looking shaken. He brings his head to his forehead and stares blankly at the wall opposite the bed.

She waits.

An eternity seems to pass when finally, “Are you sure?”

She reddens. That question is why she was planning to wait to give him this news. After all, if she’s wrong, or she loses it (every septa and maester has told her the first few moons are the most dangerous), he’d be crushed. She scrambles to alleviate some of the potential damage. “Not… Not entirely. I’ve never been with child before, that I know of. I saw a septa before we left, but that was only after a month, and she said we couldn’t be absolutely sure until three moons have passed. But she said I might be. She told me things to take note of, and some of them have happened.”

Her husband start breathing heavily. “Did you speak to a maester? Get examined?”

She blushes further. After a number of her experiences, she’s become distrustful of and nervous around maesters. The one at Winterfell was the same one that served Ramsay. He’d examined her before to verify her maidenhood. In King’s Landing, she was sometimes treated by Grand Maester Pycelle. After her father died, he had her held down to her bed so he could touch her for an examination. He gave her looks that made her uncomfortable, and was uncaring when he had to treat her after one of Joffrey’s beatings. “No, and I don’t want to. Maesters are all men, and I don’t like them touching me. Or looking at me. Or telling me what to do. Maester Syrus was Ramsay’s man, besides. Lord Roose ordered him to track my courses and look at me every month.”

Jon’s face falls from guilt. “I’m sorry, Sweetling. I just—”

“---No, I understand. We need to be sure. I didn’t want to tell you until I was. But…” Her voice trails off as she searches for the words to explain.

It’s not easy. But she wants them to just have a moment. A pure, happy moment that all husbands and wives are supposed to. Something normal. Something real. Something good and not tied up in
subterfuge and negotiations and dynastic tensions. They’ve arrived at a castle famous for death. Life is what they need.

The pressure is greater than ever now that they’re here. They need some relief, something that they can celebrate together, something to free them from one worry, at least. Sure, the child is not born yet, but neither of them need to worry about fertility anymore, at the very least. And she just wants to give him something.

“...I thought we could both use some good news.”

He glances at her, and she sees his eyes flicker. His mouth twitches. “Well, since we’re not technically, completely certain yet, we shouldn’t be lax in our efforts to have a child, should we? We’re more likely to avoid disappointment if you’re not to put you in that condition as soon as possible, don’t you agree?”

Now he grins at her in a way that makes her heart flutter. “Oh yes, My King.”

Any weariness the two might feel after their long journey does not show itself. Their prior lovemaking was soft and gentle and while loving, did not involve much energy being exerted. But this time, it’s another matter entirely. It’s like they’ve been revived.

“I’m going to put a thousand babes in you,” he tells her as he pounds into her, “You’ll never have a flat belly again. I’m going to take you, fill you with my seed, fill you up over and over and over... You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Wife?”

Moaning is her response, wordless, but clearly a confirmation of this.

When they finish, he’s suddenly gentle and reverent. He lies on his stomach at an odd angle and begins stroking and pressing soft kisses to her belly, as if he’s trying to coax whatever is inside her to grow and appear right then and there.

With a fond smile, she says, “So you’re happy?”

“Happier than I’ve been since we realized we could have a true marriage,” he tells her. He gives her the biggest grin she’s seen in what seems like ages. Her heart swells and warms.

“We ought to share the good news,” Sansa suggests, her mind at work. Yes, it was soon, and there’s a risk, but Jon’s feelings are the most important thing. Let Daenerys and all of Westeros that they had a future. The other queen is twice widowed, with neither husband nor children. And it would draw public opinion in their favor. It wouldn’t look good for the dragon queen to distress a woman with child, after all.

So they do. Time arrives for the impromptu welcoming/opening banquet that originally planned to take place two nights from this one. Jon sits between both queens at the center of the High Table, spending the whole night being extra-attentive. It’s especially entertaining since his distraction means that Daenerys and her people cannot get him to focus on them enough to goad him into starting up negotiations right there at the table.

Just before the main course is due to arrive, Sansa begins tapping the end of her fork against her cup, sending out a ringing sound that soon silences the room. Jon rises, cup in hand.

“My Lords and Ladies, first of all, I’d like to express thanks and admiration for our guests, Queen Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, and her court. We are honored to host you, and hope that this visit shall produce peace and prosperity for our realms, and bring about a great alliance with which we might defeat our enemies!”
“Hear, hear!” Many, most of them members of their retinue, cheer and take swigs from their cups. But they stop when Sansa starts tapping her cup again.

“Forgive me, good people, but I need you to indulge me further. For there is something to celebrate which I believe can only be seen as the most promising of omens for the future of the North and South. For my wife, Queen Sansa of House Stark, and I have conceived!”

Cries of shock echo throughout the realm. The response is mixed. Jon helps her to her feet.

“So, to the future of peace between our realms, to both of the queens, and to the heir which Queen Sansa carries!”

Everyone drinks and cheers to at least a polite degree. Much of Daenerys’s retinue are anxious and curious.

The other queen herself nearly spills her wine as she brings the cup to her lips, her hand shaking. Her face is flushed and her eyes narrow on Sansa’s belly, then her face. In acknowledgement, Sansa pauses from her drinking and lifts her cup a little higher, smiling at the other queen.

She notices Tyrion as well, whose expression is dark and deep in thought.

Several people, especially the Northerners, come to her to offer congratulations and wish them a strong, healthy son. Daenerys makes wooden sentiments of the same nature.

The king and queen are giggling together when they close the bedchamber door over the look on the dragon queen’s face. They fall asleep whispering to each other about it.
Diplomacy

Chapter Summary

The first day of meetings commences.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to Hannah for beta-ing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa:

At dawn, she wakes to a passionate kiss from her husband, who then proceeds to pat her belly affectionately and say, “Good morning, Baby. Your mummy and daddy have a busy day ahead of them!”

She chuckles, both at his behavior and his characterization of what waited for them. The first day of negotiations. It was planned to take place in a council chamber all day long. They’d be bringing Lord Manderly, Lord Reed, Tormund, Lord Royce, Lord Mallister, Brienne, and, of course, Davos. Meanwhile, Tyrion, Missandei, Lord Randyll Tarly, Grey Worm, a Dothraki lord called Barro, and Lord Rosby would accompany Daenerys.

When everyone enters, each party from opposite entrances, there’s a formal exchange of pleasantries. Daenerys carries a pot with gold decorations on the sides and holds it out to Sansa.

“What is this?” Sansa asks, not yet taking it.

“Well, I thought about your condition and felt it should be accommodated. Something for you in case you fall sick.”

Sansa struggles to keep a straight face. It’s a chamber pot. She doesn’t smell or see anything that implies anything but cleanliness, but it doesn’t need to be dirty now. “How considerate of you. Do you often handle your own chamber pots?”

Daenerys’s delight fades. “Of course not.”

“So you prefer to carry the waste receptacles of others, then? How grand your court must be, for even the lords to relieve themselves in such fine receptacles!”

A few people stifle laughter. Daenerys glares. “This is an unused pot, Queen Sansa, I assure you.”

“Doubly kind of you, then, to have a brand new one made for me, and on such short notice! Brienne, would you place this fine gift next to my chair?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”
Sansa eyes Daenerys carefully as she neglects to even touch the shiny new piss/shit/vomit pot. “I only wish I had a gift for you now, oh....” She looks at her hands, then removes an amber ring. “Take this, please.”

Daenerys’s eyes narrow as she examines it. “It looks like there’s something in the stone.”

“Are you not familiar with amber?” Sansa asks, “Well, you see, that’s because there is. The stone is actually sap that hardened over the course of centuries. Before it does, though, it often traps things inside it--- insects, leaves, etc. So inside that is a perfectly preserved ladybug and wildflower petal that existed during the Age of Heroes.”

Daenerys actually looks interested, despite herself. “I could not take this.”

“You must. As a token. You needn’t worry. I’m only giving you one of many. Such things are common in The North.”

Daenerys’s eyes narrow, but her smile widens. “I’m pleased to hear that the North is so suited towards preserving things, even down to the smallest bug!”

There’s an awkward silence, and oddly enough, the dragon queen glances at her stony-faced advisors. Finally, Tyrion speaks. “Well, now that that is settled, shall we proceed?”

“Yes. Let’s.” Jon agrees.

Everyone takes their seats, and Sansa finds herself directly across from Tyrion. He looks at her as if she’s some sort of puzzle he can’t solve, and she likes that. Advisors unfurl papers, and Daenerys, already disgruntled, speaks first.

“The Iron Throne was built by my ancestor, Aegon the Conqueror, from the blades of those who futilely resisted him. It represents three hundred years of unity between all the peoples and realms of Westeros. The entire continent, from the Northernmost point to the deepest south, joined under a glorious dynasty for three centuries, creating the greatest civilization the world has ever known---”

“---Pardon me, Your Grace,” Tormund interrupts, “But you’re wrong.”

She appears affronted by being interrupted by a man draped in fifty pounds of bearskin. “Excuse me?”

“The entire continent hasn’t been unified under the Iron Throne, not for three hundred years, not ever. None of the Free Folk ever knelt. Beyond the Wall are vast, vast lands inhabited by many, many different nations of people who have that in common,” Tormund tells her, looking quite irritated himself, “Even now, we follow the King and Queen here, but only because we choose to. And they’re not Iron Throne. And while we follow them for now, we do not, have not knelt to them, either.”

Sansa clears her throat. She’s a bit perplexed, honestly. The dragon queen obviously had prepared her statements, but just a few sentences in, she’d stated something that was so inaccurate in so many ways. How had no one caught it? She glances at Tyrion, Lord Rosby, and Lord Tarly. All of them look slightly embarrassed, but say nothing. So Sansa does. “It’s not just the far North, either. Dorne wasn’t conquered by Aegon. It took over a century for the Iron Throne to finally rule there. And even then, it was only when House Martell agreed, and were granted special privileges that other areas never enjoyed.”

Daenerys was just lucky that she hadn’t included any of the Dornish in her delegation. If word of that mistake got back to those infamous Sand Snakes, the reaction was unlikely to be favorable.
“Speaking of Dorne,” Jon adds, looking down the table, “I find it very interesting that there isn’t a Dornishman here. You have Lord Tarly from The Reach—,” Jon spits Tarly’s name, “—But Princess Ellaria allied with you as well. And I believe the Stormlands are yours as well. Yet I don’t see a Stormlander representative here, either. Well, not on your side, anyways. I’m surprised that neither place wanted representation. We made sure to bring Lord Mallister from the Trident and Lord Royce from the Vale to represent their regions. We even have two Stormlanders ourselves. Tell us, is there a reason that both places didn’t desire to contribute to our negotiations?”

The Dragon Queen and Tyrion exchange looks. Dany’s is furious, yet oddly expectant. Her Hand answers.

“The princess and lords made it clear they had enough trust in us to speak for all of Westeros.”

“But The Reach and Westerlands didn’t feel the same way? How unfortunate,” Sansa replies, irked by the part about ‘all of Westeros.’ The whole reason they’re here is because of ‘all of Westeros.’

“All the people here are here by my request,” Daenerys snaps.

“Of course.” Jon nods. “All of your people.”

The dragon queen sighs. “The point is, though, that the North—” Tormund opens his mouth to say something, but Jon silences him with a gesture so Daenerys may continue, “—The Vale of Arryn, and the Riverlands have been part of the empire of the Iron Throne from the beginning. If it weren’t for my ancestors, the Riverlands would still be ruled by the Ironborn. Your ancestor Torrhen Stark freely bent the knee to King Aegon upon their meeting. They’ve always knelt to the authority of the throne.”

“I’m sorry, Queen Daenerys,” Jon says again, “But once more, we must correct you. Our own brother Robb, King in the North, led the North and the Trident against Cersei Lannister and Joffrey Baratheon and declared themselves independent.”

“They rebelled against false kings, that is true,” Lord Rosby manages to sputter, “But now, the true heir sits upon the throne. The legitimacy of it and its authority is restored.”

“Your queen’s father was also a true heir, though,” Lord Manderly replies, “But we, the Vale, the Trident, and the Stormlands rose against him all the same.”

“You’d do well not to remind me of that,” Daenerys warns him, “But even then, your predecessors still bent the knee to the Usurper,” She looks straight at Jon and Sansa, “Your father still bent the knee.”

“A different time,” Jon remarks, “Different circumstances. Aye, our House and the other Houses of our kingdom showed loyalty to the throne in the past, but we were repaid with oppression, corruption, and violence. The Iron Throne deposed both House Stark and House Tully through violation of guest right, the very thing that allows us to sit here now and negotiate, then put our lands in the control of monsters.”

“That wasn’t a true king that did that!” Daenerys protests.

“No, a true king burned our innocent grandfather and uncle alive, and his heir kidnapped and deflowered Lyanna Stark,” Sansa reminds her, “Our people have suffered under the authority of the Iron Throne, regardless of who sits upon it, for a long time. And our people called upon us and my brother to take up a throne of our own to rule them independently. Countless lords and knights calling for a Stark king, twice. Specifically because they want nothing to do with that institution
“Aye,” Lord Manderly says, “I was there both times. I took up the cry twice. I freely swore myself to
King Robb, King Jon, Queen Sansa, and the royal House of Stark.”

“I wasn’t there for King Robb,” Royce adds, “Though I continually petitioned our lady regent, the
late Lady Lysa, to join him. And I was present when Jon was called for, when both he and the queen
were crowned. I was with Jon Arryn, Eddard Stark, and Robert Baratheon when we rebelled against
House Targaryen as well.”

“I was there for Robb, and when the king and queen freed us of the Frey tyrants, I was among the
first to declare for them,” Lord Mallister says solemnly. “And I was part of Robert’s Rebellion and
the War of the Five Kings. When we marched with Robb, he proposed we support Stannis or Renly,
but we protested and demanded he be our king. Not because of any interest in a true heir to that
throne, but because we no longer wanted to answer to that throne, regardless of who sat on it. We
were fighting for independence well before you appeared, Madam, and we don’t want to kneel to
you.”

Daenerys raises an eyebrow at him. “And you’re sure of that, are you?”

“I am,” Mallister answers, a little more testily, “Why would I follow someone who granted the
Ironborn, the barbarians my family had to fend off for generations, independence? Who made friends
with them? Allied with the very people who terrorized so many of our shores for generations, in part
because your own family refused to help us or subdue them even when you could? You, who laid so
many of our lands and castles to waste for so many years? Even when we were under the throne, the
only time your crown ever lifted a finger to help us is when Lord Stark was Hand, and it’s been the
wolves that have helped us since. House Stark had only just been restored while we were still
conquered. They were still recovering from their own hardships, and facing the new winter. And yet,
they still spared the resources, time, and men to free us. Even after Lord Edmure surrendered
Riverrun and none of us sent help in their hour of need.”

“Queen Sansa rescued The Vale and our Lord from the control of Petyr Baelish and got justice for
Lord and Lady Arryn,” Lord Royce says, “We chose first to fight for her, then to serve her and King
Jon. We did not march our armies all the way to Winterfell for no reason, and we certainly did not
join in the cries for a Stark sovereign because we want to kneel to dragons.”

“The King and Queen freed us from the monsters of House Bolton and forgave us, welcomed us
even after we refused to march for them when they needed us most,” Lord Manderly adds, “When
they took back Winterfell, I knew it was time for a Stark monarch again. House Stark, hundreds of
years ago, offered my family sanctuary when we were run out of the Reach, gave us lands, a home. I
look to my side and see the sovereigns I want, for they are the ones who have aided and led us.”

“You think I will not do the same?!?” Daenerys demands, affronted. “I am not my predecessors. Why
should it be assumed that I am a tyrant?”

“Daenerys Stormborn is no tyrant!” Grey Worm, the Unsullied Commander, insists in a heavy
accent. “No one can make that claim!”

“Why not? She’s claimed to be our queen since she arrived!” Lord Manderly answers, before turning
his gaze to Daenerys. “And you received the wight’s hand, proof of the approaching enemy, months
ago. And instead of immediately moving to prepare for the war with the supernatural ice-men and
their army of corpses, you’ve brought us here to try and make us bow to you, wasting time all of us
could be spending actually protecting people, first.”
“Aye,” Lord Mallister agrees, “You’ve come from nowhere, having done nothing for us, demanding our loyalty, willing to endanger us instead of help us or any of the other parts of Westeros you lay claim to. You have three bloody dragons! Why should someone willing to increase the danger to Westeros be trusted to rule it?”

Daenerys sits back, speechless. It’s her herald, Missandei, who eventually answers.

“How are you lot even here, ‘wasting time’, as you say, if it endangers Westeros? Why are your king and queen here?”

“Because we don’t want our homes burnt to the ground while we’re trying to save them from the Others!” Manderly snaps. “You demanded they both be here, and we have no way of knowing what you’d do if we all defied you!”

“My Lords, Queen Daenerys is perfectly willing to give you the aid you need to end these White Walkers once and for all, all we ask is that she is shown her proper deference.” Missandei insists.

Tyrion nods, and tries to mimic the herald’s gentle tone. “All it would take is for your king and queen to bend their knees, and--”

“---If Queen Daenerys is deserving of any deference, then she wouldn’t be withholding her support until we grant her more power!” Davos interrupts, furious. “I followed Stannis Baratheon, served him for decades, until he died. I never doubted him, even after Blackwater, even after my sons died for him and we had to flee King’s Landing, our fleet sunk. I followed him even as he was under the influence of that Red Witch! At a certain point, he had next to nothing, and had only just replenished his troops thanks to the Iron Bank. He didn’t use those men to improve his position against the Lannisters! No, he heard that Westeros was threatened by an enemy at the Wall, and brought all he had there to aid the Watch! He saved the Watch from destruction and promised his protection before he pursuing an inch of land in the North. Being a true ruler meant protecting his kingdom, regardless of whether the subjects kissed his hand or not! He couldn’t take the throne without saving the realm first and he knew that!”

His face starts reddening and his begins flexing his mangled hand, just as he always does when speaking of Stannis.

“That’s what separated him from the Joffreys, the Tywins, the Cerseis, and the Renlys of the world. He did what he did because he believed the world was doomed if he didn’t act! You know what the threat is, and you’re refusing to face it, even though it will destroy even your own.”

Sansa cannot help but look at the Onion Knight in amazement. She carefully passes one of her handkerchiefs down to him. “Please, Ser Davos, calm yourself.”

“The Free Folk have no history with you whatsoever,” Tormund insists, “None of our ancestors swore any vows to you, or any of the others who came before you. The only king and queen we’ve ever acknowledged after Mance Rayder are these two.”

“The point I think our vassals are trying to make, Queen Daenerys,” Sansa interjects, fearing a brawl next, “Is that this is not just a matter of one or even two people, as far as our side is concerned. We didn’t come into our positions through inheritance. When Jon and I took back Winterfell, we never expected to be crowned anything, we just wanted our home back and to stop the White Walkers. Our titles were thrust upon us by our people.”

“We chose to follow Daenerys,” Grey Worm insists, “She gave us a choice when she freed us to follow her or not.”
“Then why won’t she do the same for our people?” Sansa asks. “Respect that the North chose us instead?”

“I was under the impression that the North only chose your brothers,” Daenerys replies, “That you’re only queen because one of them insisted and married you. These men didn’t want you, either.”

Now Sansa is silent, wounded. The Dragon Queen is right, of course. The wildlings followed Jon. The lords called for Jon. They’d ignored her. The trueborn daughter of Winterfell, right there. The one who had actually brought the army that saved them all. And not once did any of them mention her, not even once. Not even the very men she had brought to The North. Their subjects eventually swore fealty to her, yes, but only after she’d gone before the Heart Tree with their chosen sovereign. They only followed her by the will of her husband. No amount of edicts, declarations, coronations, or anything will ever change that. If not for Jon’s will, she probably wouldn’t even be queen if he died. The Three Realms would probably fall to Bran if not for the measures they’d taken. The things Jon signed his name to. She’s secure and accepted, now, of course. But only because one man beside her wanted her. She’s not been chosen anymore than Daenerys.

Sansa looks at her lap, ashamed. She feels like such a fool.

She might have urged Jon not to stand, if not for the fact that he’s not the only one who rises in anger. Nearly the entire Northern side of the table does.

“We thought we had to choose one!” Manderly barks, “We were facing a war and Jon was the military man. If we didn’t want Sansa as our queen, we’d have all rebelled when he made that declaration and married her! We were willing to allow our king to marry his sister to have her as monarch as well!”

This makes her look up in surprise. She hadn’t considered the possibility that their vassals tolerated the incest in order to see her crowned. She assumed they did it solely out of loyalty to their king. She loses her breath.

“The only reason the Vale ever even looked North was to fight for Queen Sansa!” Lord Royce thunders, “For her, only for her!”

“And we never would have taken back the North if my wife hadn’t brought them!”

“And the only reason I’m here is because of the queen!” Mallister insists. “The king is Lord Stark’s bastard! The personification of Lord Stark’s transgression against the Trident’s favorite daughter! You think we’d have kneeled to him if he hadn’t declared Sansa would rule with him?! Last time we joined a King in the North, it ended in the Frey rule. We weren’t about to do that again without Hoster Tully’s granddaughter on the throne as well!”

“The Free Folk joined for Jon Snow,” Tormund says mildly, still sitting, “But the queen has done well by us, and we are happy to have her. We lose the king, we shall still follow her. And we choose her over you any day.”

Sansa tries not to weep at this show of support.

Members of Daenerys’s retinue have risen as well, moving protectively towards their own queen. Both sides seeth, and Sansa spots some itchy fingers. She swallows her feelings and rises herself.

“Please, my lords, my ladies! We are here for a parlay! What are we, Freys? Sit!”

Her people obey, albeit slowly. It’s only when they’re seated that Daenerys’s men settle as well. Grey Worm stands the longest.
Sansa takes a deep breath. “Now, I think you have a better understanding of our position, Your Grace? I mean, your people in Dragon’s Bay follow you because they wish to. I doubt you’d feel comfortable merely handing them all off to someone who merely demands it. Especially when their claim is built on such an… uncomfortable history.”

Daenerys’s eyes harden even more. “I broke their chains.”

“My son was a Frey captive,” Lord Mallister grunts. “The king and queen broke his.”

“I freed those people from a tyrannical system!” Dany counters. She gestures towards Grey Worm and Missandei. “Some are now at this table!”

“Our king and queen did the same for us! And they’re doing that again now!” Royce exclaims impatiently. “We don’t want to be servants of the Iron Throne anymore! We don’t want to be ruled by people who can burn us alive with a single word!”

Royce gestures around the room, to the walls and ceiling. “Look at this place! We don’t want to live under this! Under some empire held together with dragonfire! Answering to a person who we’ve never met before, who spent her whole life half a world away! Who prioritizes titles over our safety! How can you call yourself a ‘Breaker of Chains’ when you’re trying to force your authority on an unwilling people in the midst of a crisis like this?! What kind of liberator decides their assumed ownership of a people is more important than protecting them?!”

“Thank you, Lord Royce!” Jon interrupts. He takes a few deep breaths and glances around the room. No one looks happy. “Look, clearly things have gotten… heated. Why don’t we take a break to calm ourselves, have lunch, and resume afterwards”

“Yes,” Daenerys agrees, lips pursed so tightly they look white, “I think that would be wise. I’m sure you’d like to do the same.”

Lord Reed surprises them all by speaking for the first time.

He sits at the far end of the table; a diminutive, contemplative man with an odd aura. He’d been quiet throughout the meeting so far.

“Before we do adjourn, there is something I would like the Southern delegates to consider, because it’s a point I believe we’ve neglected so far,” he declares, hands folded atop the table, “If The North doesn’t stop the White Walkers, we shall all die. I don’t just mean that Northmen will die.

“There will be no one left to burn their bodies, and they’ll all become wights. And the further the White Walkers get, the more their armies will expand. They shall keep moving, and moving, their forces absorbing every man, woman, and child as they march. By the time they reach the borders of your domains, they’ll be made up of every human body in our three realms.”

He focusses on Daenerys. “Rhaenys Targaryen’s dragon Meraxes was brought down by House Uller during the Conquest. If you allow us to fall, not even all your dragons and armies will have a chance against the force that’ll come. Without us, you and everything you’ve got shall perish, and become the tools of our enemy. All of your people will be slaves again, mindless corpses moving based on the will of the Night’s King. Even you, Your Grace. If the North falls, you will become a wight. All of you will. It is guaranteed.”

There’s a long, awkward silence. Then Lord Reed follows up this little speech with, “That’s all.”

~*~*~*~
Jon:

They take their mid-day meal with their advisors in their solar and discuss their next steps. Everyone is animated, but Jon keeps quiet.

He should be happy for his wife, after what these men said about her. Part of him is. But as for the rest of him...

...The king is Lord Stark’s bastard! The personification of Lord Stark’s transgression against the Trident’s favorite daughter! You think we’d have kneeled to him if he hadn’t declared Sansa would rule with him?!!... Lord Mallister’s speech rings through his mind. Even a chosen king, and he’s still the bastard. He can’t help but wonder how many of these men still see him this way.

He can’t help but wonder how they’d react to the news that he’s not even Ned Stark’s bastard, but Rhaegar Targaryen’s. Not the personification of an insult to Catelyn Tully, but the product of the rape of Lyanna Stark.

Jon wants to sink into the ground and escape the noise, if only for a while. It’s all so much. They’ve done well so far, but how much longer can he do this? Especially with such a great secret weighing on him.

And the isolation.

He has his wife, but she’s only one person. Exceptional, yes. But only one person he can share with. Lord Reed is still a stranger. Bran and Arya are at Winterfell. Sam is at the Citadel, Edd is up North. Tormund and Davos don’t know the truth.

Maybe she’s right. Maybe they should tell them. Good, informed counsel is so scarce.

But then Royce says something like, “I’ll be so happy when I never have to see one of those flaming lizard people again!” And the whole table gleefully agrees.

Jon almost wishes he were a lizard, so he might crawl under a rock.

He doesn’t like Daenerys. Not in the least. His feelings about her sort of remind him of his impression of Melisandre, actually. A powerful, mysterious woman, desired and seen as beautiful by so many… Fiery, bold, capable of unbelievable things.

Jon didn’t find Melisandre beautiful. He found her red, and horrifying, and red. Not kissed by fire, not warm or bright with the light of her god. No, bloody, scorching, and uniform. Confusing, but without facets. So singular in thought, purpose, passion, goals. To the point where she didn’t really seem like a person. Even the simplest people had many sides to them: needs, wants, emotions, ideas, goals, strengths, weaknesses. They’re complex. Melisandre was just red. Everything about her was one thing, one goal, one idea. It was all she was. Everything she projected seemed false. She almost reminded him of the Night’s King. Indeed, if Jon had discovered that she’d been a White Walker in a disguise as a human all this time, it wouldn’t surprise him.

Her fire may have saved him, but it also repelled him. He kept her near, of course. Someone in a situation like his could hardly reject a woman who had brought him back to life. But that was before he knew the depths of her madness, her ruthlessness.

Murdering a small child… Convincing the child’s parents to let her do it… And for what? For what? For a God she was supposedly serving? The one who had apparently blocked her path in the first place? One she clearly couldn’t really understand?
Fire is not the only thing that reminds Jon of Melisandre. It certainly doesn’t help, certainly. Nor does the fact that she is also apparently hailed as the prophesied “Prince Who Was Promised” by other priests of R’hollor.

It’s her entitlement, her singular belief that she knows how the world should be. It’s the arrogance, the single-mindedness, the lack of reservations and self-awareness. The way she clearly liked to manipulate people through fear and grandiose concepts of “fate.”

Daenerys had her dragon fly over Harrenhal after promising the thing wouldn’t come within five miles of it. She’d done it to intimidate and show off. Make it clear that she didn’t feel obligated to honor their agreements. The same reason she arrived earlier than she said she would. She wanted them confused, unprepared. And she didn’t expect to be challenged.

She declared herself on a righteous path, but used fear to achieve her own ends. She didn’t care to show anyone the slightest bit of respect. She believed, much like Melisandre believed, that people didn’t matter in the pursuit of the cause. And she believed herself to be that cause.

Jon can barely stand to look at her, really. She is the manifestation of a heritage he neither knew of nor wanted. Her brother, a man with the same purple eyes and silver-gold hair, with the same ‘birthright’, created Jon. That man, who may have raped Lyanna Stark, who threw the Seven Realms into chaos, abandoned his wife and children, and didn’t care when his father was burning innocents alive, was Jon’s father all this time.

Daenerys was the heritage of cruelty, brutality, and megalomania. All he had grown up despising. She was the sound of people screaming as they are burnt alive, of families losing their daughters, of countries being crushed under the ambition of so many grasping, uncaring hands.

She knows where and whom she comes from. She’s proud of it, and think that means she should rule them all. She has the dragons to do that with.

Her dragons could also destroy the Night’s King and his army once and for all, but she’s more interested in threatening people into serving her.

She’ll do it with a man who helped his family ruin all of their lives by her side.

She doesn’t care about winter, or wights, or the or well-being of the very people she seeks to govern. She just wants them all to kneel. Her dragons keep her warm, so why should she care for the winds of winter?

Jon looks at her, and is terrified. She came from the same line he did. He looks at her and sees what he could be.

He’s a product of fire. His life was sparked by the prince of dragons, and brought back by a red priestess. He kept a woman by his side who had convinced her last “Chosen One” to burn his own daughter alive. He possesses the blood of the Mad King.

He took a crown that rightfully belonged to someone he loved. He’d not even wanted to go home. He’d wanted to flee. He’d almost gotten his whole army killed. She’d been the one to convince him to fight in the first place, then saved him when he nearly doomed them all.

And when people called for him to take the title and power that not only was her right, but was something she’d actually won, he took it. He took the fruits of her labors, her birthright, without a word of protest.

She’d faced down the man who raped and tortured her to get the North back, and once she’d gotten
it back, Jon let everyone give it all to him instead.

Jon cannot help but wonder if that was just the beginning of the Targaryen in him showing himself. Taking a crown and power he didn’t really deserve.

Sure, he’s done everything possible to even things out. He elevated Sansa to her rightful place, he’d declared her rule… but only alongside him.

He married his sister. Another Targaryen practice.

And wanted her, too. All that time. From the moment he saw her again, he’d wanted her. He knows that. He fought that, true. But what if he never learned the truth? What if she hadn’t wanted him back? Would he have continued fighting those feelings?

Jon feels every doubt, insecurity, and negative feeling about himself bubble up after speaking to this dragon woman who shares his blood.

What if he becomes more and more a Targaryen, more and more a child of fire?

He’s only ever wanted to be a Stark. But now, he has to confront all about him that isn’t a Stark. He’s not a Stark. He’s a bastard. He’s a Targaryen. He’s the product of the rape of a Stark, the line of the Mad King.

His father took Winterfell’s daughter. Daenerys wants to take The North. Jon has taken both.

His people want nothing to do with what he truly is. They only follow him because of a deception. He’s a hypocrite. A dragon in wolf’s clothing.

He stewed over this throughout the meal. During the tail end, everyone goes over their arguments, their plans, their tools to keep their country free of the dragon’s rule. Most of them having no idea…

Sansa prompts him on a few things, and he smiles at her and answers. At the very least, he owes it to her to be perfect. To do this. She believes in him, relies on him.

She knows who he is. But she still sees a wolf. She always has. In her eyes, Jon sees all that he wants to be.

In Daenerys’s, he sees all that he fears

But he can’t show fear, and he doesn’t.

When the meetings resume, none of the Southerners look particularly excited.

Daenerys speaks first, again. Jon can tell she likes this. She intends to be the first to speak, thinks she should be. She wants to control it all.

“First of all, please allow me to offer an apology for any offense I may have caused… Your Graces,” she says, almost choking on those last two words. Jon and Sansa glance at each other. It’s the first time she’s addressed them as royalty. It’s surprisingly comforting.

“That is quite gracious of you, Queen Daenerys,” Sansa replies in that kind way she always speaks.

“Thank you.” The Dragon Queen swallows and hesitates before choosing her next words. “I think it’s clear that none of us want war, agreed?”

Everyone nods.
“And that we all want what is best for Westeros?”

More nods. Jon braces himself for the deluded, narcissistic rant about her being what’s best for the country she barely knows. The one she’s working up to.

“Good. You have all made your position very clear to me.” The condescension has already crept back. “You and your people have been mistreated by the crown for generations, regardless of who wears it. You’re facing great danger, and only trust those who have defended you, who were chosen by you, to be your leaders.

“King Jon and Queen Sansa, you’ve earned the loyalty of your people, and you came to power because they asked you to. You are determined to answer their call, and confirm their trust in you. The two of you have suffered particularly because of my predecessors, as have your family. You face a winter and an unbelievable enemy, and don’t want to face them having already abdicated the responsibilities your people gave you.”

She begins looking around at them all. “You’re all wary of me and my dragons, and history tells you that is how you should feel. You all believe that your loyalty and fealty should be something that is earned, and earned by one of your own. That you have no interest in following some dangerous foreigner who demands your subservience just because they’ve claimed a position that has only ever abused you. Especially when you have already given that to two people you picked based on their proven concern and service to you. After years of war and oppression and betrayal, all you want is to end your great enemy, then live in peace under your chosen monarch, serve leaders you respect, and no longer be entangled by the affairs and ambitions of the South. You want me to respect your will, lend the aid you need so that the White Walkers are defeated, and then my own business. You feel that this is especially reasonable, since the White Walkers will be an even greater danger to my people and I should you all fall. You want this foreign woman and her dragons to stay away.”

“Yes,” the entire Northern side says this in unison. Jon is actually surprised by how thorough and correct this speech has been so far. He glances around at her advisors, expecting some sign that one of them coached this to her. But no. Daenerys’s advisors seem even more stunned by this speech. Tyrion appears utterly bewildered.

Daenerys clears her throat. “I understand. Now, would you be open to hearing my position?”

“Of course,” Jon replies, trying to be as gracious as a Stark should be. Trying at the patience of his wife and the man who raised them. Here it comes.

The Dragon woman clears her throat once more, sits back in her chair, and puffs out her chest. “I have spent my whole life fighting to return to my family’s throne. I’ve also spent my whole life being chased and threatened by my family’s enemies. My own people suffered because of what happened as well. My brother and I grew up begging on the streets. My niece and nephew were butchered, along with their mother. My father and brother were killed. I was eventually traded to a brutish-seeming stranger as part of others’ schemes. At one point, I seemed to lose everything. Then my dragons were born.”

She pauses briefly for effect.

“After that, I was pursued more than ever. My children were size of birds when they hatched. It seemed the only thing that could protect me and the people I came to lead from anyone butchering us and stealing my dragons was my name and the title that came with it. It was the promise of what I and my dragons could and would achieve that helped me raise my armies, liberate slaves, conquer kingdoms. Millions were freed from bondage before I set foot in Westeros.
“And believe it or not, the power that allowed me to end Cersei Lannister was earned. Countless people, upon my arrival at their gates, cried out for me, called me their mother, asked me to lead them. Like Your Graces, I was determined to keep my promises. I did not sail for Westeros until I felt I had learned to govern properly. To do more than just conquer. I only set sail once I was certain I could be the leader this country deserves. I knew that Westeros was being torn apart by tyrants abusing their power and fighting for control. And it is my duty to end that.”

She pauses again and takes a deep breath. “Now, I am here. Cersei is gone. I’m here not just because of my dragons, but also because people here decided I was worth following. I have taken the throne of a harshly divided country that has known great bloodshed, that has seen awful people gain power at the will of those like Cersei Lannister. And I have to make sure they trust me, so that they will remain united. The problem is, it’s rather hard for anyone to believe I can sustain a peaceful unity in Westeros when I don’t even have the loyalty of over half of Westeros. When three of the Seven Realms I’m supposed to be uniting insist they’re independent, and will not recognize anything that my position is supposed to represent.

“If I do not unite all the realms of the Iron Throne, then I’m no better than any of the Five Kings that came before me. So there’s nothing to stop my vassals and allies from deciding that they should break away and that unity is useless, and I can’t do anything to maintain peace here. I will fail here, fail at the very thing I swore to do my entire life. And if I fail here, the people back east, those who are not happy that slavery has been ended in certain areas, will use it as an opportunity to strike again. And it shall be that much easier for them to succeed.

“If that happens, all of my people, those who were liberated from lives of bondage, will suffer and lose their freedom, because their queen left them so she might fail at her primary purpose. If I don’t take the North, the Riverlands, and the Vale, then I can’t keep Westeros together. If I can’t keep Westeros together, then I keep nothing together. Everything I’ve built crumbles, war breaks out again, well beyond Westeros, and many people are enslaved once more. So believe it or not, I am not here simply out of ego, but out of responsibility to those who need me to keep my word and unify this continent. And that’s a lot of people.”

Jon loses count of how many of these sentences start with “I”. Any benefit of the doubt her “understanding” preamble might have earned her is depleted.

“She’s telling the truth, actually,” Tyrion announces, “The fact that your families are the ones who made up the great alliance that overthrew House Targaryen in the first place also doesn’t help. If the South sees her giving up three more realms, they’ll want to be independent, too. And the only way to prevent that is through dragonfire. The choice will be burn millions of innocents, or fail. And if we fail, then Dragon’s Bay is doomed to become Slaver’s Bay again. I know you all fear her dragons, and I understand that. But if Daenerys is lost, what do you think will happen to them? Better dragons that answer to their mother than ones untamed.”

Jon and Sansa exchange looks. This is a fair point. But one they’ve prepared for. Jon hesitates before speaking.

“You make an interesting case, Lord Lannister, but the fact is, even if we did bend the knee, that’s no assurance that Queen Daenerys will succeed. The North, Vale, and Riverlands united under us. But if we give up our thrones, they’re under no obligation to follow our lead.”

“Especially not the Vale or the Riverlands,” Sansa adds, just as rehearsed. “But even the North could decide to crown our brother Bran or sister Arya in our place. The only reason we were ever crowned was because our country wants to be independent. It is not our interest to cause unrest for you, but I’m afraid, quite frankly, that we have our own problems. And quite frankly, if dominance over all
the constituents of the Iron Throne is that important, then it sounds like you’ve failed already. You agreed to relinquish the Iron Islands. I know that’s quite small in comparison to our lands, but it’s still a release of a realm. You either need to unify all of Westeros under your rule, or you don’t.”

“And if you do, well… As my wife says, it’s already moot at this point,” Jon shrugs, “You say you’re afraid that the other areas will wonder why they shouldn’t be independent if we are, but there’s already nothing stopping them from asking that exact question about the Iron Islands.”

“There were conditions on that agreement,” Daenerys says through clenched teeth, “They had to agree to end their reaving.”

“Yes, but if their independence crumbles the Iron Throne anyways, then there’s no reason they’ll ever have to honor that agreement,” Sansa counters. She sighs. “Your Grace, I’m sorry, but if what you’re saying is true, then this is already lost. The Reach and Dorne agreed to follow you, yes, but they didn’t do so out of a sense of loyalty or belief in you. They did it because they wanted revenge against the Lannisters. They wanted to destroy Cersei. Now she’s gone, and you’ve granted independence to one realm, and you have the very last Lannister as your Hand. Dorne has just as much reason as any of us to secede, especially given what happened to Elia. As for the Reach… What would Olenna Tyrell have to lose? Cersei murdered everyone she’s ever loved. You got rid of her, but kept her brother. Why should Olenna follow someone who allows the House that ended hers to continue?”

Sansa glances at Tyrion, who begins going red. “My apologies, Lord Tyrion, but if you are going to press this case based on unity…”

Jon interjects. “The thing is, Queen Daenerys, unity doesn’t require subjugation. If you can release the Ironborn on the grounds of an alliance, then there is absolutely no reason we can’t do the same. There is absolutely no reason you couldn’t have our full support just because we don’t bow to you. There’s a key difference between our situation and that of Dorne and the Reach. They agreed to take you as their queen, we did not, nor did the Ironborn. We were independent before you even got here. Our country already has a king and a queen. It’s not a loss to you for us not to serve you if we never did in the first place. And we can’t, in good conscience, break our vows.”

_With the amount of vows I’ve already broken, why should anyone take me seriously?_

Sansa clears her throat, leans forward, and uses her sweetest, gentlest tone. “But we can still lend you legitimacy. We can be a powerful ally beyond the War for the Dawn. You can be a ruler who compromises, breaks the cycle of tyranny, protects her people, and is supported by your most powerful neighbors. You can assure the people you already lead of a friendship with us through their fealty to you. And you can build a new Targaryen Empire. It’s not like you haven’t already started.”

“If I give in to your demands, it won’t be seen as compromise, but surrender,” Daenerys protests before rising from her seat. Jon doesn’t feel reassured by her obvious strain now. If anything, he finds it a bit insulting that she’s so clearly unprepared. “I think I’ve had enough for today. I feel a headache coming on. If we might resume this tomorrow?”


“I do hope you feel better, Queen Daenerys,” his wife says, ever so kind.

~___~___~

It’s when they’re alone in their bedchamber again that he and Sansa finally speak.
“We still have Harrenhal to offer her,” Jon says after they’ve dismissed their attendants and undressed. “It could make her feel less like she’s surrendering.”

He couldn’t care less about this ruin. Let Daenerys have it, if it appeases her. She’s a wounded animal now, humiliated. He would prefer to undo some of that. Jon has no confidence in the outcome of provoking his aunt.

“After all we’ve said about the will of our people, it’ll send the wrong message,” Sansa tells him as she pulls back the bedclothes. She’s like a painting, in her pleated linen shift, her hair gathered in a loose ponytail that cascades over the front of her left shoulder. “She’ll wonder why we’re willing to surrender Harrenhal’s independence. This place is officially our Iron Islands. It’ll undermine our position, and make her think we’re weak. We’re making too much progress to offer that to her, especially after only one day.”

“Well, I think threatening invasion would be a bad idea,” he replies, sliding into bed, exhausted. “She’s already hostile, we don’t want to anger her further, or we’ll undo our progress.”

“She’s especially hostile to me,” Sansa remarks.

“I think I know why, too,” Jon tells her, trying not to grind his teeth.

They both get on their sides, facing each other. Sansa looks at her husband with interest.

“Oh?”

“Well, it’s possible that at one point she hoped to resolve this little issue through marriage.”

It makes perfect sense to him. The fiery woman wanted to use and consume him for his own ends. It has happened before. His wife laughs. “So I stole her marriage prize?”

“And I stole you,” he answers, trying not to match her energy. “From Tyrion.”

“Right. But you were the grand prize.” Sansa laughs some more. “Oh, dear, and I bet she felt even worse when she saw you for the first time.” She reaches out and strokes his cheek. “She could be the one falling asleep next to this handsome face if it weren’t for me!”

Jon blushes a bit. He does feel handsome under her gaze. She never seems to miss an opportunity to lift him up. “The announcement probably did not help, either. She has no heirs.”

Sansa chews on her lower lip. “It’s probably more than that, though. Daenerys doesn’t strike me as the type who would make a powerful enemy over a mere man—-”

“---Thank you, Darling, I love you too---” He interrupts, wanting to see her smile again.

“--- that she doesn’t even know ---” Sansa continues, ignoring him, “Do you think she may feel conflicted?”

Jon’s eyes narrow. “Over what?” He doubts there’s any room for conflict within his aunt. People like her weren’t capable of it. All was justifiable in pursuit of their goals to people like that.

Sansa begins playing with her hair. “It may be hard for you to understand, being a man…”

“Try me.”

“Well, before, all of her other conquests were against arrogant, awful men and one especially tyrannical woman. Aside from Cersei, she was always striking against male dominance. But I’m not
Sansa takes a deep breath. “Sure, I may share my power with a man, but it’s been made quite clear by now that I truly lead. And the one I rule with is the anti-Cersei. You’re dutiful, kind, wise, sane, and happy to share your authority.”

“And I have a cock,” Jon adds, enjoying the ways he differs from any Lannister.

“Where Cersei just wished she had one.” She giggles again. “Maybe Daenerys feels conflicted about potentially deposing a woman who came to power through altruistic means. And she resents me for making her feel that way. After all, aside from Tyrion, all of her allies thus far have been women.”

It seems odd to Jon. “So was Cersei, though.”

“Cersei was a violent, ruthless, lunatic.”

“So is Ellaria Sand,” Jon points out.

“Maybe she is, and that just makes things worse. I may not be perfect, but I’m not a violent, child-murdering kinslayer.” She shudders. Jon knows why. Ellaria Sand and her infamous Sand Snakes upset his wife in particular.

Sansa had met the woman once, briefly, at Joffrey’s wedding. Apparently, she’d seemed kind. But first impressions are almost always deceiving, and Sansa rarely forgave herself for misjudging people.

His wife had spent many hours puzzling over this case in particular, recounting her experiences and thoughts to Jon.

From what she’s said before, Jon can hardly blame her for not being able to predict the Sand woman’s nature. Ellaria’s violence made no sense. Prince Oberyn, as famous and dangerous as he was, was also famously protective of his family. Why would such a man want to be “avenged” through the murder of his relatives? Especially since, Sansa said, she’d always heard Oberyn’s focus seemed to be on Tywin Lannister and Ser Gregor Clegane, who were directly responsible for what happened to Oberyn’s sister, Elia. Sansa said he never showed any sign of ill will towards anyone innocent.

How was destroying House Martell supposed to honor Oberyn and Elia Martell? Even if the Sands were unhappy with Prince Doran’s response to their deaths, there were other ways to dispose of him without violence. And his son… Trystane was Arya’s age.

Sansa killed Ramsay and Petyr, but they were directly responsible for the deaths of her loved ones, and had hurt her. Jon had killed Olly, and Ser Allister. The boy’s death in particular still haunted him, and Olly had inserted the final blade. But Jon cannot imagine directing any rage at their relations. Both Jon and Sansa were horrified to learn of what became of Lady Walda and her son, and Lady Walda was a Frey.

The who of them had even retained and provided for some of Petyr and the Boltons’ staff. Why not? Most of them were as much victims of those people as anyone else.

Jon hates the unhappy, disturbed look on Sansa’s face, so he reaches out and strokes her cheek. “Maybe that should be your personal motto, ‘Not a violent, child-murdering kinslayer.’”

“And what would yours be, then? ‘Not an oathbreaking, incestuous usurper’?”

Jon tries not to flinch. “I was thinking, ‘Still a Stark, I promise.’” I hope.
She giggles. There’s silence for a while. Jon almost leans over to blow out the candle when she says, “I think we need to tell Daenerys the truth. The sooner, the better. If we end up having to tell her later, she’ll be even less inclined to trust us.”

Jon winces. “Must we? It’s not like she trusts us anyways.”

“But she may if we are honest with her.” Sansa answers, “Tell her something that we haven’t even told our men. Tell her that she… has family. It might make her more inclined to work with us. We need that to happen, Jon. We’re already on borrowed time.”

“Or more inclined to destroy us.” This stuns him. They’d made so much progress on their very first day, without divulging a thing. And Daenerys had been adversarial the entire time. He doesn’t believe his aunt capable of sentiment and trust. But she could and would respond to leverage.

“I’m not so sure she would, not if we promise to keep it a secret. I mean, our men just spent half the day talking about how they want nothing to do with the Iron Throne.”

Jon’s voice rises. “And you think that will be enough to assure the queen, even if they kept to that conviction?” The worst part about all of this is that Sansa’s right. They can’t waste any more time. The White Walkers could be storming the Wall right now. They needed to get Daenerys behind them as quickly as possible. He doubts telling Daenerys the truth will make the woman trust them, but it might make her fear them enough to give in. Still… “She has no reason to believe they wouldn’t change their tune the moment they found out the Iron Throne could go to their king. And quite frankly, neither do we. And that’s if they don’t decide to have me strung up and beheaded.”

His wife seems shocked by this. There’s an awkward, silent few moments. Then her face falls, and Jon can tell by her pitying, anxious, loving expression that she’s uncovering his fears. She sees right through him now. And she moves toward him, clutching his face in both hands.

“Rhaegar or no Rhaegar, you’re still a Stark. You’re the son of a Stark. You were raised as a Stark. You look like a Stark, act like a Stark. You married a Stark, you’ll have Stark children, and you’re certainly no Southerner. That’s enough for anyone.” Sansa kisses him. “And it’ll certainly be enough for Daenerys.”

“And what if it’s too much?” Jon asks, melting internally from her reassurances, but not being able to loosen the grip of his various anxieties. “What if she doesn’t believe us? Thinks we’re lying to gain power?”

“For one thing, if that was our goal, we wouldn’t be telling her before we told our own supporters.”

“She has no way of knowing what we’ve told anyone.”

Sansa’s face falls. “We can have Howland Reed present evidence, but…” Sansa trails off.

“… The only way to truly convince her would be if I interacted with a dragon,” he finishes.

Jon closes his eyes. He feels a burn, as if one of Daenerys’s dragons is breathing down his neck. He has to do it, though. He has to get his aunt’s forces to The Wall before it’s too late.

“...No. Forget it!” His wife says frantically. “We don’t have to tell her. We’ll find another way---”

“Maybe, but the Wall could be crumbling by then.” Jon shakes his head. “I’d rather do anything else, Sansa. I don’t want to be a dragon. I want no part of it. But I have to. It’s the dragons or the wights.” He takes a deep breath. His mind races. “I have to do this. And you must do something as well.”
“What?”

“Leave.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a method to my madness, I swear.
Enter The Dragon

Chapter Summary

The King of Winter faces his heritage.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Hannah, as always!

Jon:

She looks at him, petrified. “I don’t understand.”

He cringes, angry with himself. “I don’t mean for good! Just for a few days! While I… handle this.”

“No, that’s the last thing we need. You can’t face this alone.”

“Sansa, I must,” he says, putting his arm around her shoulders, “You know I must.”

“But it’s too dangerous!”

He actually laughs at this. “Sweetling, all of this is dangerous. I’m going to be facing an army of the undead before we know it. Coming here at all was dangerous. Our marriage is dangerous. Accepting the crown was dangerous.”

“This is different. If you were lost…”

“You’d continue ruling, and birth an heir in a few moons’ time,” he says, cocking his head vaguely towards her abdomen.

“And you’d leave me to face all of that alone?!” She asks, miserable, “My pregnancy assures nothing. I could die. The child could die. And then what? Even if we both survive, you’d have left me to protect the realm and our babe from the White Walkers and winter alone. You’d leave me to fight the inevitable uprising that would occur if you were killed alone. I’d have to face the Night’s King and the Dragon Queen, alone!”

His face falls. “Sansa, you’re not alone. Never. And if anyone can do it…”

“Even if it is me, childbirth, Jon! Gods…” She lowers her knees and shakes her head. “As good as you are, you’re still a man. Childbirth isn’t a battle. There’s no level of tactical brilliance, no amount of resources, no level of skill that can ‘win’ anything. Women die giving birth constantly. From the lowest scullery wench to the highest queens.. Yes, there are things that can make it safer, but if something goes wrong, it goes wrong, and there’s no retreat, no allies, no tactical advantage that can save anyone. And do you honestly think I’ll be best-prepared for the ordeal if I’m mourning my husband? How healthy do you think I’ll be, having carried every burden possible for months on end without the one person I can rely on? Since conceiving, I’ve been relieved, because I suspected I was
infertile, since Ramsay’s seed never found purchase despite the length and events of our marriage. And I knew it wasn’t Ramsay, because he’d gotten girls pregnant before.

“Now, I believe that my state of mind affects my health and my ability to procreate. I truly do. Even before Ramsay, I’d spent years as the captive of lunatics, believing my whole family dead, gone from my home. Literally years like that. Even after I’d escaped King’s Landing, my aunt tormented me, she eventually tried to kill me, I was being controlled by Littlefinger, I had every reason to believe I’d never return home, see Arya or you again, that Bran was dead. And throughout all that time, from my first blood until very recently, my courses would be irregular. Not just when I first started bleeding, but for years. And I had to keep all of Littlefinger’s secrets, and stay in hiding from the Lannisters. I barely slept or ate. Then Ramsay happened, and it was even worse. And even after we got our home back, there was stress. Things started getting better, yes, but I was still so overcome with guilt over mating with my brother, believing I was sick and wrong for how I felt…”

He stares at her, sick from every word. But he does not interrupt. She’s so afraid, so afraid. Why didn’t he see this?

“But so soon after we learned the truth, Jon, I’ve conceived. Not a just missed a course, but truly with child. Our couplings occur at a frequency similar to Ramsay’s… attacks. But I’ve had months where I’ve reunited with family I thought I’d lost, regained my home, freed myself from enemies, found a loving husband, and even become stronger and more powerful. And despite everything we face, I’ve grown more hopeful, and I have something to fight for. I’ve known true happiness and safety, for months on end. And so much of that is tied to you! But if I lost you. What then? What if the tragedy and hardship affects my body? It’s not as if I can just try harder or make myself happy or change strategy. Even with you here, even if we won the war and winter ended tomorrow, there’d still be so much danger, so much risk. So imagine how it will be if I had to do everything alone?”

She stops, catching her breath and clutching her chest. Shame engulfs his. Every fiber of his being just screams for him to make it better, make her stop crying, stop gasping like that. Make her less afraid.

Jon pulls her closer to him and buries his face in her neck “Sweetling, I’m so sorry… I don’t want to leave you. I just… I don’t know what else to do. But I have a plan.”

~_~_~_~

Sansa:

She closes her eyes. This is hardly fair to him, either, she reminds herself. And he’s right. There are few options. She curses the prior generation; particularly Rhaegar and Father. If only they’d left behind something more than Howland Reed’s word as evidence!

That’s not fair either, she knows. If Robert had discovered Jon’s origins, he’d have had him killed, just like Rhaegar’s other children. She still believes Father went too far with the secrecy, but it only made sense for him not to leave a paper trail. It’s not as if Father had any reason to anticipate a situation like this.

“What’s your plan?” She asks him. He explains it to her in gentle murmurs.

She sighs and makes some suggestions, among them consulting Lord Reed. They summon him to their chambers. To their surprise, he arrives with a large box, wrapped green silk and bound with cord, and tells them it’s a gift they’re not to open it until he says.

Her father’s best friend is an older figure, with solemn mossy eyes and greying dark hair. Like most
Crannogmen, he’s small, shorter than both her and Jon, and small-boned. And yet, something about him makes him impossible not to notice.

Sansa always compares him to his daughter, Meera, Bran’s friend. And indeed, though the elder Reed is clearly more reserved than his tomboyish daughter, the resemblance is obvious.

They sit him down at the small dining table in their solar and dismiss the servants once their supper of river trout and sweetgrass salad is served.

He speaks first. “You two want to tell someone. The men, or the queen?”

Jon and Sansa exchange glances. Bran has told them much of his adventures and companions when they were all separated, including about Lord Howland’s late son, Jojen. According to their brother, Jojen had visions similar to his. That was how they met. Jojen knew things, and could see the future. He was the one who led Bran to the Three-Eyed Crow and explained his dreams to him.

Meera seemed to lack any such ability, but Sansa isn’t sure about the father. Does he know by mystical means, or did he figure it out?

It’s far more likely he figured it out. It’s not as if it’s impossible. After all, what other reason would they randomly and suddenly summon him for a private dinner where they didn’t even want the servants present to overhear?

But if he does possess some special skill, there’s so much he can tell them. So much it tells them in general. If he knows the future, is that why he’s supporting them? Are they slated for success?

Still, she assumes nothing. “The queen,” she responds after taking a dainty sip of Dornish Red. “Did you know what we wanted to discuss because you had a vision, or because it’s the likeliest reason this meeting would be happening?”

“I lacked my son’s gifts,” Howland answers as he cuts up his fish, “Sorry to disappoint you.”

It does make her stomach sink. But she tries to give no sign of it.

“What do you think, Lord Howland? Our strategy is based on using secrecy as leverage. That’s threatened if we tell the others, obviously. We were hoping to conduct some more intimate negotiations with the Dragon Queen and tell her then.”

“But we have little to no evidence that it’s the truth, aside from your word and that of a lad with magical visions that Daenerys has no reason to believe,” Jon continues.

Lord Howland takes a bite of his fish, chews, swallows, wipes his mouth, and says, “Your Grace, it’s time to open your present.”

Sansa’s heart skips a beat. Jon pulls back from the table, places the box at his feet, leans over, and opens it. From it, he extracts a breathtaking antique lyre, made of finest mahogany, gold, and inlaid with red enamel and mother of pearl. Sansa gasps. The instrument is unstrung, and clearly hasn’t been played in years. But she also notices the moldings at the ends and base, and inlaid into the sides. Dragons. The three-headed dragons of House Targaryen.

Though she’s never seen it before, she realizes what it must be. Robert Baratheon burned all portraits of the famed Silver Prince when he took the throne, but copies of some were still preserved in books, including some in the library at the Red Keep. Sansa had seen them, and most, if not all of the different likenesses featured Rhaegar with his harp. This one.
“One the second night of the tourney of Harrenhal, during the banquet, Prince Rhaegar performed for the entire court. He played and sang a song so beautiful and melancholy that it brought Lyanna Stark to tears. That is his famous harp. When he left the Tower of Joy to fight Robert’s Rebellion, he left the instrument with Lyanna. Most believed it lost. But Ned trusted me with it, and I’ve kept it hidden at Greywater Watch for years,” Lord Howland tells them, “I don’t believe he ever intended to actually use it, I think he kept it safe for sentimental reasons. Or perhaps he eventually meant to give it to you, Your Grace. Or add it to Lyanna’s tomb. Any who knew Rhaegar--- and that will include Lord Tarly and Lord Rosby, at least, will know it to be real.’’

The royal couple gape at it. It’s exquisite, to say the least.

Hands quivering, Sansa reaches out and places it in her lap, running her fingers over the detailing. She’s seen and handled many rich, luxurious things in her life, but this is a true treasure. Unmistakably an heirloom, a relic, an icon.

She turns it over to examine it. At the bottom of the base, engraved in gold, it reads, ‘Rhaegar Targaryen, Prince of Dragonstone.’

Maesters had ways of authenticating items, too. Their age, their value, various aspects of their origins.

Sansa knows this to be true. One of her “punishments” from Joffrey was over a stolen crown. It didn’t take Sansa long after she’d healed from the beating to get an explanation through court gossip.

For his coronation, both Joffrey and Cersei had wanted him to wear Robert’s crown, which had been originally made for Aegon the Conqueror, and altered to be more Baratheon when Robert took the Iron Throne. When they took it from the treasury to the goldsmith for resizing, though, the goldsmith felt something was amiss, and insisted they get it appraised. Grand Maester Pycelle examined it and declared the crown they had to be a copy.

“A very good, very rich copy,” the old man reportedly told them, “But very clearly forged within the last year.”

Word eventually reached the capital that Renly was running around the Stormlands in Robert’s crown. He’d nicked it before his escape and replaced it with the false one. Both Joffrey and Cersei threw fits. Their rage was terrifying. And Joffrey, of course, ordered Sansa beaten. After all, the crown would be there if not for her “traitor father.”

But Sansa always suspected otherwise. Renly had been gone within hours of Robert’s death. How would he have had time to steal the crown, have a perfect copy made, and replace it within so little time? She’s come to realize that King Robert’s brothers probably knew the truth about Cersei’s children and had been planning accordingly long before her father even arrived in King’s Landing. It would certainly explain how Renly managed to escape and assemble his forces so quickly.

But she still has a row of little white lines on her left wrist from the knuckle edges of Ser Boros’s gauntlet breaking her skin during that particular episode. She glances at them now.

A maester would be able to verify that this was indeed Rhaegar’s real harp. Sansa says as much, her heart soaring.

But Jon’s response dampens her excitement. “She could claim we stole it. A lot of treasures were plundered during the sack of King’s Landing, after all. Having this doesn’t prove I’m Rhaegar’s son.”
Her heart sinks. He’s right.

Howland nods. “This can certainly help your case, but it doesn’t prove it. I’m afraid the only way you can prove for sure that you’re the blood of Old Valyria is by getting close to one of the dragons.”

Sansa empties her cup and pours herself another. “The danger…”

“If he’s Rhaegar’s son, and I know for a fact that he is,” Howland says, “Then he has enough dragon’s blood in him to get close without incident, Your Grace.”

“Tell that to Rhaenyra Targaryen!”

“She was devoured by her enemy’s dragon, under the orders of his master,” Howland reminds her, “Sunfyre had been battling Rhaenyra’s dragons in the Dance, and belonged to Aegon. There’s no reason Viserion would—”

“---Unless Daenerys orders him to,” snaps Sansa, impatient, “And what would stop her, exactly?”

Howland sighs. “We all know that Daenerys hasn’t completely mastered her dragons. It’s very possible she doesn’t have enough influence on him to make him kill another Dragon Lord, yet. And even if she could, there are ways to keep that from happening.”

“Just as I explained to Sansa. I do have a plan for that,” Jon states.

“It’s hardly foolproof.”

“It’s the best chance we have. And it’s not exactly flimsy, either,” Jon replies defensively. He rests his hand on hers and their eyes meet. “Please, Sansa, I know you’re afraid. But I need you to support me in this.”

Suddenly devoid of appetite, Sansa hands the lyre back to her husband, and stands. “I do so begrudgingly. And I’m not happy about this. Now, if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen. Lord Reed, good night, Jon can explain his idea to you. I am suddenly weary.”

One of the advantages of her condition is that no one dares protest when she excuses herself.

Jon enters the bedchamber about an hour later and crawls into bed with her, taking her into his arms. She stays determinedly still and doesn’t face him.

“Bran saw us riding with Daenerys, remember?” He whispers. “I’ll be fine.”

She tries to take comfort in this. But it’s possible Bran could be wrong. She wants to believe her brother is infallible, though.

Sansa doesn’t want to end what could be their last night together with anger, though. So she reluctantly turns to look at him.

“I can’t help but be afraid,” she says, trying not to cry anymore. She’s furious with herself. Jon had mentioned before that telling Daenerys would almost certainly lead to him having to face a dragon. But she’d proposed telling her anyways. “I can’t help it. I wish I’d never insisted we tell her. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you. I love you, Jon.”

“And I love you. And I won’t leave you.” He kisses her fingertips. “I’ll always find a way back to you, I promise.”
"You can’t promise that, though," she says, “Conquering death once already tested the Gods. You can’t do it again."

"Who says?" He retorts, clearly trying to be funny. But he sees her reaction, and his face softens. “I won’t need to. I’m going to die in your arms, when we’re in ripe old age. I know it.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I believe it, then.”

She closes her eyes. “Just promise me you won’t take any extra risks.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

That’s a promise she can accept.

~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Jon:

Keenly, is how he feels the absence of his wife as he and Lord Reed enter the meeting chamber. The lyre, out of the box but wrapped in the green silk, is under the arm that he usually leads Sansa on. His fingers itch to interlock with hers.

His aunt is already there, seated beside Lord Tyrion. The long council table seems mostly empty, but he’s pleased Daenerys held up her side of the agreement.

Tyrion Lannister’s eyes zero in on Jon’s parcel. “And what is that, a gift for the queen?”

“No,” Jon replies, taking his seat and placing it just to the side, “But something I’ll need to show you in a few minutes.”

“It doesn’t look like a written declaration of fealty, so what could it possibly be?” Daenerys demands.

“You’ll know soon enough.” Jon frowns. It’s been three days since their first meeting, and Jon, Sansa, and their party all tried their best to be as gentle and polite as possible. However, it’s only seemed to inflame the Southern party more.

“Well then, we should get this started,” Daenerys replies, “But before we do, how is your sister?”

Jon doesn’t flinch. If anything, this amuses him. “As per her last letter, Princess Arya is doing well. Thank you for asking.”

“How is your sister’s sister?” Daenerys rolls her eyes as she asks this.

“My wife is ill, as you were informed. But nothing beyond the expected, according to the Maesters and septas. She’s not feeling well enough to attend, but she sends her regards, and should recover soon enough. At worst, she may have to leave the climate here at Harrenhal for a short while until she’s well again. Luckily, her uncle is nearby.”

Daenerys gives a tense smile. “How good to hear.”

“Thank you for asking. My brother Bran is in good health last I heard, if you’re interested.”

Tyrion coughs in a way that makes Jon certain that it’s to cover a laugh.
“Lovely. Now, tell me, King Jon, what is this oh-so-important secret that you had to call a special meeting only for our ears just to speak?”

Jon hesitates and mentally reviews what he and Sansa practiced. He folds his hands atop the table. “Your Grace, please don’t jump to conclusions when you hear what I’m about to say, but… I’m not exactly who you think I am.”

She jumps not only to conclusions, but also from her chair. “I knew it! You’re not the real Jon Snow, are you?! Where is he?!”

Jon keeps his composure. “I am the real Jon Snow, King in the North, Your Grace. That’s not what I mean. What I’m saying is that per a recent discovery of my own, that’s not the whole story. And the queen and I wished to give you the truth before any solid agreements had been made. Please, sit. There’s no deception meant here.”

Daenerys slowly seats herself again. “What, then?”

“You, and indeed, most of the world knows me as Jon Snow Stark, bastard son of Eddard Stark of Winterfell and an unknown mother, who was named king despite a lack of legitimacy. But recently, I learned of my mother’s identity. And it changes quite a lot. You recall the circumstances that sparked Robert’s Rebellion, correct?”

Daenerys grudgingly nods.

“And you know that Eddard Stark eventually found his sister at the Tower of Joy, where your brother kept her, right before she died?”

He notices that Tyrion begins to look alarmed. And he continues. “As it turns out, Queen Daenerys, Lyanna Stark died in childbirth.”

Now Daenerys looks alarmed. Her breathing gets heavy. “And the famously-honorable Ned Stark returns to Winterfell with a bastard son whose mother he won’t identify.” She begins to shake. Her eyes seems to pierce his. “Lyanna died giving birth to—–”

“---A healthy baby boy, yes. Lord Howland is the only other survivor of the Tower of Joy, besides Lord Stark and his newborn nephew.”

“I can confirm that,” Tyrion interjects, his voice oddly flat and his eyes wide. “Everyone knows that.”

“I was indeed there, and it is true,” Lord Reed offers, “And it wasn’t just a baby that we took from the tower.”

Jon reaches for the lyre. “Rhaegar left this to Lyanna when he marched off to fight Robert. Lord Stark had Lord Reed keep it safe since.”

He unwraps it and hands it over. Daenerys and Tyrion gasp.

The Lord of Casterly Rock immediately begins to examine it, looking ever more stunned by the second.

“This had to have been forged at least thirty years ago,” Tyrion states, turning the lyre over, “The words on the bottom are copied from Rhaegar’s signature. It’s his harp, or my father truly shat gold.”

Daenerys, anxious, looks back and forth between Jon and her Hand. “Even if you do have the harp,
that doesn’t make you Rhaegar’s son! Plenty of things were stolen from us back then, why not this?!”

Jon swallows heavily and glances at Lord Reed. “We thought you might say that. We are prepared to prove it another way. But before we do, we should—”

“---I’m not giving you the Iron Throne,” Daenerys says, glaring, “I don’t care if it is true.”

Jon holds her gaze. “If I wanted the Iron Throne, we wouldn’t be here right now. We’d be on a battlefield. Aside from my wife, brother, and sister, no one else knows. And I suspect we’d both like to keep it that way.”

“You still call them brother and sister?” She asks, alarmed.

“I was raised with them, and unlike my relationship with Sansa, there’s been no motivation to change how I regard them. But that is besides the point. The point is, I’m the son of your older brother. I am prepared to prove it. Given your family’s past marital practices, it’s perfectly possible that I’m trueborn. And even if I’m not, being a bastard has never stopped me before. My claim to the Iron Throne rivals yours, and if this gets out, it’s very likely many people will seize upon that regardless of my own wishes.

“There are probably a lot of people in Westeros who would prefer not to kneel to a woman, let alone a foreign woman. Who don’t want a monarch who marched on these shores with Dothraki riders, and granted the Ironborn independence. Who don’t like that the Hand of the King is the reviled brother of Jaime and Cersei Lannister. Who fear your dragons and the dominance they could lead to. Who, for whatever reason, don’t want you on the throne. You’re far more secure as the only Targaryen. A lot less blood is spilled that way.”

“You’re offering to keep quiet?” She seems truly astonished.

“I meant what I said. I don’t want your throne. I certainly don’t want lives wasted in my name, especially when the real enemy is coming. What I want is to end the threat from Beyond the Wall, go home, live in peace with my family, and take care of my people. But I don’t intend to kneel. And if you’re determined to be an enemy under any other circumstances, well, then my hand shall be forced.”

Her eyes narrow. “You’re blackmailing me.”

Jon ignores how his insides squirm when she says this. “In a fashion, I suppose. But I’m not really asking for anything extra. And what I want serves both of us. As Lord Reed reminded you the day we met, if the Others get past us, then they’ll destroy you ten times as easily. You need an alliance as much as we do. And it’s not as if I could expose any of your personal behavior. This is Rhaegar’s doing. And I have options for you. We can agree never to reveal this, you acknowledge our sovereignty, and we finally arrange a mutually-beneficial alliance everyone needs. We can agree not to reveal this for now, agree on a temporary truce to last until we’ve defeated the White Walkers, and revisit this issue once the war and winter are over. You can refuse these options and leave, start a war to try and conquer us, and force me to reveal the truth, mounting a defense, further splitting up the kingdom, taking time and resources from efforts to defeat the White Walkers, allow them to take over everything, and we can all die.”

Daenerys closes her eyes and leans back. “Why should I take anything you say seriously?”

“Aside from that severed, still moving hand I sent you months ago? Aside from the fact that I decided to reveal this to you now, before any of my vassals, instead of blindsiding you with a sudden
military effort? Aside from the enemies even you admit are marching towards us now? Well, for one thing, I have no reason to make something like this up---”

“---You do.”

He stops. “What?”

“I said you do have a reason to make this up.”

“If I wanted the Iron Throne, we wouldn’t---”

“---Not that,” she says, “Sansa. Your wife. Your beautiful, pregnant, exceptional wife and queen. Your marriage becomes a lot more pleasant if you’re her cousin instead of her brother, doesn’t it?”

Jon tries not to reveal his shock at this. Daenerys knew. So many of their vassals had no idea, but she guessed. Lord Reed even looks surprised.

He waits a second, refusing to break her gaze. “I am prepared to offer irrefutable proof that I’m a Targaryen. Viserion.”

It’s Dany’s turn to look stunned again. “You can’t honestly think that you can just hope on his back and yell ‘Giddyup!’ Even if it is true---”

“---No, but if everything I’ve heard is true, I should be able to get close enough to an unrestrained, free Viserion, even touch him, without any harm. Without him acting hostile. Provided, of course, that his owner doesn’t order him to attack. I’m willing to demonstrate proof of my Targaryen blood.”

The queen cocks her head. “What’s to stop me from ordering Viserion to roast and devour you?”

“Precautions.” Jon clears his throat. “I want you at a far enough distance so that you can’t make such an order. Just close enough to see me get close to your dragon in a way that only the descendent of dragonlords can. And there are other things.”

“Such as?”

Jon’s lip curls. “The consequences of killing me. The same thing that has kept you from killing me so far.”

“You’re more of a danger to me alive as a Targaryen than you are as a Snow,” Daenerys answers, “And it’s not as if marching against me like that would be so simple. Your wife and heir are just down a few halls. The Northern succession is uncertain, and what forces that are gathered won’t be in the right---” But she stops suddenly, comprehension dawning on her face. “Where is Queen Sansa?”

“She’s recovering from a pregnancy illness, of course.” Jon smiles. Daenerys goes red.

“When did she leave?!”

“Why would my sick queen leave, especially in her condition? The only reason she’d do that is if the climate here proved damaging to her health and she had to go visit her uncle at Riverrun,” Jon replies.

Daenerys and Tyrion exchange panicked looks.

“I swear to the gods, old and new,” Daenerys says, “If you try to deceive me, my dragons and I shall---”
“Kill the pregnant woman whose name and innocence is known of from Dorne to the Frostfangs? Reign death and destruction down upon me, whom you already intended to kill?” Jon counters. “Or upon Winterfell, the Starks, and everything else that stands between you and an army of the Undead? All while I assume your loathed Hand keeps the rest of your vast empire--- who will probably be thrilled by that destructive reign of violence--- together? Through, I assume, the power of his drained mines, his nonexistent popularity, the other dragons that only you can command, and whatever armed forces you leave behind? I’m sure the rest of your kingdom will be thrilled to support you decimating those who tried to make an ally of you when a supernatural is marching towards them, all because of a title. Dorne especially should like that. And they’re so dependable, after all!”

The deep color drains from her face even more quickly than it bloomed. She leans back, speechless. Tyrion, for once, appears to be as well. Jon stays firm.

“You have everything to lose by making good on threats to us, Nauntie,” he tells her, “You are guaranteed to lose everything if you do. We’re not a few tiny islands filled with people everyone loathes anyways. Your dragons are neither indestructible nor all-powerful, just terrifying and dangerous. There’s only three of them and only one of you to wield them. And it’s a big empire you’re eyeing. And if you destroy anything that lies between you and The Wall, not even your dragons will be able to save you and your people from what’s coming. I’m offering you all the protection and support you need to be a savior. And you’re threatening to be a monster instead. All over titles and authority you don’t need and kingdom that doesn’t want you anyways, none of which you’d be able to hold onto for very long anyways. Losing everything is preferable to having a friend, ally, and kin for you.”

There’s silence for a long time. When she speaks, she does so reluctantly.

“When and how do you want to test Viserion?”

“As soon as possible. I’d like you to be accompanied by Lord Reed and my direwolf, Ghost.”

“The direwolf?”

“Yes. For my protection. The queen is understandably very nervous about this undertaking.”

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They call Viserion the “White One”, but up close, Jon can see he’s more cream than white, more gold than white, as well. His wings and the scales at certain edges glittering even in the setting sun.

The crown’s spy network had provided them some information on the dragons individually. Viserion is considered the gentlest, most tamed of the three. Jon isn’t sure if that is a comfort or not. The dragon is settled in an open field eight miles from the castle limits, but not only are his roars loud enough to be heard from Kingspyre, they’re loud even there. If this is the “gentle” one, then Jon shudders to think of what his brothers must be like.

Still, the creature thus far has behaved himself, proving more bark than bite. Thus far, there have been no reports of him harassing smallfolk, getting too close to Harrenhal since his arrival, or causing accidents. People have avoided him, he’s avoided people.

His “mother” visits him at the beginning and end of each day. She rides him through the air, feeds him, and who knows what else. It’s kept the beast happy.

But even a happy, “tame” dragon is still a dragon, and there has been plenty of forewarning that the beasts are not to be trifled with.
This is no trifle, though. Jon just hopes Viserion can tell.

He leaves Daenerys, Lord Reed, and Ghost at the edge of the field. But even his first step inside Viserion’s domain is hesitant.

Daenerys notices, and smiles. “Afraid, are we?”

“Terrified.” He snaps as he says this, his whole manner defiant. Fear has never stopped him before. Thus, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.

He strides away, fists clenched. The air around him gets warmer as he draws closer, and yet he shivers.

Viserion lounges in the middle of the field, head tucked under an extended wing, grooming it. His grunts and snarls are audible a hundred yards away.

He’s immense and magnificent. And yet, as Jon draws closer, he’s struck by how… real… the creature seems. It breathes without flame. For whatever reason, Jon is surprised by this. Logically, he knows it makes sense, but for some reason he always assumed dragons only drew breath when they were about to exhale flame.

As Jon moves closer, the dragon lifts his head from under his wing and shakes it, snorting. This makes Jon pause. Not from fear. But because it reminds him, of all things, of Ghost.

_Ghost terrifies most_, Jon reminds himself. His wolf is red-eyed and larger than a horse. _But he’s a living thing. And a good wolf._

Still, he raised Ghost from puppyhood. He’s never seen Viserion as a hatchling.

The dragon looks at him and, if anything, seems curious. At one point, it opens its mouth, revealing enormous onyx jaws, but merely does it to run its skinny tongue along them.

Jon gets within a few yards from him, and begins to speak. “Hello, Viserion. I’m Jon, I’m your… Well, your nephew, I suppose.”

Viserion looks unmoved by this. He just stares.

“We’re family, of a sort,” Jon continues, wondering if his speech is serving to soothe himself or the beast. “I only learned this recently. Cousin, on the other side of my family, told me. Your mother’s brother was my father. Your brother, Rhaegal, is named after him.”

He’s so close now, and nearly jumps out of his skin when Viserion spreads his wings. But the dragon merely does so to place the tips of them in front of himself and rest his massive head atop them.

Jon gets so close. “Your mother isn’t quite sure she believes it. That’s why I’m here. To prove my Valyrian blood. And, look, maybe my cousin was wrong. I doubt it, but I suppose it’s possible. And if he is, then… All I ask is that you give a sign without killing me.”

The dragon almost seems to cock its head.

“I hope you don’t think me a coward for asking,” Jon continues, “I swear to you, I’ve never begged for my life before. But, you see, it’s not just my life anymore. I’m not one soldier among many. I’m not some inconvenient bastard. I have a country to lead. I have a wife, whom I love. She’s carrying my child. They need me. My country needs me. I ask for them. I belong to them, Valyrian or not.”
He’s inches away now, and he starts to reach, tentatively, to touch the creature’s wing.

“But, if I am, I’d also like a sign from you. Just give me an answer, yes or no, and I’ll never bother you again, should you wish it.”

The beast does not move. Jon takes a deep breath, then makes contact.

The scales are hot to the touch, but not in any way that makes him withdraw. If anything, it’s almost comforting. The world is silent, but for Viserion’s breathing. Jon opens his eyes.

The dragon just gazes at him.

“May I?” Jon asks.

Viserion tilts his head again, Jon takes that as a yes. He leans over and begins running both hands along the dazzling cream-and-gold wing, tracing the color patterns with his fingertips.

Viserion eventually lets loose a mighty, yet flame-free, yawn.

Jon actually smiles. “You’re a nice dragon, aren’t you? And a sleepy one. Did you fly a lot today?”

A grunt is his only reply.

“Are your wings sore? I could keep rubbing them, if you like.”

No response.

Jon keeps talking. “I’m not so bad with it. Sometimes, at night, my wife and I rub the other. We both work very hard. Her shoulders ache a lot, but she always seems to appreciate when I massage them. And she gets my back. I was shot, you see. Three arrows, by a former lover. And the old wounds act up. One of them was just a few inches from my heart. Shall I get the other one?”

Viserion gives what Jon interprets as the dragon equivalent of a shrug. Without thinking, he mounts the creature’s back.

Viserion raises his head at once, and Jon freezes, raising his hands, panicking. “I’m just moving to the other side!”

He slips down for emphasis. Viserion’s curious head follows him. He doesn’t lower it when Jon begins to massage the other wing.

There are a few silent minutes until finally, Viserion shakes his wings. Jon jumps away, and the dragon sits up. For a few, perilous seconds, the creature stares right at him.

He shrieks in a way that should burst Jon’s eardrums, but somehow, it now sounds almost, _musical_. A moment later, Jon finds himself clinging to the edge of Viserion’s sharp snout. The dragon flips him off, and the King of Winter yelps, only to find himself lying atop Viserion’s back.

He scrambles, confused. For a moment, he thinks that the dragon is going to carry him into the air. He gets into a proper position, and reaches for Viserion’s neck. The dragon just leans into his hands.

“He… Do you want to fly?” Jon asks. Viserion just moves slightly, showing no sign of wanting to take to the air. Perhaps Daenerys had some special commands? Perhaps in High Valyrian?

Jon searches his mind for his own limited vocabulary in the tongue. “SOVEGON!”
Viserion just snorts and presses his neck back further.

“He wants you to massage his neck.”

Jon’s head turns. Daenerys Targaryen stands below him, hands on her hips, her face unreadable.

“Oh.” Jon feels like a fool. He begins moving his hands along the ridges. “I... I think he likes me.”

“He does. Tyrion once tried to communicate with my dragons. He got surprisingly far, a whole minute close to him and Rhaegal. They were chained, though. And they still chased him out more or less immediately. You’ve been here for over a quarter-hour. You’re on his back. He doesn’t mind.”

Jon’s heart pounds. “So that means...?”

Daenerys sighs. “Congratulations, Nephew. You’re a prince of House Targaryen.”

Jon withdraws his hands and slides off, landing just in front of Daenerys. “I’m a king of House Stark.”

Her eyes narrow. “You were.”

“I am.”

She frowns. “You wish to be a king? That’s doable, I suppose. But let’s be honest, here. Now that you’ve truly felt the power, there’s no way you’re forsaking the dragon for the wolf. This? This is only a taste of what you could be. What you could have. What you’re meant for. Destiny has brought us both here, Jon Targaryen.”

He steps back. “The wolf has been with me my whole life, Daenerys. I am here to prove who I am, yes. But with the understanding that I’d never lay any claims. I haven’t changed my mind. The Iron Throne is yours.”

“It could be yours as well. You want an alliance? Fine. I want Westeros, all of it. You wouldn’t have to bend your knee. You and your children can have everything that the last several minutes just promised you.”

There’s such awkwardness. Jon hopes he’s misinterpreting this. Gods, how he hope he’s wrong. Tentatively, he asks, “What do you mean?”

“I mean that maybe... Maybe we are both right about this situation. Maybe I’m not perfectly stable here. Maybe I do need the North. Maybe you’re more suited to win the hearts and minds of these people. Maybe an alliance is our only real option. There’s a solution to all of this, Jon. One born of generations upon generations of our family and heritage.”

Jon closes his eyes for a moment, then looks at her. “I already married S——”

“Jon Snow married Sansa Stark. Or Jon Stark did. You didn’t even know who you were at the time. You married her as her brother——”

“—Fine talk from a woman whose parents were siblings——”

“—It’s different for us!” Daenerys snaps. “Either way, the name given at that wedding isn’t real! You’re not some Northern bastard anymore! You’re a Jon Targaryen, prince and dragonlord. You’re meant to fly and sire dragons. Not rut in the ice and breed puppies. Think of the unity and peace we’d bring to Westeros! Think of all we could accomplish!”
“We can accomplish plenty without me abandoning my wife and child,” Jon replies, furious, “Gods, Woman, are you really so power-hungry that you would have a man do such a thing just so you can have larger borders? Have you no ethics? The only difference I see between you and the Lannister woman is that she didn’t have dragons!”

Daenerys gapes. Now, it’s her turn to step back. “How dare you? You have no idea who I am, what I’ve done, what I’ve sacrificed! You know nothing!”

Somehow, this makes him lose it completely. “Horseshit! I know plenty, Daenerys Targaryen! I am so tired of people saying that, because it’s not true! I know enough not to chase some hideous lump of tin while the world is about to be overrun by wights! I’ve gone from bastard to king, without the benefit of commanding a trio of fire-breathing beasts! I’ve saved lives, defeated armies, stared down giants, been proclaimed a king, married the finest woman in the world, and kept the Mother of Dragons on her toes! I’ve gotten rather far with very little for a man who knows nothing! What is it exactly that you know?”

Daenerys looks away for a moment, crossing her arms across her chest. “Plenty. Enough to know this was a stupid, pointless effort. Gods, you’d do anything for her, wouldn’t you? Literally anything.”

Jon thinks back to the night before the battle with Ramsay. Sansa told him plainly that if they lost, she would take her own life instead of going back. What was the first thing I did? Oh, yes, go straight to Melisandre and tell her not to bring me back if I should fall.

He glances at Viserion, who watches them curiously. “Anything but live without her.”

“If she asked you to bend the knee to me, would you?”

“Maybe, if she won the argument that would immediately come after such a request. If she convinced me that she meant it. And that would only happen if it was truly for the best for our kingdom. But that’s not the case.”

“I thought you’d do anything for her.”

“Yes. But not anything she asked. I’m her husband, not her slave.”

Daenerys shakes her head. “I don’t understand. Men kill to be kings. Even the ones who love their wives. But I’ve never heard of a man who wears a crown because he loves his wife.”

“I hold my crown for many reasons. She’s one.” Jon’s looks heavenward. How narcissistic is this woman? “Daenerys, did it ever occur to you that perhaps I refuse you for reasons other than another woman? Are you under the impression that if it were not for Sansa, I’d be falling at your feet?”

“Am I incorrect?”

“Yes,” he tells her, unblinking, “I haven’t lied to you. Everything my men and I have said since we arrived here? It’s all true. I don’t let my cock or even my heart rule me. I was asked to be a king for a country trying to break free from the tyranny your title represents. I was asked to lead them, as king, against the threats that face us. I swore to. I am the descendant of a man your father killed and a woman your brother raped. Everything that’s passed between us, I’ve meant. And there are yet more reasons I wouldn’t do so that I haven’t even spoken.”

“Such as?”

“For one thing, I want to go home. My true home, Winterfell. I want to go home, and stay there. I
don’t want to go anywhere near that ugly chair of yours, let alone spend my life polishing it with my arse!” Jon snaps. “And for another… Quite frankly, Nauntie, I dislike you. Very much.”

Her eyes widen at this. Jon wonders if any man has ever said anything like that to her before.

“I don’t want your power, I don’t want to subdue you, I don’t blame you for my struggles. I just really don’t like you. You. As a person. I consider you arrogant, entitled, selfish, power-hungry, inconsiderate, rude, egotistical, vindictive, petty, and thoughtless. You presented my pregnant wife with a chamber pot, then demanded I hand over everything I had. You are holding the safety of both our realms ransom because I won’t kiss your feet. And your reaction upon discovering we’re family is to try to seduce me away from my family, in contradiction of pretty much everything I’ve ever said to you, which furthermore tells me that you simply turn a deaf ear to anything you don’t wish to hear! I find you repellant.”

There’s silence. Daenerys eventually breaks it.

“Viserion hasn’t attacked you, even though you just railed against his mother. You’re definitely a dragonlord.” She glances downward for a few moments, then looks up again. To his amazement, she smiles. “Thank you, Nephew. I needed that.”

“...Pardon?”

“I said, I needed that. You’re right. My behavior thus far has been inexcusable. I’ve made an utter arse of myself. And right now, I’m regretting the fact that you’re unavailable even more, because you’re willing to tell me the truth to my face. Even Tyrion minces his words with me. To be honest, I don’t really like myself right now, either. I’ve had quite a few illusions shattered, you see, including ones that allowed me to survive all these years. And I’ve handled this poorly. But hopefully, I’ll do better. Write to your wife. Tell her to return. She and your child are officially safer here than anywhere else. I swear it on the life on my dragons.”

She turns on her heel and begins walking away, leaving him stunned. She stops and turns her head for a moment.

“Oh, and Jon?”

“What?”

“You’re a cold, sanctimonious, pompous, pretentious, presumptive, humorless, arrogant twat who is willing to get by on the accomplishments of far superior women. I’ve met soup tureens with finer personalities than you.”

And she leaves.

Jon glances at Viserion. “Goodnight, Lad.”
Sansa:

She’d left Harrenhal in rather non-royal circumstances in order to pass through undetected: in the middle of the night, dressed as a peasant, in a turnip cart pulled by donkeys. When the cart reaches an inn, they are approached by some men in Tully livery, who ask them how to determine ripe turnips from rotten ones.

“It’s all in the color,” she informs them as she draws water from a well herself. “You want the white, not the grey. Would you all like a drink of the Trident River?”

She rode atop one of the knights’ horses, dressed as a regular noble girl, the rest of the way to Riverrun.

Lord Edmure delighted in receiving his niece, and provided her with beautiful rooms overlooking the Red Fork. Unfortunately for him, the visit proved short-lived. Little more than twenty-four hours time from when she departed arrived from Harrenhal that both King Jon and Queen Daenerys hope that she’s recovered from the complications of her condition. Edmure protests, begging her to stay a few days more, but she insists.

He tries to make up for the hospitality that was cut short by personally traveling with her, providing her an impressive guard, a luxury carriage, and beautiful traveling clothes.

When she rides back into the main courtyard of Kingstower, she finds that the Dragon Queen and her retinue are there to greet her along with Jon and the Northerners. Daenerys even descends the steps to greet her.

So does Jon, who practically races Edmure to help his queen from the carriage. Her heart skips a beat when she sees him, alive, unharmed, smiling. Strong and fast in his strides. His hand in hers as she steps onto the ground.

“Queen Sansa, how good it is to see you returned. Thank you so much for fetching the Lord of the Riverlands to aid in our negotiations!” Daenerys says with a stilted smile and a shallow curtsy.

Sansa resists her immediate urge to embrace her intact husband as tightly as possible and smiles back, giving her own curtsy. It’s all alright. He survived Viserion. Daenerys was acknowledging them. They were moving forward. Bran’s vision was right. So much fear and tension seems to melt from
“It was no trouble, Your Grace. We could hardly continue these talks without my dear uncle, could we? I did my duty!”

Edmure smiles awkwardly and bows to Daenerys. He’d been informed of the excuse they’d be giving for Sansa’s departure, but not of why they were making it.

“That’s my niece,” Edmure remarks nervously, “Always doing her duty! An honor to meet you, Your Grace.”

“The honor is all mine, Lord Tully.”

Sansa resists the urge to tap her feet. But when she and Jon finally get to be alone, she rejoices, throwing herself into his arms.

“You’re safe!” she exclaims.

“I can say the same for you!” he replies, hands splayed at her waist. “Are you alright? Everything… in order?”

Sansa reddens and nods. “A little nausea, nothing more. But you! What happened?”

“Not a scratch on me,” he says, getting to the heart of her question.

“Are you sure?”

“You may inspect me to make sure, if that is your desire,” he says wickedly.

If he’s being carefree enough to get right to seduction, she imagines things are exactly as they’ve hoped. It only occurs to her as they kiss that he might be trying to distract her.

When they pull apart for breath, she asks, “The queen, has she agreed?”

“She’s deciding now whether she wants the temporary truce, or if this should be settled. I believe Tyrion is pushing her to settle.”

“Have we offered Harrenhal yet?”

“No yet.”

“Good.” No use giving it up if there’s no need. “You really think she’s seen reason?”

“I believe I may have actually terrified her. She doesn’t want any more bloodshed than necessary. And you were right, things are unstable in her domains. Tyrion isn’t popular.” He grins.

“And you’re certain she’s truly convinced?”

“As certain as I can be about anything.”

“Anything signed or declared?”

“She made a verbal agreement to acknowledge the King and Queen of Winter for the near future in front of her advisors, and she’s preparing a statement of friendship for the banquet tonight. That is, if you feel you can attend.”
“I’m not bedridden, Jon.”

“But you are tired.”

She shrugs. “So I’ll nap. Then I’ll just be hungry.”

“Are you hungry now?” he asks anxiously.

“No! But I will be in a few hours.” She stretches. “But I’d like to invite the queen to tea, regardless.”

Jon cringes. “I promised to meet with some local leaders this afternoon.”

“That’s not a problem. I meant a private tea. Just the two of us. I want to see how she behaves.”

Another cringe. “Before you do, there’s something you should know. Last night, when I proved my heritage, Daenerys proposed I leave you for her. That we share the Iron Throne.”

Sansa doesn’t need to ask what his answer was, but she does ask how he conveyed it.

“Angrily. I ended up telling her exactly what I thought of her.”

“Jon!”

Now it’s her turn to cringe. “That might complicate things.”

“How is this for complication? She thanked me for it. And more or less agreed with me.”

“Did she?” That was… odd. Sansa would not have expected that.

Her husband nods. “She described her behavior throughout this visit as inexcusable. When I return from my meetings, I’d like us to compare notes on her behavior.”

Sansa goes to her desk and quickly draws up an invitation, handing it to her husband. “Hand this off to a page and call for a tea set up in the solar, would you?”

Jon nods and departs with a kiss to her forehead. Larra comes in and helps her change from her travel ware, and within an hour, the solar is properly set for tea and the Dragon Queen arrives.

Sansa deliberately dresses simply for this audience. Despite her fondness for finery, she knows it’s a better representation of Northern sensibilities, and she believes the contrast serves her. Daenerys always wears beautiful, sumptuous things, accessorized with elaborate jewelry. Bright colors, imported silks, exquisite metalwork. Sansa goes a different route, especially for more casual occasions like this.

Not that she outfits herself as a pauper. Sansa always makes sure there is some sort of rich statement aspect of her attire, whether it be elaborate silken embroidery or a single, impressive piece of jewelry.

For tea, Daenerys sweeps in wearing violet brocade trimmed in snowy rabbit’s fur, her hair dressed with combs shaped like silver dragons with ruby eyes, a jeweled belt at her waist, and silver bracelets at her wrists. Sansa settles for a plain net holding her hair back, simple, silver stud earrings, and a gown of navy lamb’s wool with white snowflakes embroidered at the cuffs and a panel running down the center of her bodice and skirts.

The women’s eyes meet and they curtsey to one another, exchange pleasantries. Sansa serves the tea and cakes herself, having dismissed Lara.

Daenerys remarks on this, “Why not leave such things to your staff?”
Sansa smiles. “I learned a good long ago to arrange how many ears are present whenever possible. The fewer, the better. And it’s not as if I need someone to pour my tea for me.”

“You don’t trust your people?”

“It’s not always a matter of trust, but safety. Their safety, actually. Anything they don’t need to know can make them a target. I’d rather not subject my people to that.”

“Interesting. But I wouldn’t judge you if it were a trust issue,” Daenerys answers after wiping her mouth. “It’s understandable, for those in our position.”

“Certainly,” Sansa says brightly, not offering any more. She changes the subject. “So, now you know the truth about my husband. I hope it doesn’t scare you. He doesn’t want your throne. It’s to our advantage to stay quiet.”

Daenerys’s eyes narrow. “How long have you known, exactly?”

“Jon and I only found out the day your first summons arrived,” Sansa answers.

“So not before you married?”

“No. We regarded our union as a great sacrifice. We felt it especially keenly since, as it turns out, we were repressing feelings for one another the entire time. The news of Jon’s parentage came as a relief in some ways, a burden in others.”

“A burden?”

“Aye. Learning that my father lied to everyone for our entire lives wasn’t exactly easy. And we feared being drawn into certain conflicts that we wanted no part of.”

She’s careful with all that she reveals, but she does not lie. Not directly.

Daenerys watches her carefully. “But personally…”

“…Personally, yes. It was a relief. Though,” Sansa pauses to nibble on a lemoncake, “Thinking on it now, it would be better if Jon turned out to be, say, the son of our Uncle Brandon, perhaps by Ashara Dayne, than Aunt Lyanna and Prince Rhaegar’s. I hope you’re not offended by me saying so.”

“Why?”

Sansa sighs. “Because we have enough problems without the Iron Throne involved. I witnessed the conflict over that thing firsthand. And the addition of dragons? No. That’s danger we could do without.”

“So what, all you want is a cozy, private domestic life in the family homestead as well, then?” Daenerys asks, sounding doubtful.

Sansa ingests the rests of her cake as she nods, and washes it down with her tea. “I’ve wanted to be away from the Red Keep and back in Winterfell since I was thirteen. I didn’t take my home back for nothing.”

“It’s just that… You’re not queen consort. You’re a sovereign, along with Jon. If that’s all you want, why assume an official regency at all? Why not just marry him?”

Sansa smiles. “Principles, mostly. I felt I had a duty to look after my people, to secure the power
structure we created, to shoulder the burden with Jon. I also resent the idea of being passed over by virtue of my sex. I suffered and contributed far more to the reclamation of our home than Jon did. He’ll tell you that himself. But he was chosen over me for having a cock. I resent and oppose that system and the mindset that put it in place. Also, quite frankly, I felt more secure that way. I’d had more than enough of being subject to the authority of others. Of not being in a position to protect myself and others. Jon is the best of men, but he is only one man. And even if he granted me every privilege and honor, it would all ultimately rest with him. And if he were lost… Well, that would leave everything, including my own position, vulnerable to people I trust far less. Ruling in my own right is a statement, a duty, and a safety measure. If Jon is lost, the gods forbid, my position can never be lost with him. My country doesn’t have to undergo a regime change in the middle of a crisis. Everyone is safer.”

“And what of your destiny?”

She’s asking for herself, Sansa realizes.

“By that you mean…?”

“Being chosen for something, meant for something, born for something. The path determined for you.”

“I grew up believing the path determined for me was to look pretty, be charming enough to do credit to my family, marry some important lord, serve him, have his children, and make sure his castle was run well. I had three trueborn brothers, one of which still lives. I was beautiful, accomplished, and courteous from the beginning. I was a perfect lady by age three, and never felt drawn to any activity or idea that deviated from the role of a charming, obedient, traditional lady wife. Instead, I’m married to a bastard, I wage war, I’m the highest authority from the Wall to the Crownlands, and the only person aside from my husband who wields a similar level of power is another woman. I don’t believe in destiny, as you describe it. I believe in responsibility. I believe that the only thing that determines our lives aside from ourselves are the circumstances surrounding us. And I don’t believe those circumstances are preordained.”

Daenerys cocks her head. “I am a daughter, too. I grew up in exile, with an older brother. Viserys was supposed to be king. I always believed we were meant to take back everything the Usurper took from us. That the Targaryens would rule Westeros again. When Viserys died, even before that, I suspected that my fate was to restore my family and rule Westeros myself. The birth of my dragons only seemed to confirm it to me. It was an actual miracle. And I knew what I was meant for.”

“The thing about miracles is that most people don’t experience them. I haven’t. I didn’t get where I am through any miracles. My family was slaughtered. I had to make choices. I wasn’t encouraged, I was compelled.”

“And you don’t think that just proves my point? Perhaps your—”

Sansa does her best to repress the white-hot rage that surges through her when she hears this. “You’ll refrain from suggesting that the brutal loss of nearly everyone and everything I ever loved was supposed to happen, thank you very much.”

Daenerys’s eyes widen. “My apologies. I just wanted—”

“Yes, you just wanted. That’s what this is actually about. You believe in your destiny, all that ‘Blood of the Dragon, rightful heir to the Iron Throne’ stuff because you want to believe in it. All of that mythology, your supposed birthright, it all serves you. You want to rule the Seven Kingdoms, and your ‘destiny’ tells you that you should. Nevermind that Rhaegar’s ‘destiny’ and Viserys’s ‘destiny’
was the same at some point. If there are divine forces that intend on you ruling, then that is to your advantage, isn’t it? But let’s say that we do have a fate chosen by the gods. It doesn’t matter, then. Because what will happen will happen regardless. Jon and I don’t need to change our minds, if you’re going to end up conquering us anyways. It’s not as if destiny is something we control, if it exists. So I’m afraid it’s not your fate to convince me to kneel based on the idea that you’re meant to rule me. Because I don’t accept it.”

“Well, if I’m right, it would be easier for everyone if you did. Do you really want to take that chance?”

“The alternative would be equally risky. And frankly, I think if the gods’ plan is to give absolute power to a woman who prioritizes titles and personal power over the safety of the very people she wants to rule, then I’m obligated to interfere. If you’re really this obstinate, and you’re really meant to be queen of the whole continent, then everyone is doomed one way or another. I’d rather face defeat having lived according to my own beliefs and values than having surrendered them to a vague concept and a person who refuses to accept anything short of complete dominance.”

There’s a few seconds of silence. Then Daenerys smirks.

“You know, you accuse me of putting titles before the people, but how are you and Jon any different? You both know bending the knee to me will deliver me right to The Wall. And yet, you cling to your crowns.”

“We’re different because we were asked to rule by our people. And the surest future is one where we serve their wishes and forge this alliance. If we bend the knee, we can’t guarantee that our people will be safe, even if we win the war. Our realms are strongly, even violently opposed to subjugation by you. There’s nothing that could stop them from overthrowing us for betraying their will and mounting a revolt under someone else. Thus, more war, more attacks, more death. We’re more likely to guarantee their safety by doing as they’ve asked and giving them no cause to upset the peace once the White Walkers are gone.”

Daenerys glares. “Maybe you’ve just convinced yourself that the people will never accept me because you want to be a queen.”

Sansa tries not to lose her patience. “Your Grace, we’ve offered you a temporary agreement. One that leaves the possibility for us to step down peacefully and for our kingdom to accept you after the White Walkers are defeated. Why would we do such a thing if we weren’t sure about this? We haven’t technically taken your sovereignty off the table. We’ve only opposed your immediate, unconditional rule. If, after you’ve helped us save the realm, our vassals decide they’re happy to serve you, we’ll bend the knee. We’ve made that offer from the beginning. You’re the one refusing it. So no, I wouldn’t say we’re making up circumstances to ‘cling’ to a crown when we’re offering you a perfect opportunity to gain the committed loyalty of our kingdom.”

The Dragon Queen closes her eyes. “Yes, yes, I know.” She does something shocking: she props her arm atop the table and rests her head in her hand. “And you’ve made that offer clear not just to me, but all of your chief subjects as well. So it’s not as if you’re keeping that option from them. Your lords know and expect that you’ll step down if they change their minds. That you’ve made that offer to me. So it’s not as if there’s nothing to force you to honor such an offer. At this point, you’d be destroyed if you violated such an agreement.”

“Then why—?”

“Because it’s so much easier for me to think of you as dishonest and hostile. Because certain people, people I want to trust, have insisted otherwise. They’ve assured me that I’m entitled to rule you, and
that you’re being unreasonable. That there is no right outcome aside from the one that serves my interests. That I can, will, and must dethrone you both and take the North as I’ve always intended.”

Sansa sits back in her chair. So much begins to make sense. But she’s not quite ready to let her guard down. “Did these people also tell you that you could have my husband?”

Daenerys looks up, and to her credit, she exhibits what looks like genuine shame. “I’m so sorry. Please understand, I didn’t really want to—”

“Do you think that makes it better?” Sansa demands. “That you made attempts to tear apart my family without even wanting him?”

“I wouldn’t have… I didn’t even expect it to happen. I knew how you two felt about each other almost immediately. I saw it. Anyone who has truly loved and is paying attention could see it. I did what I did not to hurt you, I promise. None of what I did was meant for that.”

“Then what for, exactly?” Sansa asks, “You’ve insulted us, threatened us, acted—”

“Like a petty fool?”

“Among other things. Jon told me what he said to you.”

“And he had every reason to say those things. What person observing my behavior wouldn’t get that impression? And he didn’t even see how I acted away from the negotiation room! He’s the first to say it to me, and you’re the second.

“Tell me, Queen Sansa, how honest was Tyrion with you when you were married? Did he try to put a barrier between you and the truth?”

“Sometimes,” Sansa admits, “but he did so out of kindness. I truly believe that. Especially since I had no power of my own and a lot of tragedy in my life.”

“I thought he was honest. He’d questioned and challenged me before, you see. Gently, but he did do it. I always thought that if he didn’t believe in what I was doing, he wouldn’t support me at all.”

“I’m afraid that’s a false impression. I know for a fact that he was disgusted with his family’s goals and actions, but aside from a few, small acts of defiance, he still devoted his time and talents to their interests. He loathed them, but he still kept them in power. His greatest act of defiance was probably not raping me. And that was a last-minute decision. It was only when they were about to kill him that he finally left.”

Sansa observes the queen’s expression and mannerisms. She’s sure, now. “Your Grace, are you trying to tell me that this whole time you’ve been testing your own advisors?”

Daenerys takes a deep breath.

“I don’t have a partner, Queen Sansa. I’m surrounded by sycophants, by people who don’t dare challenge me. Who are served best by telling me exactly what I want to hear, getting me everything I want. I thought I had at least a couple of people willing to tell me the truth, and perhaps at one point I was right, but I believe that has changed, especially since I defeated Cersei.”

Daenerys closes her eyes. “Gods… And even Missandei, she…”

“Does she owe everything to you?” Sansa guesses.
“More or less. Seven Hells, she even told me to my face that I was right to dismiss others’ advice when it suited me.” Daenerys runs her fingers through her silver-gold tresses, knocking her jeweled combs askew. “The worst part is, I can’t even blame them! I have three dragons, and I’ve burned down every challenge that I’ve met the entire time they’ve known me. The most I’ve dealt with since the dragons were born were temporary inconveniences, really. They’ve all seen firsthand what happens to…”

She trails off, and Sansa cannot help but feel her heart open a bit.

The Dragon Queen then shakes her head, clearly embarrassed. “I’m sure you were wondering this whole time how such a stubborn, unreasonable person agreed to meet you on your terms in the first place.”

“And how such a person managed to get this far at all, even with three dragons.”

“Mmmm. Such an idiot would have lost them by now.” Daenerys actually snorts.

Sansa bites her lip. “I take it this is the answer? I thought you seemed way too lucid at certain points. The assessment you gave of our respective positions the other day seemed a bit too—”


“That possibility did occur to me, yes.”

“I’m not so easily coached.” Daenerys smiles. “And, thankfully, I’m not so easily manipulated, either. But that hardly helps me now, does it? I mean, look at how I’ve behaved! During an affair of this magnitude. In the middle of a crisis, I presented the pregnant woman who controls half the continent with a chamber pot! I’ve been stalling the salvation of everything I’ve built over titles! I tried to seduce a married man away from his pregnant wife! What more do I need to do to get the people who are supposed to advise me to speak up and tell me ‘no’?!"

Her smile is gone by this point. “What kind of people just stand by and encourage behavior like this, especially when so much is at stake? How am I supposed to trust anyone at this point??”

Sansa gapes. The last time her feelings about someone changed this quickly, she was watching Illyn Payne decapitate her father.

Daenerys swallows. “I thought… I hoped… that maybe coming here would finally compel my advisors to rediscover their spines, and if not… Well, then I’d know for sure. And, granted, I also wanted to see what you two were made of.”

“And how do you find us, then?”

Daenerys manages to smile once more. “I find you both excellent, I am happy to say. It’s the one bright spot in this.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. I—”

But they’re interrupted by the hallway door opening. Jon comes marching in. He stops short when he sees them. “Seven Hells, how long has she been here?”

Sansa realizes, with a jolt, that she doesn’t know. Her tea is now ice cold, and when she looks out
the window, the sun is setting. They’d been talking for hours.

“A while,” Sansa answers, baffled. “We’ve been having a… very interesting discussion. And the time got away from us.”

“Clearly.” Jon gazes at Daenerys. “Erm… Good evening, Your Grace.”

“Good evening, nephew. You should sit. What I was about to say concerns you too.”

Awkwardly, Jon goes to grab one of the armchairs by the fire, and pulls it up to the table. “Well?”

Daenerys takes a deep breath. “I’ve suspected, for a good while, that everything I’ve pursued and achieved since my brother’s death amounts to… Well, far too much power. Especially for one person. I assure you, it was by accident. I didn’t set out to conquer Slaver’s Bay or unite all the khalasars of the Dothraki under my rule. But, altogether, combining the seven realms and my domains back east, not to mention the dragons… It’s all too much. I’ve reached a certain level where I can’t expect those around me to tell me the truth. I have undermined any and every reasonable boundary on power. And unless I establish limits myself, then any sort of balance of power in the world shall be annihilated, and the only chance it will ever have at being restored will be soaked in blood. The Valyrian Empire eventually fell in the most destructive way possible, and it was ruled by a community. I’m only one person. If I don’t set a precedent for restraint, there won’t be any. Everything I’ve built will eventually destroy itself. At this point, the only chance to avoid that would be to ensure the existence of rival powers, and impose limits on what our House should take. I must establish a precedent of humility and coexistence, not tyranny and conquest. Also, I need to show those around me that I can accept being challenged. So, logic dictates that…”

Sansa practically faints from relief.

An hour later, she is draped in ivory satin, crowned, and standing at the head table, cup raised along with the rest of the hall, everyone listening to Daenerys with rapt attention.

“...I formally recognize the North, the Riverlands, and the Vale of Arryn as the independent, sovereign nation of the Three Realms, jointly ruled by Jon and Sansa of the royal House Stark, the King and Queen of Winter, untethered by the dominion of the Iron Throne. Furthermore, I officially petition the King and Queen to enter into a full military and fiscal alliance, insuring that our respective realms shall always come to one another’s aid to defend and maintain the peace and stability of the entire continent of Westeros through all the seasons to come!”

Daenerys’s chief advisors are stunned into silence, but the rest of the hall erupts in applause.

An applause that lasts too long, compelling Sansa to finally call for silence. When the cheering dies down, she and Jon raise their cups to Daenerys.

“It is with great delight,” she declares, “that the King and I accept an alliance with the Iron Throne on behalf of the people of the Three Realms.”

More applause. The monarchs exchange embraces. When they finally sit again, Sansa notices a nonplussed Tyrion lean over and whisper something to his monarch through a stiff smile. Sansa cannot help but giggle.

~_~_~_~
Jon:

He’s happier than ever, singing, downing tankards of mead, exchanging congratulations with the entire table, even getting up a few times to take his wife and aunt for a turn around the dance floor.

Such a weight has been lifted. Now he can think of what faces them with something other than dread. He actually giggles, imagining the Night King’s face when he sees three dragons swooping down upon him.

Indeed, what does he have to worry about now? He wonders this to himself as he and Sansa spin about the floor, laughing. What stands in the way of everything he’s ever wanted? Their odds of defeating the White Walkers are greater than anyone could have expected. Arya and Bran are home safe. His brothers in the Watch are no longer alone. The North is united with the rest of Westeros, the threats in the south officially quelled. Winterfell is waiting for him, and it’s his for the rest of his life. His people are safer than they’ve been in years. He’s no longer a bastard. He’s wed to a woman who embodies practically everything he’s ever dreamed of. He’s free to love her, and she loves him. They have a child on the way. He’s a bloody king. The threat of the White Walkers has almost become a formality. And once that is seen to, there is nothing stopping him from simply going home, putting his feet up, and spending the rest of his days surrounded by loved ones, respected by all, keeping his ancestral seat, changing the world around him in the best ways, and bouncing children on his knee.

On top of it all, he knows he deserves it.

Winter may be coming, but that doesn’t scare him anymore. He’ll make it through to greet spring and summer. Nothing shall stop him. Nothing shall stop them.

He’s never felt like this before. Not ever.

They dance until finally, Sansa begs him for a break, weary. Giddy on mead, hope, triumph, and, of course, her, he scoops her up into his arms.

She shrieks and laughs, beats her hands against his chest, protesting half-heartedly at the impropriety of it all. He just grins and buries his face in her soft, red hair. Because he can. He’s allowed to. He’ll be doing this for the rest of his life. She wants him to. Him, and only him, for all the years to come. And no one can say they can’t do this. Nothing can stop them. Not even dragons and White Walkers.

He carries his giggling wife back to the high table, attacking her neck and collarbone with kisses. She laughs so hard that she shakes and tears form at the corners of her eyes. Jon takes his chair again, holding her in his lap. She wraps her arms around his neck and balances atop his knees like a tavern wench, propriety forgotten.

It’s late enough, and almost everyone is drunk enough not to remember this in the morning. He’ll remember, though.

“How’s our babe?” he asks, pouring another cup of mead.

“Good. Happy. Our pup likes to dance, I think.”

“Our ‘pup’?”

“That’s the term for wolves’ young,” Sansa reminds him, “and this one is the child of two wolves.”

He laughs. “Aye. That’s true. Does the pup like to drink as well? If so, it could be trouble.”
“I don’t know. Not all of us are well into our cups, Your Grace.”

Jon rolls his eyes. “As if you’d let me do this to you in public when sober!”

“I wouldn’t let you do this if I wasn’t. Too much makes me very sick now.” She rests her head against his chest. “You’d be clutching my hair, not my bottom.”

Jon moves his hand sheepishly. “Then how is this happening?”

“Maybe you’re just having an effect on me.”

This makes him grin. “I love you.”

“Likewise,” she replies, “I love me, too.”

“You little minx!” He attacks her neck with his mouth once more, and she shrieks with laughter. When he withdraws, she smiles.

“I suppose I’m fond of you as well.”

“Mmmmm.” He leans back, stroking her hair.

A couple appear a short while later, practically spilling into the chairs beside Jon and Sansa. It takes Jon a second to realize it’s because the woman is his aunt. And the man is his uncle. By marriage. Edmure Tully, Lord of Riverrun.

A man whose very presence is apparently enough for Jon’s mood to drop slightly.

Technically, the two men have only known each other for a short while, and their time actually around one another has been even smaller. After news came that Walder Frey and his sons were dead, Northern troops marched into the Riverlands. Given that it had been Edmure himself that had surrendered Riverrun to the Lannisters, Jon had been tempted to name a different man as Lord Paramount of the Trident. It was only for Sansa, Arya, and Bran’s sakes that he fully restored Lord Edmure to his position.

Not that Lord Tully seemed to appreciate this. He couldn’t seem to look past the awkwardness of Jon being his good-brother’s bastard, the insult to Edmure’s late sister. Edmure showed Jon only the most begrudging courtesy, and even as he stood in the hall that Jon won back for him, he stated that only one of his sister’s trueborn children were fit to don the crown of winter.

Jon promptly informed Lord Tully that he would get his wish, as he would be marrying Sansa and that she would be crowned co-monarch.

Edmure’s reaction to this was to offer his niece a kidnapping. Or, as he put it, “a rescue from the perverse bastard.”

Upon Sansa’s firm and hard rejection, both he and his niece insisted it was a joke.

Not only has Edmure never looked upon Jon without glaring, he also at one point threatened to geld him “if you ever lay a hand on her after that blasted wedding night.”

It wouldn’t bother Jon so much, except for the fact that he can’t recall Edmure displaying such concern and bravery when Sansa was married and begging House Tully to save her from the son of the man who murdered Robb and Catelyn.
Needless to say, Edmure sitting so close while Jon held Sansa in his lap like a tavern wench was unlikely to yield a positive reaction.

Jon’s body stiffens in all the wrong ways, immediately defensive. Even Sansa suddenly clutches his collar tightly and tenses up. He waits for the laughter on Edmure Tully’s face to morph into a blustering, dangerous rage.

And he waits.

And Edmure’s eyes finally fall from the beautiful dragon queen onto the King and Queen of Winter.

The laughter diminishes. Edmure’s Tully blue eyes focus a little more. He leans towards him.

The smile does not disappear, though. His eyes meet Jon’s.

“Good evening!” he says in a way that makes Jon wonder if the man is too drunk to recognize them. “Glad to see you’re enjoying yourself. You should! Allow me to personally offer my congratulations, nephew!”

And he winks.
Jon and Sansa grapple over Edmure's word.

Chapter Notes

As always, thanks to Hannah/sassy_classy_ass/dragonchristianlady97 for beta-ing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon:

Before he can say a word, Edmure turns away and runs off to get drinks. The world is hazy and spinning. He feels ill. And a palm on his cheek. “Darling?”

“Let’s... let’s retire.” He says. This is bad. Possibly? He feels it is bad, but he can’t concentrate enough to ascertain if it is or not, and if it is, how bad? He’s not sure. He can’t be.

Sansa slips off his lap and helps him up. They’re well away from the banquet hall when he sputters “I... You... You shouldn’t be doing this for me. I... I should be helping you move!”

“She’s not doing it alone, Your Grace.” And Jon realizes that there’s a man holding him up under his right arm. A guard. Someone Jon recognizes, he thinks. His name starts with a T. “I’m taking the weight, mostly.”

“It’s alright, Jon,” Sansa says softly, at his left. “We can talk about it when we’re back in the chambers.”

“Right. We can… We can’t… Ugh!” He shakes his head. “I was fine just a few minutes ago! I was so happy! I was dancing!”

“I wouldn’t call three-quarters of an hour ‘a few minutes’. Quiet, now.”

“Right. Not in front of…” He shuts his mouth. “Sweetling, when we get there, I think it’ll be my turn to hold your head over the chamberpot. No.... Wait. I mean, it’ll be your turn to---”

“---Yes, Jon.”

“If you wish, My Queen, you needn’t---”

“---Thank you, Ser Tommett, but I am perfectly capable and open to taking care of my husband myself.”

“She’s capable of anything!” Jon insists, head rolling towards his wife, though he directs his words towards the knight. “And there are things only a queen should do, or talk about. Please understand, Ser Tom, it’s not a matter of any defi--- deficacy?--- Deficancy?---” Jon giggles. “Any failing on
your part. I’m sure you’re a fine and capable man. But you’re not a ruler, and you’re not my queen. Obviously. And there are some things I can only do with my queen, specifically, that I can’t with you.”

“I am pleased to hear that, Your Grace. I fully understand.”

Jon notices, even through the haze, that the guard is trying not to snicker. And even in his cups, Jon figures out why, and starts to laugh himself.

“I don’t mean that! I mean, obviously, that’s one thing only I can do with her, but that’s not what I’m talking about! I mean, many, many other things. Matters of state, you see. Ser Tom, are you Northern or Southern?”

“I’m of the Vale, Sire.”

“Alright then, so you’re my subject,”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Well, you’re hers, too. Don’t you forget it.” He wags his finger at the man. ”She’s as much king as I am— or, well, you know. She has said all the same vows, she’s got a crown and throne of her own, she does all the same work, she’s got the same rights and authority as I do. We rule together. I can’t rule without her. That’s what I’m talking about. So, there’s things I discuss with her that I can’t discuss with anyone else. And I can’t make any great decisions without her, either. That’s what I meant. Besides, as much I’d like to, I think I’ve had a little too much to—–”

“Enough, Jon!”

Jon shuts his mouth. For about five seconds. Then he tries to whisper. “I rule the Three Realms, she rules me and the Three Realms. Especially when I’m drunk and she’s sober.”

“Jon!”

“That’s all, Darling.” He remains silent until they’re through the door and Ser Tom is gone. Sansa leads him to the bed, sits him up against the pillows, places the chamber pot in his lap, and yanks off his boots. Jon shrugs off his silk vest and hangs it on the nearest bedpost as his wife gets undressed. He vomits twice into the pot by the time she gets into bed, and she rubs his back and holds back his hair comfortingly. She fetches him some water and wipes his face with his handkerchief. All the kind things.

A bit more spewing, and he feels considerably better. Sansa has him down a few cups of water. Once Jon is certain his stomach is adequately emptied, he speaks.

“I never used to get sick like this.”

“I don’t remember you being much of a drinker.”

“Never was. But the few times I…”

“Did you ever get this intoxicated?”

“I never could. Too much to think about.”

“Well, you’ve reached a new limit.”

“I didn’t start to feel bad until your uncle… He… He… He called me ‘nephew.’ Why… Why would
he of all…It scares me. What if he… knows?”

“Close your eyes. I can try to find out. But you’re in no condition to do so.”

“How would he know!?”

“Jon! Please!” Sansa pulls the chamber pot from his lap. “Try to get some sleep. I’ll see what answers I can get.”

“He was… He was dancing with… Daenerys…”

Sansa:

She’d heard what Edmure said, but alarming Jon further would do no good. Ser Tommett knew he was to fetch Lord Tully when he left the royal couple, so Sansa only had to wait in the solar for a short while for her intoxicated uncle to be brought to her.

“Ah! Niece!” He says, arms wide. He comes towards her and pulls her into a great embrace. Sansa dismisses Tommett with a gesture over her uncle’s shoulder. Edmure sways. “Your mother would be so proud, you know.”

As much as it warms her heart, Sansa almost wishes that Edmure sometimes wouldn’t say things like this. It’s distracting.

“Thank you, Uncle,” she says, discreetly trying to maneuver him towards Jon’s usual chair by the fire. He’s easy to move, thankfully. And when he’s settled, Sansa quickly gets him some water. “For your head in the morning.”

Edmure takes it gratefully and toasts her silently, downing the entire cup. “You’re such a good girl,” he remarks, wiping his mouth, “Always taking care of everyone. Like she would.”

“I remember,” Sansa responds, taking her own seat. “I hope she’d be proud of me.”

“Of course! She was always proud of you! Even in her letters, she was always mentioning how you were the perfect lady. If she’d lived to see all you’ve done…”

“Like marrying her husband’s bastard?”

She needed to shock Edmure to some degree. And her words accomplish this. Edmure drops his thankfully-empty cup.

“I… Well… You had your reasons…”

“Family. Duty. Honor. I definitely did it for family and duty. But I find it hard to believe Mother would have seen the honor in it, or even appreciate how I applied family to this.”

“Your happiness, and that of your siblings, was what mattered most to her---”

She paused for a moment and then spoke. “Not all of my siblings. She hated Jon.”

She watches his face carefully for some sort of sign. Some manner of contradiction. Edmure frowns.

“Well, like all ladies whose husbands had favored bastards, she feared him usurping her children. But you did find a way around that.”
“I doubt my mother would have liked our methods, though. I think you agree, too. Or, at the very least, agreed. It’s not as if you displayed much enthusiasm for the match.”

“No, I didn’t. And I’m not going to pretend I’ve made peace with the arrangement, not entirely.”

“I can’t imagine this visit is any easier than the wedding was, then.”

“I’m not sure.” Edmure picks up his cup and pours himself some more water from the pitcher between them. “Tonight, you both seemed so happy. I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen anyone like that, let alone one of our family.”

Sansa’s heart skips a beat. “We were happy. Or, we are, rather. And I’d like to think that that would be enough for her to reconcile with this.”

“I can’t speak for Catelyn, I’m afraid. Not entirely.”

Sansa grows weary of this. “And what of yourself? Tonight, you called Jon ‘Nephew’. Why?”

Edmure shakes his head. “Did I?”

Sansa’s stomach sinks. If Edmure is too drunk to remember he did it, he’s unlikely to remember why. There’s so many people who could know by now, and Edmure couldn’t tell them. How else are they to find out until it’s too late? The signing of the truce is mere hours away, but if word gets out before then…

What would Daenerys think? Worse, what if she’s the one who told? Jon was right; Edmure was playing with her.

“You did,” Sansa insists, “When you and the queen came back to the high table from dancing.”

“Right! I… I just… Well, you both looked so happy. And… you know who you two looked just like?”

“Mother and Father.”

“No! You looked like Cat and your Uncle Brandon, actually. He was meant to marry your mother instead, you know. And Cat adored him. She barely knew your father when they married. But Brandon courted her. He was never forward enough to put her on his lap, but they weren’t married. Jon takes after your father quite a bit, but physically, he looks more like Brandon. Especially when he’s in high spirits, like tonight!”

The hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Instinct produces her next words. “I’d always heard Uncle Brandon was quite charming, and a reveler. Far more so than poor Papa.”

“Aye. Your father was a good, gentle man.”

“The last you’d expect to produce a bastard. I can’t imagine the sort of woman who could have gotten him to…it.” But she stops and shakes her head. “Nevermind. I just hope that you’ve warmed to Jon and can find it in your heart to see him as a nephew, truly. We must be more unified than ever. And despite the unconventional grounds on which we wed, I truly think I could not ask for a better husband. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Uncle…”

Edmure gets to his feet. “Of course. Goodnight, Your Grace.”

Sansa remains in the solar for a while, staring into the fire. It’s moments like this that she feels so
torn, so fearful that she may have utterly forsaken her mother’s memory.

Catelyn Tully wasn’t perfect, but she was a loving mother who had gone through her marriage being lied to and openly dishonored. Edmure was right---she had to fear the favored bastard, the one that looked more like a Stark than any of her own sons, possibly usurping her children.

And she wasn’t wrong to, was she? A nasty little voice in the back of her mind sneers. And you helped him stay in power. You married him. You love him.

Sansa knows better than to think the truth of Jon’s parentage erases all that. One way or another, Eddard Stark betrayed and dishonored his lady wife through Jon. He’d lied to her, all those years.

Jon was always a point of contention in her parents’ marriage.

Out of love for her mother, Sansa insisted on reinstating Edmure as Lord Paramount of the Riverlands. But that wasn’t the only reason. They needed to solidify their blood ties to the top levels of the Trident nobility, and they needed someone of Edmure’s stature that they could easily control.

They use Edmure. And Sansa cannot entirely forgive herself for that. Especially with it being so very clear that despite his failings, Edmure loves his remaining family. Especially his nieces and nephews.

She often feels she has betrayed her mother in many ways. And the cruel twist of that is whenever she feels this way, she also feels she’s betraying Jon somehow. Her mother hurt him. And while his very presence hurt her, it was not his fault.

It simply tears at her. She tries so hard to be the woman her mother would have been proud of. But how can she?

Everything about her life forces her to disassociate with so much. She is a queen, facing a war, she cannot let herself be controlled by her emotions. She must always be looking at the now and the future, and if she looks back, it must only be to what applies now. She cannot be simply Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn’s daughter anymore. She must be the Three Realms’ Queen, Winterfell’s Lady, the lords’ liege, Jon’s wife, her children’s mother, her servants’ mistress, Daenerys’s ally, Arya and Bran’s sister.

Her whole life once was being their daughter. Now?

Most of Sansa’s furniture back home is Lady Catelyn’s, altered slightly for her use. Indeed, many of her things these days are hand-me-downs from her mother. Lady Stark left Winterfell intending to travel incognito to investigate the attempts on Bran’s life. She’d left most of her finery in the castle. Some of her things had been dispersed---her jewels and furniture, for instance, were given to Lady Walda. Lady Bolton was much too large for Catelyn’s silks, so Ramsay gave some to his mistress, and left the rest in Sansa’s closet. Other things were pawned off or put into storage. Or stolen by loyal servants who kept them out of Bolton hands until the Starks returned to Winterfell.

Save for a few things that were sold, Sansa’s gotten those things back. Some of the furniture, originally decorated with Tully trout, was damaged by the Boltons, who replaced many of the moldings with towers like The Twins. Jon had them repaired, however, wiping away all signs of their enemies for a mix of trout and direwolves.

Among these items was Sansa’s dressing table back home, with its silver-edged looking-glass. The same one where Lady Catelyn used to sit her eldest daughter every night and dress her hair.

Sometimes, when Sansa looked into it, she swore that for a split second that she saw her mother standing behind her, just like when she was a child. And sometimes, Catelyn didn’t look happy.
When Sansa and Jon were betrothed, Sansa insisted on getting a new bed, giving Catelyn’s to Arya. As much as she loves her husband, as blameless as he is, she could not bring herself to share her Lady Mother’s bed with him. She cannot, she thinks. Even after the two began coupling regularly at home, she wouldn’t do so in his apartments, in the Lord’s bed. That had been her mother’s as well. She almost refused to wear her mother’s opal collar to the wedding, but Edmure asked her to wear something Tully.

Robb’s bones were recovered eventually, but Lady Catelyn had been tossed naked into the Trident. Her body was never recovered. Once restored to Riverrun, Uncle Edmure had a funeral held for his sister, placing a straw effigy of Catelyn in her clothes and placing it in the ceremonial boat and burning it according to the traditions of House Tully. Sansa will always love him for that.

A place beside Father is set aside in the Winterfell crypts, engraved with Catelyn’s name. Sansa intends to put statues for both of her parents up when the war is over. Bran gave slight protest to this when she told him, as it breaks with tradition. But she reminded him that their own Father broke with tradition by erecting statues for his siblings as well.

She tries. She tries to take care of Edmure however she can for her mother’s sake. And Sweetrobin. And Bran and Arya. But she feels so lost.

With Jon, she often glimpses the pain he holds over never having a mother, over how Catelyn made him feel. He pretends to have moved on from being a bastard, but she knows better.

Sometimes, she wonders if it is part of why he made her queen. Not just love, a sense of fair play, a need to keep the North safe, or a genuine need for a partner, but guilt. Guilt over realizing Lady Stark’s worst fears about him. Of a desire to prove his step-mother/aunt wrong.

She sees the faint glimmer in his eyes when someone mentions he’s a bastard. Then there are his doubts.

Despite all he’s done, all he’s accomplished, all the people he’s helped and saved, despite his goodness, there’s always been an undercurrent to their relationship. Jon often acts as if he is unworthy of her. He treats her with a sort of reverence which mostly makes her happy, but every so often, he turns it towards himself supposedly being undeserving. He puts her on a pedestal that is too high, and feels guilty for loving her.

It crushes her, when that happens. She knows where that comes from. It comes from when he was the bastard boy, the blemish on the Stark family, the bane of Lady Stark’s existence. Sansa never witnessed her mother insult or harm Jon, but she also showed him no kindness or courtesy, often avoiding or ignoring him. She would call him “Boy” or “Young Man” or “Snow”, instead of “Jon.” When she did look at him, it was with bitterness, misery, and/or anger.

Sansa isn’t the exact copy of her mother that people predicted. Their coloring and cheekbones are similar, but Sansa is taller and more willowy than Catelyn Stark. Her hair is a lighter shade of auburn and less straight, her lips are fuller, her jaw shorter, her eyebrows thicker, her nose is narrow at the bridge.

But she knows that sometimes, when Jon looks at her, he sees Lady Catelyn’s perfect lady daughter. Everything he could never have. He feels he’s trespassing again.

Reminders of her mother only make it worse.

Sansa’s certain that if that comment came from anyone but Lady Stark’s brother, Jon’s reaction wouldn’t have been nearly as strong. Anything and everything Tully puts her husband on edge,
makes him act differently.

Hurting him, scaring him, is the last thing she’d ever want. But she can’t stop being her mother’s daughter. She can’t stop loving her. She can’t let Catelyn be forgotten.

Sometimes, she wonders what she’ll tell their children about her mother.

Sansa just wishes at some point, her father had trusted his wife enough to tell her the truth. If he had, perhaps things would have been better for both Jon and Mother.

Edmure knows nothing. That’s clear. She just hopes her word might be enough to calm him when he wakes.

And what will calm me? She wonders. Will I ever be able to find a way to reconcile my mother and my husband?

She tells herself that Catelyn is dead, that that should be the answer. Mother is dead, Jon lives. But it’s not. She carries her mother with her. So does Bran. So does Arya.

And, in the worst way, so does Jon.

~_~_~_~

Jon:

He wakes and, after registering and adjusting to his splitting headache, remembers that despite the previous night’s success, something is bothering him. It takes him a few minutes to recall what it is.

After a few nudges, his wife is awake. And it takes her a few moments for her to gain full consciousness.

“Does anyone know?” He asks her, once the morning pleasantries have been exchanged.

“I don’t know for sure. But I don’t think Edmure does. But…”

“...But?”

“You do remember what we decided to do sometime down the road, once things calmed a bit? What we would eventually tell the public?”

“That I’m really Brandon Stark’s son?”

Sansa nods. “If I’m right, and Edmure doesn’t know, and it’s still a secret… I think convincing people of that may be easier than anticipated. And I think the time to start planting the idea in peoples’ minds is now.”

“Why?” Jon folds his hands in his lap, still unsure.

“Last night, Edmure talked about how you reminded him of Brandon. It seemed odd for him to say, Edmure only knew our uncle briefly when he was a lad. But… I got the feeling that he would be very happy if you were. I think there could be many people who would welcome such an idea. Apparently, you look more like Brandon than Father anyways. And everyone knows our uncle wasn’t particularly chaste. Lady Barbrey alone has made that clear. And everyone knew Father as steadfastly honorable. I think the idea that Father took in his brother’s bastard and raised him as his own to preserve Brandon’s memory would be easy for many people to believe.”
Jon’s eyes narrow. “Even if you don’t think Edmure knows, that doesn’t mean---”

“Yes, he was drunk. He forgot that he’d even called you ‘nephew.’ But once I reminded him… he seemed to remember. And I think there’d have been some indication if he’d received such a bombshell. Now, maybe I’m wrong. Maybe someone did tell him, and told several others, others that remember, but---”

“But nothing.” Jon yanks himself out of bed, hurrying to change his clothes. “We can’t risk this spreading.”

“Jon, that’s all the more reason to bring out the Brandon---”

“What? Announce to the whole world that we’ve been lying this whole time? Now? Oh, sure, that will quell the rumor mill. For pity’s sake, Sansa, you don’t fight fire with fire. You fight it with water!”

“There may not be any fire! And if we start dumping buckets, it could raise suspicion! And I’m not saying we make a grand announcement. Just lay out a few suggestions, here and there. If word has gotten out, it’ll get people confused. Muddle any consensus. And you have to admit, Jon, you being Brandon’s son is a lot easier to swallow than the alternative. Enough people want this treaty to proceed and will prefer that story over you being a claimant to the Iron Throne. Brandon had a reputation. No one is challenged if you’re his.”

Jon shakes his head. “What if Daenerys is the one behind it? She was the one dancing with Edmure last night.”

“Why would she do such a thing?”

“I don’t know! To undermine our leverage? Because she has some extra-secret plan? It’s not as if she’s been particularly forthright throughout this trip.”

“How would she have time to plan something so elaborate? She didn’t know anything until two days ago!”

“But what if somehow, she did know?”

“How?!?”

“I have no idea. With all of her resources, she could have found out a hundred different ways.”

“Jon, the only people who survived the Tower of Joy were Father, Lord Reed, and you.”

“How can we know that, though? What if there was a servant or spy? Or one of the kingsguard escaped? What if Rhaegar sent word to Dragonstone that Lyanna was pregnant?”

“If that was the case, why didn’t Daenerys reach out to you much earlier?”

“Maybe she hoped we didn’t know, and she didn’t want to share her power.” Jon yanks on his doublet and washes his face quickly.

Sansa gapes, still in bed, undressed, and ungroomed. “All this because my uncle called you ‘Nephew’?”

Jon fumes. Why can’t she see this for what it is? “We can’t take any chances, Sansa!”

“Darling, the treaty is being drafted as we speak. It will be signed in just a few hours…”
“Will it?” He shakes his head. “There’s still time for Daenerys to double-cross us.”

“What exactly do you intend to do, then?”

“Get some answers.”

“From who?”

“Who else?”

Sansa springs to her feet. “Jon, no! It could ruin everything!”

“Everything could already be ruined!”

“We don’t know that! We barely have any reason to suspect it!” She begins rushing around the room, pulling her clothes on. “One word, Jon. By my drunk, foolish uncle. And you’re ready to march up to our most important potential ally and offend her just as we’re about to cement our treaty?”

“We deserve to know whom she may have told!”

“We don’t have to ruin ourselves to do it!” She hurriedly shoves silver combs on either side of her head to hold her locks back. “Just… If you insist, lace me up, and we’ll both go to speak with her.”

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Look outside.” He gestures to the window.

Sansa notes the position of the sun and understands at once. It is dawn. And every morning, during the sunrise, Daenerys visits her dragon. She’ll be with Viserion now.

He tugs on his boots. “I can’t waste any more time.”

“You can’t go to her angry, either. Jon, please. We’re so close to having everything---”

“---Exactly!” Jon scowls. “It’s all too good to be true! Maybe you haven’t realized it by now, Sansa, but things that seem too good to be true, usually are. In two days, Daenerys went from a megalomaniacal, dangerous tyrant, to a clever, self-aware, humble patron of compromise.”

“You seemed all too ready to believe it last night. Was the word ‘nephew’ really enough to make you ruin all we’ve accomplished? Does Edmure Tully really have so much power over you?”

Jon knots his bootlaces sharply and glares at his wife. “Don’t do that. I’m trying to protect us.”

“And endangering us in the process. Father once decided to confront the enemy at once, too. He at least knew he was right. And they killed him. And if Daenerys has done nothing wrong---”

His blood burns. He stands up straight and eyes her suspiciously. “Is this a woman thing?”

“What?!”

“Is your reluctance to confront Daenerys about her being a woman? A woman in power? Like you? Maybe you just don’t want to believe that a female ruler could be so duplicitous.”
Sansa’s eyes, mouth, and even her nostrils widen in bewilderment. Then she actually laughs. “What?! Are you seriously proposing such a thing? After Cersei?! Are you mad? Or are you still drunk from the night before? Maybe you’re the one fixated on her sex. Maybe you’re determined to think the worst because she’s a woman. Maybe you’re sick of sharing power with us.”

This wounds him as much as it angers him. “Are you mad?! After everything?! I could have shut you out whenever I wished, but I’ve always embraced you as an equal!”

“Then why aren’t you listening to me now?!”

“Because things are desperate!”

“So?! When have they not been?!”

Sansa, flushed, stumbles backward into her dressing table, gasping. Her hand goes to her mouth and her cheeks go from red to green. Acting on instinct, Jon rushes to grab a chamberpot--- his from the night before, his own vomit now partially solidified at the bottom.

But he puts it in front of her just in time.

She lands on her dressing table bench when she’s done, sobbing and wiping her mouth. Jon sits beside her, holds her hair back, offers her a handkerchief, rubs her back.

“Are you alright?” He asks nervously, once the she’s spat the last of it out.

“No! This,” she says, pointing to the contents of the pot. “Is the best thing to happen to me so far today!” She shoves the pot into his lap. “Look at it! Look! It’s all your fault!”

He cringes. “Sansa, if I could assume the pain of this for---”

“I don’t mean vomit!” She says, turning to fumble around one of the drawers of dressing table, “Granted, though, you are the reason I’m doing it--” She pulls some cloth from the drawer, wipes her mouth with it, then wipes the corner of her hand. “---But at least it’s stalled you from marching out of here and acting like a madman!”

“Sansa, I just want to protect you!” He does. He doesn’t just want to, he needs to. And if Daenerys is this duplicitous, he has to know now. Not just for their sakes, but for the sake of the entire world.

She sighs, pauses, then takes his hand in her lap, cradling it. Their eyes meet. “I know. But you’re not going to protect me by picking fights where there should be peace. Especially over so little!”

“It may not be so little, though!” With every passing second, he thinks on his behavior the night before, what he probably risked.

“Jon, when you were shaken last night, what did I do? I put you to bed, then I summoned Edmure and spoke to him at once. Because I value your instincts, even when you’re… well… not in the best state. And I was careful. I was thorough. I was also sober. And I truly saw nothing to suggest panic. And you tried to storm out anyways, as if my judgment is not to be trusted.”

“It’s not about that, Sansa! It’s just…” He groans and closes his eyes. “I suppose I’m just waiting for everything to go wrong. After all we’ve been through… I keep waiting for everything to go wrong. Because I just can’t believe everything is now so perfect.” He opens his eyes again and looks deep into her eyes, pleading with her to understand.

Sansa gapes again. “Perfect? Jon!... Seven Hells, Jon, are you mad?”
“What? We have the alliance, and we didn’t even have to surrender Harrenhal for it! We’re not siblings, and any threat my heritage might have posed is resolving itself. Our neighbors to the South, for once, are reasonable. We’re king and queen, and we have a babe on the way!” Saying it out loud makes it sound positively absurd.

“...For pity’s sake, Jon... Yes, we’re in a better place than we were but... Winter is still here, and we have no way of knowing how long it will last. And we’re facing it with a kingdom already recovering from war, instability, and famine. We may not be siblings by blood, but the rest of the world still sees it that way. I’m not even halfway through my pregnancy, and so much can still go wrong there. Yes, maybe Daenerys is decent, but that doesn’t mean anything is set in stone. And yes, maybe we finally have the support and alliance we need to stand against the White Walkers, and we have a great weapon in the dragons. True. But we still have a nigh-invincible army that can raise the dead to swell their numbers heading straight for us. We still have to combat them with a kingdom that’s already been worn down over the past six years, a Wall that’s been neglected for centuries, forces which are not acclimated to our lands and weather, and giant, fire-breathing monsters we can’t even be sure we can control! Jon, there’s an area between perfection and certain doom. A chance of avoiding the latter isn’t ‘too good to be true’.”

“It certainly feels that way, given all the time I spent facing them with no more than a gang of criminals, now I face them with a woman who controls three fire-breathing beasts. If my brothers can betray me, why can’t she?”

“Jon, you’ve come back from the dead. You, of all people, should realize there’s nothing wrong with hope.” Sansa shakes her head. “But... If it comforts you at all...” She cups his chin and meets his eyes. “We’re probably still completely fucked.”

There’s silence for a short while. Jon’s never heard her use that word. It’s perfect. His shoulders shake, and he erupts in laughter.

Upon regaining his breath, he looks at her. “There still might be...”

“...I am happy to go out and investigate if there’s any rumors flying around about you, if you wish.”

“That won’t help unless I talk to---” But he stops mid-sentence, for when he tries to lift the chamber pot in both hands and set it aside, his left hand is tugged back. He looks.

His wife has tied his wrist (rather expertly, it seems) to the dressing table. He gapes.

“You can’t be serious,” he says, yanking his arm and nearly spilling the chamber pot over in the process. Sansa catches it, and sets it on the floor.

“Funny, I keep thinking the same thing whenever you say you’re going to go confront Daenerys Targaryen because your wife’s uncle called you ‘nephew’ when drunk.”

“So you’re binding me?!”

“Just until you come to your senses and stop acting like a lunatic. I love you, I love you so much, but I am also perfectly willing to harmlessly restrain you from endangering us and our kingdom if necessary. You’re not going to pull another stunt like at the battle with Ramsay while I’m queen.”

He goes red. She just had to bring that up, didn’t she? He can tell from her tone that she does so reluctantly, but somehow, that makes it worse. “Sansa, for pity’s sake!”

“Jon, for pity’s sake!” She mimics him. “All I’m asking is that you don’t throw yourself into an unnecessary confrontation with the Mother of Dragons!”
“All I’m asking you is to let me prevent a threat from becoming a disaster!”

“But you’re about to create one!” She glances out the window. “Just… Instead, let’s go out together, listen to whatever gossip comes our way… If you’re right, it will, at once. And then you can run off and threaten the dragon queen. If not… I suggest we start planting seeds about Brandon being your father, just in case.” She pauses. “I actually started that last night. I am not without my own concerns. So we take precautions. Together.”

Jon bows his head. Maybe he is still drunk, because it makes sense. That was the most he’s ever had, after all. “Alright, then.”

The Brandon idea seems the way to go. The only way.

They adjourn down to the immense Great Hall, still filled with servants cleaning up after the prior night’s festivities. But the Hall of a Hundred Hearths is so massive that they may as well all be dispersed across a limitless field. Deep, rumbling laughter echoes through the hall, and Jon recognizes it at once. When they get to the High Table, they find Tormund doubled-over, face as red as his hair, as Tyrion Lannister sits across from him, gnawing on kippers and looking pleased with himself.

Jon had wondered how long it would take these two to find one another. The barriers that had separated the two likely had melted away with last night’s announcement. They were now allies for all but a few scribbles. Beside the Lannister is Missandei, who shakes her head disapprovingly at her plate.

He likes seeing Tormund laughing, but this is still awkward. Before he and Sansa can turn away, though, the wildling spots them and ushers them over, insisting they eat with them.

Jon is stiff as he helps Sansa into her chair and takes the place next to her, across from Tyrion. Servants rush over to fill their cups and over steaming dishes. Jon at first refuses all but a couple of small portions, but Sansa puts her hand on his arm and urges him to eat. “You need it, after last night. And you’ll feel better.”

“Go for the greasiest dishes,” Tyrion offers eagerly, “The sausage, the bacon. Eggs.”

“And plenty of bread to mop up the yoke!” Tormund adds, demonstrating with a hunk of brown.

Jon blushes. Clearly, he’d made a display of himself last night. “…For?”

Everyone at the table exchanges looks, and the two other men erupt with laughter.

“For the after-drink! No one has a night like that without paying for it in the morning!” Tormund says with a wink.

Jon scowls. “I admit, the spirit of the occasion might have led me to indulge a tad too much—”

“---Oh, no, I’d say just the right amount!”

“---I hope my conduct wasn’t unkingly.”

Tyrion shrugs. “Hard for me to tell, I spent many of my adult years in the court of Robert Baratheon.”

Jon grits his teeth. “Not exactly a man I wish to emulate.”
“Don’t you worry,” Tyrion assures him, “You’re far better behaved. No rages, and Her Grace was the only woman you spanked all evening!”

Jon’s jaw drops, truly mortified now. He vaguely remembers his hands drifting occasionally, but only that, and gently. He looks at Sansa (glaring at Tyrion) in horror. He knew he’d been affectionate last night, but... Striking her behind? Striking her at all?! Even playfully… “My queen, please forgive me, I—–”

But he’s cut off when Tyrion and Tormund erupt again. Missandei herself giggles, and Sansa even seems to be stifling some chuckles.

“You think yourself very amusing, don’t you, Lannister?” He demands, furious.

“He knows himself to be amusing, King Crow!” Tormund insists.

“To joke about such things in front of ladies—–”

“–Both have heard worse, I assure you—–”

“–Perhaps my wife once had to endure people making light of her being struck and dishonored publicly by the men in her life. That wouldn’t surprise me. But that doesn’t mean either of us have to tolerate that behavior now!”

Tyrion and Jon’s eyes meet. Lannister looks chastened.

“Nor would I expect Lady Missandei to tolerate such rudeness, either,” Jon adds hastily, nodding to her. She looks at her plate again, but the small smile on her lips is appreciative.

Sansa clears her throat. “I’m sure the gentlemen meant nothing by it, Your Grace.”

Jon glances at Tormund. “...Gentlemen?” He’s surprised the wildling doesn’t take that as an insult. But then, the wildling has always had a different attitude about “kneeler” terms when it comes from women. He’s outright blushed whenever Sansa’s referred to him as a “Lord”.

Sansa ignores Jon. “Honestly, there are far worse things they could be saying.”

Jon looks at their companions carefully. All of them look rather awkward, but it could easily be due to his temper.

“Calm yourself,” she says softly, “Leave the fiery behavior to the Targaryens.”

Jon watches carefully, Tyrion actually laughs, though the look he gives Sansa is a cautious one. If Daenerys wished to put the truth out, Tyrion would know, regardless of the queen’s shaken confidence in him. He’d probably mastermind it. But he betrays nothing but trepidation at Sansa’s ‘Targaryen’ remark.

“Forgive me. I just… You’re right, my lords, my head is in agony. I’m also understandably protective of my queen. And perhaps a bit nervous.”

“It’s an important day,” Tyrion declares, nodding, “Manderly and Rosby are finishing up the draft right now. We’ll have it recited and signed by the midday meal. And no one begrudges you some fun, Your Grace, after what you’ve accomplished here. You deserve it.”

“We’re just not used to seeing you dance and smile so much, Lord Crow. That’s all. No harm in it. Just remember I ain’t one of your southern lords.”
“Still, I wish I’d saved my revelry for when the treaty is actually signed,” Jon answers, rolling his eyes.

“We have precious few opportunities to celebrate anymore,” Missandei remarks, “Take them when and where you can.”

The royal couple exchange glances, and it’s at this point that the relief hits him. She was right. There’s nothing. Nothing. Jon recovers his appetite and practically inhales his breakfast.

Eventually, Lord Tully joins them, nursing his head. He looks at Sansa. “Good Morning, Niece.” He looks at Jon. “And Nephew.”

If anything can convince Jon that nothing is amiss, it’s the reluctance and venom with which Edmure says “nephew” this time.

Jon grins. “Good morrow, Nuncle. Kippers?”

~*~*~*~*~*

He strides into the council chamber, dressed in his best, wife on his arm, chest puffed out, smile on his face. He greets everyone warmly.

Everything is as it should be. When the moment comes, he signs his name with a flourish. There’s applause. Gifts are exchanged, none of them chamber pots. He embraces his aunt.

Then the door bursts open, and a breathless page ---- the same breathless page, in fact, that informed Jon of his aunt’s arrival days ago---- actually slides in.

“Forgive me for disturbing you, but---” The lad stops to inhale, “---Word from the Wall, the White Walkers have been spotted! They’re at most a moon’s turn away!”

Chapter End Notes

This is a slightly shorter chapter than usual, but I think it’s clear why. Next chapter will feature the first Daenerys POV!
Preparations

Chapter Summary

Hasty plans are discussed and made.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to kattyshack for beta-ing!

Sansa:

It’s a blur. Everyone seems to move about the room, save for the two of them. Everyone begins speaking. Daenerys has to grab Tyrion’s hand to get him to sign as a witness. Sansa mimics this behavior, reminding Lord Royce.

Jon stands still. He’s no longer smiling. He’s not frowning, either. He does not look petrified. She recognizes his vague expression: he’s collecting himself. He’s absorbing this.

It occurs to Sansa that this sudden panic really doesn’t make too much sense. Everyone’s known they were coming for awhile now, even in the South. The last major skirmish took place at Hardhome, and that wasn’t so far from Castle Black. Only a couple people here have actually seen the creatures, aside from the wight hand Jon sent to King’s Landing. They’ve all been operating on borrowed time. It’s a miracle they’ve had this long.

She’s been waiting for this moment for some time now, she realizes. She’s not seen any of them face-to-face, but she can picture them in her mind. Jon’s recounted his encounters, described them to her so many times, she feels like she’s stared down the Night’s King herself. Jagged spires of ice sticking out of his head like a crown, cruel eyes like moonstones, black where the whites should be, shriveled blue skin, a pitiless mouth. She’s dreamt of him, only to wake to find Jon in the midst of a nightmare.

Sadness, that’s what she feels. And pity. For the people around her, for those who seemed to think this would never actually come.

Pity for the countless men who would be marching for the Wall now. It’s been arranged for levies to be raised at every major fortification, ready to march the moment this news came. She now visualizes them all… Lines and columns of men of all ages (and likely women disguised as men, she thinks, imagining Arya), marching from a hundred different gates, their mothers, wives, sisters, and children weeping as they pass. All of these people move and become like ants, slowly moving over a map of the three realms, eventually filing together, all heading to the same cold, unforgiving destination.

The cruelty of it...

Songs may be sung of them all, but few names shall be remembered.
The Three Realms already has too many widows and orphans. One is one too many, but the War of the Five Kings, the winter, the raids, the Ironborn, the Boltons have produced hundreds, possibly thousands. But what can be done, when no one is safe? Better widows and orphans than nothing but corpses.

Since discovering her condition, Sansa has not cradled her stomach as much as she expected to. It’s not really swelled yet, for one thing. There’s not much to cradle. There’s barely even a bump. But she clutches her belly now, and leans against her husband’s chest. She may be one of the widows, she may carry one of the orphans.

That’s not fair. Jon had to grow up never knowing one—or, technically, both—of his parents. Will their son or daughter suffer the same? The world became so unsafe when Sansa lost her father. Her child might be born into such a world.

Will Jon even get to see her swollen belly, at least? When it gets big and round and they’ll be able to feel it kick? Will he even have that?

Their family hasn’t even had a chance.

Rivers of tears are running down her cheeks and soaking Jon’s doublet before she even knows they’re there. Her hands feel weak as she reaches into her skirts for a kerchief. She can barely lift it to her cheeks.

She hears his heart pound. His arm around her waist is tight, tense.

Sansa looks to Tormund Giantsbane, the man who knows better than anyone what they face. He’s weeping, too. She finds this oddly comforting. She almost wants to thank him for it. Few have seen and suffered more from this enemy than this man. Few have fought and escaped this enemy more than this man. And he weeps. It makes her feel less shame for her own tears.

Next, she looks to Daenerys, who appears concerned, yes. But certainly seems more confident than anyone else in the room. What do you expect from a woman who can fly? Sansa asks herself. She wonders what that’s like, to wield such power, such invincibility. Who can give up half an empire based on personal principle alone.

Sansa wonders if Daenerys would be so calm if she actually saw the enemy.

But Sansa, despite her own misgivings, tries to emulate the other queen. She stands up straight, wipes her eyes. She moves toward Tormund and rests a hand on his shoulder. The wildling’s massive hand, tufts of ginger hair bursting from below the knuckles, covers hers.

She scans the room, and notices, to her surprise, that Grey Worm and Missandei, Dany’s lord of the Unsullied and herald, discreetly hold hands and exchange looks. They’re Summer Islanders, originally, and partially raised in New Ghis as slaves. They have their own legends and monsters. They’re less likely than anyone here to conceptualize the threat they face. And yet, they do look frightened. No less frightened than Rosby, despite not sputtering like him.

Edmure paces in anxious circles near one of the windows, hand to his chin, head bent, trying to be a man of action.

Manderly, Reed, and Royce are exchanging directives in short, rapid sentences, but their terror is writ large in their tones and faces. Sansa’s particularly struck by Reed, who is not easily shaken.

She then looks to Tyrion, and is startled to see him looking intently at Jon. But the Hand quickly senses her gaze upon him, and meets her eyes. She looks away…
Just in time to notice Lord Randyll Tarly, nearly backed against a wall, face red, fists and teeth clenched… But not quickly enough to stop him from erupting.


Incensed, Sansa steps forward. “How dare you! You have no idea what you’re talking ab—”

“SHUT YOUR MOUTH, WOMAN! THIS IS A TIME OF WAR!”

“I will n—”

But Tarly looks past her, straight at Jon. “I guess now I know why that ingrate son of mine returned to us as an even greater embarrassment than he was before. Wildling-loving, traitorous, thieving, letting women speak for him! Learned it from you, didn’t he, bastard? Too bad you didn’t have time to teach him to rape his sister as well!”

“THAT’S ENOUGH, LORD TARLY!” Daenerys shouts. But Lord Randyll even dares to glare at her.

“I WILL NOT!” Tarly shouts, “A KING WOULD NEVER HAVE TOLERATED SUCH BEHAVIOR! HE’D HAVE FLOWN HIS DRAGONS STRAIGHT TO WINTERFELL AND FORCED THESE HEATHENS IN LINE! WE’D HAVE THIS THREAT QUELLED ALREADY, RATHER THAN SITTING AROUND THIS RUIN, BLATHERING ABOUT BORDERS! WITH BLOODY BASTARDS, BROTHER-FUCKERS, AND WILDLINGS!”

The sound that engulfs the room next is not a shout, a rant, or even tears. No, it’s the most unexpected sound of all: laughter.

Everyone looks to the King of Winter, whose shoulders shake. He folds his arms across his chest and just laughs. When he raises his head and his eyes, sharper than Sansa’s seen them since Ramsay Bolton, practically pierce through Randyll Tarly.

“Thank you, Lord Tarly,” he says. The Lord of Horn Hill actually looks a little off-balance.

“For what, bastard?” he sneers.

“Every since I heard you’d be here for these negotiations, I’ve been hoping, yearning, pining for the opportunity to express my disgust for you. I’ve been holding my tongue for the sake of diplomacy. A king controls himself for the sake of his kingdom. But now… The treaty is signed, and you’ve just alienated the person who was protecting you. So thank you, thank you so much for giving me the chance to say something for Sam.”

Sansa’s fury quickly melts into anticipation. Her husband has complained and cursed Lord Tarly’s name since they learned they’d be meeting with him. And even before that, he’d recounted enough for her to know of his hatred for this man. Lord Randyll is the father of Samwell, Jon’s best friend at the Wall.

Sansa has yet to actually meet Sam. He’d departed from the Wall with his wildling lover and her baby for the Citadel when the Watch’s last maester, Aemon, died, to earn his chain and replace the old man. But she knows much of him. A sad, scared, fat young man, who considered himself a
coward but was anything but. Whose self-loathing was only matched by his compassion and love for reading. Who had wanted to save a poor girl and her baby from her awful home beyond the Wall, and eventually did just that. Who traversed the lands Beyond the Wall with no protection and an adopted family, killed a White Walker, fought like a champion to defend the Wall, then made Jon Lord Commander of the Watch.

A man who only ended up at the Wall because his father threatened to murder him if he didn’t leave and make way for his handsome, strong, more “appropriate” younger brother to inherit the family name. Who terrorized Sam throughout his life, subjecting him to cruelty after cruelty to make a “man” of him, instilling his son with self-hatred and shame.

The victim of the man now decrying the rest of them.

Now, at last, Jon would release years’ worth of pent-up hatred. And he was right: he could. After that rant, it’s not as if Daenerys was going to mind.

“Say something?!?” Lord Tarly gives a bark of laughter. “Gods, no wonder you two took to one another!”

“Yes, say something, for a start.” Jon grins. “You foul, odious, ignorant, hare-brained, narrow-minded, deluded, facsimile of a man.”

“Facsimile?” Sansa cuts in, impressed and delighted. Jon winks at her.

“A word Sam taught me, love,” he says, “I take it you know the definition?”

“Of course.” She looks the straight-backed, blustering lord up and down. “And you’re right. He’s a tin knight.”

“I’m one of the finest military commanders of my generation, you—”

“Tin knights are indeed shiny, and have their uses, Lord Tarly. But they’re hollow. You know how to move across the board, of course. But you mistake pride and cruelty for character, and you lack even the insight to notice all the myriad ways you fail as a man.” Sansa glances at her husband. “Did Sam teach you the word ‘myriad,’ too?”

“Yes, actually. Vocabulary is just one of the many, many uses I found for the man this scum discarded like soiled rushes.”

Sansa’s eyes narrow. “This sounds practiced.”

Jon blushed, reaches into the folds of his doublet, and extracts parchment, folded and sealed. He extends it towards Lord Tarly.

“Sam told me you despised his reading, but that isn’t because you never managed to learn, is it?”

The Lord of Horn Hill snatches it out of Jon’s hand.

Sansa gapes at her husband. A letter? She’d not expected that. Sansa handled most of their written correspondence. How long has he been holding onto that?

But she cannot help herself. Everything he said was just so… so… Wrong! Silence is impossible for her. He’d shamed them in front of everyone, and they could not counter that with the written word alone. How dare he? We’ve been the only ones fighting all this time!
“My Lord, the Wall and the Watch was the responsibility of every Lord in Westeros. It was under the domain of countless kings who neglected it for decades. Years in which the only people who did contribute more than a few convicts, who kept the Wall up, were the Starks of Winterfell. That is how we ended up here. You’re right that this problem could have been rectified by now, if not for the narrow-minded, selfish, and short-sighted negligence of men like you!”

Jon nods. “Don’t you dare speak of the Wall, you’ve never been there. I’ve commanded and defended it. I’ve seen the enemy for myself.”

Spurred on, Sansa adds, “The most frightening things you’ve ever faced have been… what? The Ninepenny kings? As for us ‘not bending the knee at the beginning’... To whom? The queen you’ve just insulted? The Lannisters? Any one of the kings who have ignored, dismissed, and neglected the Night’s Watch for generations while they squabbled over titles? Yes, God forbid we try to take the real issues only we seemed to care about into our own hands and reject the authorities who have only made things worse over the years.”

Her husband glares. “It’s only when the enemy might finally come to you that you’ve paid attention. And you have the nerve to decry us for taking in the Wildlings? Think about that for more than three seconds, if you’re capable. What were we to do, kill every one of them? Of the hundreds of thousands? When potentially facing an enemy that literally builds their army from the dead?! We spent years pleading with you and every other lord in Westeros to spare men, money, and resources so that we could at least arm ourselves properly. Yet you expect all two hundred of us to slaughter two hundred thousand people fleeing from a mutual threat that would turn their corpses into mindless soldiers? Sure, there might be many fatalities, but that’s not exactly what we need to aim for in this situation.”

“Your Grace—” Tyrion interjects, but Jon holds up a hand.

“Yes, I know, we shouldn’t waste any more time on… this one. Tarly, you will read and respond to this letter by sundown tonight. If not, there shall be consequences.”

As if on cue, the door is knocked open again, and Ghost pads into the council chamber, to his master’s side.

“Ghost can bite off one appendage at a time. Nimble jaws.”

Daenerys clears her throat. “That’s valuable information. Now, Lord Tarly, off to read your letter.”

Sansa has never seen a face change color like this. His face bounces back and forth between beet red and bone white. Lord Randyll marches out of the room, his nose high but his head low.

There’s a few moments of silence before Daenerys speaks again. “Now that that is resolved, onto the enemy at hand. I must return to King’s Landing at once to fetch the other dragons. Tyrion, Grey Worm, how much of the retinue can we spare to march directly to Castle Black now?”

“Erm, not too many soldiers, Your Grace,” Tyrion replies, flustered.

Sansa interjects, “What of laborers? Healers, builders, needlewomen, the like? Money and goods? We need to supply and feed our forces as well.”

There was plenty of available space for housing, given how many areas in the North had to be abandoned or even sections that simply died out. It was how they managed to accommodate the Free Folk, and they needed residents to maintain structures and settlements through the winter.

“Give me numbers on how many you can accommodate at the moment, and the rest will be sent to
fetch supplies and deliver them to your settlements,” Tyrion says, “I’ll also need the names and locations of their destinations.”

“Much of that will depend on what you can supply,” Jon answers, “And from where.”

A good point. How many of Daenerys’s vassals would contribute?

“You’re not the only ones who have prepared,” Daenerys responds, “After we received the wight’s hand, we secured commitments from my vassals that they’d contribute to the effort. Depending on how many are alerted and when, we should be able to mobilize considerably.”

“The missive from Winterfell said that they’ve sent ravens out to every major House from the Wall to Dorne,” the page informs them.

“Winterfell?” Sansa and Jon ask in unison. They glance at one another, and Sansa clears her throat. “The message is from Winterfell, not Castle Black?”

“Aye.”

That was interesting, to say the least. They might not be in so great a rush as they thought.

Daenerys cuts in, “I’m going to start delegating my retinue with my ministers and issue orders to King’s Landing. Your Graces should do the same.”

Everyone agrees and hurries out.

Jon and Sansa confirm from the present lords that their castellons are acting immediately upon receiving the news.

They hardly came to Harrenhal without measures in place to handle this exact situation. The arrival of their enemy was something they waited for, completely incapable of predicting, timewise.

When Jon and Sansa move to their chambers, the maids and manservants are just finishing packing up their bedchamber. Meanwhile, every House under them had been mobilizing and preparing to receive word and march every available man to Castle Black. They’d already been sending men and supplies there in waves. But there was a standing order for measures every vassal would take once word came that the enemy had arrived.

Everyone has been preparing for this since they took back the North. But that didn’t mean they were ready. How could they be? This wasn’t simply some matter you could properly ready oneself for, especially coming off everything that had transpired in the prior years. A few months of work, no matter how dedicated, couldn’t fix generations’ worth of neglect.

While the royal couple wait for the bedroom to be cleared out, a maid presents them with a letter, twice sealed with both their crowned direwolf of the Northern throne and Bran’s Winged Wolf sigil.

The two huddle by the window to read it.

To Their Graces Jon and Sansa of the House Stark, First of Their Names, King and Queen of the Three Realms of the North, the Trident, and the Vale of Arryn, King and Queen of Winter, Lord and Lady of Winterfell and the Dreadfort, Commanders of Moat Cailin, Wardens of the North, and Protectors of the Realm, from Brandon of the House Stark, Prince of Winterfell, Acting Lord of Winterfell, and Co-Regent of the Three Realms; Greeting:

Enclosed is the same letter I sent out to every House in our domains, as well as Harrenhal. Per your
instructions, Arya and I prepared alert letters to be sent out if the enemy arrived during your parley.

The date you read this should be the 5th Day of the Seventh Moon, by our calculations. And if it is, then take the estimate of the White Walkers being “a month away” at face value. They were not a “month away” when the letters were drafted or sent. The amount of time between the Enemy and the Wall reported in each letter varies upon the estimated day of the message’s arrival.

As you may have guessed, this alert wasn’t sparked by word from Castle Black. I have been working at control and concentrating my Sight, and have attained success in this. I saw where they are, now. And I wasted no time in acting.

Arya and I are well, and responding as planned. We still would prefer for both of you to return as quickly as possible.

Also enclosed are the most recent numbers regarding population, manpower, supplies, production rates, construction reports, and all other relevant statistics, estimates, and projections, including suggested aid. Hope it’s helpful. Public announcements have been made, mass panic is averted. Arya suggests you send her to Castle Black ASAP as Jon’s substitute until he arrives.

People are eager for their king and queen to return, as soon as possible.

We love and miss you terribly,

Bran

“We’re certainly not sending Arya to Castle Black,” Jon says at once.

“Agreed. Glover should go. And we should send Tormund at once, as well.”

They take the other papers and spread them out on the fireside table, huddled together, eager to send Daenerys’s team appropriate estimates. When the servants finish clearing out the bedchamber, they move to the bed so their staff can work on the solar. They’ve just finished hammering out the proper estimates when a maid enters.

“Queen Daenerys and her Hand are here to see you, and wish to speak at once. Privately.”

Only slightly surprised, the royal couple agree.

~_^~_^~_^~_^~^

Jon:

Focussing on the most immediate matters at hand has always kept him going. It prevents him from getting lost in his own dread. One of the advantages to having so much responsibility is that when the worst comes, you’re too busy to lose yourself to your fears.

It barely occurs to him, when the two southern leaders enter that he and his wife are sitting atop the bed. He’s more concerned with stacking the papers up neatly and discreetly. Servants bring chairs in for their guests, placing them near the foot of the bed, and offer to get the royal couple chairs as well. Both forego them, staying where they are.

Before either Daenerys or Tyrion can say a word, Sansa crawls towards them, holding out their work. “Here are some estimates: what we need, what we can accommodate now, what posts are available, etc.”
Daenerys takes them and she and Tyrion look over them quickly.

“What do you say, My Lord, is this doable?”

“It’s far more reasonable than I’d have expected,” Tyrion replies, glancing quizzically over the papers at Jon and Sansa.

“This is an initial, conservative estimate,” Jon replies, pleased with this response. But he makes sure his tone conveys a promise that they’ll ask for more.

“Of course.” Daenerys orders in one of the maids and has the paper sent to the other ministers. “Consider this done.”

“Excellent.” He heaves a sigh of relief. “We’re working to depart for the North quickly. This evening, if possible.”

“Yes, about that…” Daenerys seems to hesitate. “I wish to propose something different. In light of the great… revelation… recently. I—that is, my Lord Hand and I think it might be prudent if the two of you instead travel to King’s Landing with me.”

Sansa sits back beside him and the royal couple instinctually join hands. Such a suggestion seems like madness itself.

“Whyever would we do such a thing?” Jon demands, relief melted away.

The other two frown. Tyrion takes a deep breath.

“The reasons are different for each of you. King Jon, you’re capable of riding and commanding dragons. Something we need. Queen Daenerys would like to fly Viserion back to the city at once to fetch Rhaegal and Drogon, then lead them straight to the Wall, and train you on the way there. As for you, Queen Sansa, it’s for your own safety. And that of your child, whom, for obvious reasons, we now have a vested interest in. If, perish the thought, the worst should befall your husband and Queen Daenerys, your babe shall be the last scion of the Targaryen line.”

Jon’s hands ball into fists. This sounded like nothing less than another hostage situation. “Absolutely not. My wife and our child belong in Winterfell. Our child is a Stark and our entire agreement is based on us never claiming otherwise. Sansa is the sovereign queen of the Three Realms, not your broodmare. If the worst happens, our people need our queen in our kingdom, not hiding away in the same castle where she was once a hostage.”

“Besides, what happened to the ‘balance of power’? That’s hardly feasible if you plan to pass your crown to my child!” Sansa exclaims.

“Your Targaryen child,” Daenerys replies, “If your husband and I are lost. Like you’ve said, the Northern crown is yours. In that case, you can remarry and pass the North to your other children. The balance can still be maintained.”

Jon gawks at his aunt. “Absolutely not. Your bloodline is not our affair. And neither of us shall abandon our own home to serve your needs.”

“Besides, I thought you wanted to keep Jon’s heritage a secret,” Sansa states, “Won’t it give a few things away if he’s riding a dragon for all to see and I’m packed away in the Red Keep?”

Daenerys groans in frustration. “It’ll hardly matter at a certain point, will it? Especially if there is no one left to claim the dragons! I need an heir… Hells, you need me to have an heir in case the worst
happens! You want three uncontrollable, flame-breathed beasts left without a rider?"

“Oh, and my infant would keep them tame, then?” Sansa snorts. “If you and Jon fall, we will need to have those things killed—”

“You dare—"

“Well, what would you suggest? Having an infant drool on them?”

Tyrion speaks up. “There’s a possibility that we might be able to place a binding spell on a child of Valyrian blood that would tame the dragons until your son is old enough to ride.”

Jon scowls. “A possibility? What, more of that blood magic that burnt Summerhall to the ground? You think we’re willing to subject our child to such a thing?” He grits his teeth. “We’re not responsible for your dragons, Daenerys. It isn’t our fault that you have no siblings or children of your own. We’re only responsible for keeping our people safe. But I’m not sacrificing the safety of my wife or child to do it.”

“If we’re lost and the dragons go wild, your wife and child would still end up dead. Them, along with the rest of your people!” Daenerys protests. “And if the White Walkers make it to Winterfell—”

“Winterfell stood against that army before. How do you think it got its name?” Sansa responds, “It’s the place where winter fell. And it will withstand that army better with its queen present to lead. I assure you, if I am not there, and the White Walkers make it to our home, it will fall. Then it won’t matter where I am. The wights shall overtake Westeros.”

“You’d have time to flee.”

“Flee?!"

Jon nearly jumps out of his skin, unaccustomed to hearing his wife yell like this.

He’s seen her angry before. But at the height of her fury, she would usually adopt a cold, calm, yet somehow terrifying tone. It was the one she used when confronting Ramsay Bolton. She’d used it on the worst, most vile criminals brought before them. With Smalljon Umber, the man who had delivered Rickon to his death. With Petyr Baelish.

Sansa generally only raised her voice under two circumstances: when she startled, or when she needed to be heard across a sizeable distance or over a din. Never before has he heard his wife raise her voice in anger before, and he’d known her since she was born.


“Your child would be rightful heir to Dragon’s Bay and the Dothraki.”

“Oh, and how would I secure that, exactly? With the dragons gone, armies dead, and nothing to secure such a claim? And even if I could... What makes you think I’d want that?! For my child? I am a Stark. My babe is a Stark. We are Direwolves of Winterfell. I am not going to flee what’s mine for the sake of your legacy. I belong to Winterfell and the North.” Sansa glares, props herself up on her knees, and starts undoing the laces of her gown. She pulls some of the fabric aside and turns, exposing her shoulderblades. Identical, thick, hideous, dark, bumpy scars marked each. Jon knows them, and so many other marks like them, well.
These are just two of the souvenirs I acquired during the many nights I spent with my last husband. He raped me from behind, got out his favorite pair of knives, and slashed my shoulders open. That, and so many nights like that, happened within Winterfell’s walls.” She pulls her gown up again and turns. “I fled from that, briefly, and when I reached my destination… Well, Jon, what was the first thing I wanted to do?”

“March back home with an army and take it back,” Jon tells their visitors coldly, “I wanted us to flee somewhere warm, leave everything behind. Sansa swore she’d do it without me if she had to. The risks she took, the lengths she went to in order to get her home back... She even risked dealing with the very man who sold her to the Boltons in the first place to get the men we needed. The moment she was out of Ramsay’s grasp, she turned around to go home again. She even stared him down and coolly assured him of his death at the pre-battle parlay.”

Jon shakes his head. These people are so… They know nothing. He at least expected better from Tyrion, who actually knew Sansa before this. To suggest she flee Winterfell—to hide out in the Red Keep of all places!—is mad. *We don’t belong to you*, he thinks, glaring at his aunt. *Why can’t you still understand this?*

Nothing stands between Sansa Stark and Winterfell. Not dragons or white walkers or even her own raper.

“Perhaps you still don’t understand what my role is,” Sansa hisses, eyes flashing. “I am not a consort queen, meant to sit on a mantel, produce sons, manage courtiers, and do as bid. I am not free to hide away and stroke my belly while the kingdom is at war, leaving the state to lordly advisors while I sit and be protected, I am the protector. I am a Lady King. I may not be slated to fight on the front lines. But I am stationed on the ramparts of my country’s capital, to rule and lead everything outside of the battlefield, and upon it, if and when the time comes. I may not—*may not*—raise a blade myself, but I am the one who has to keep those who do fighting. I may have no dragons, but I am every bit a sovereign as you, Queen Daenerys, and my husband. I don’t simply contribute to the cause, I lead it. I cannot do that from the Red Keep.”

“But what of your child?!” Tyrion gasps.

Now, Jon is incensed. The implication of Tyrion’s words replace his blood with boiling venom.

“My child shall come into the world in the midst of war and strife, regardless of what I do. No one is safe. It won’t be safe until the Others are vanquished and winter ends. I can either bring my babe into the world from the heart of his or her home as I take a stand and do my duty; or I can teach it to flee and hide when its country needs it most. I can teach it that Winterfell’s walls protect us at our most vulnerable, that service to our realm comes first. That not all leadership is male, nor is it exclusive to the battlefield. Besides, why should I consider the Red Keep, of all places, to be safe? After what I’ve seen there?” She snorts. “Oh, yes, I want to risk having my child, heir to multiple thrones, in my adolescent prison inhabited by traitors, murderers, and people who would happily slaughter children for power. Not the home I fought for, the home I control, surrounded by friends, family, and familiar faces.”

Jon wraps his arm around his wife and glares. “Don’t imply that we haven’t thought of our family again, Lord Lannister.”

He will not stand for that. He will not let anyone suggest his wife doesn’t care about the safety of their child, simply because she has other responsibilities. No one uses family against his wife. Especially not a man with Tyrion’s family history.

“Very well, then,” Daenerys says, holding up a hand, “Queen Sansa returns to Winterfell. But what
of you, nephew? Will you fly with me to fetch my other dragons?"

Jon frowns. He’s not particularly enthusiastic about visiting the Red Keep. “What if we flew Viserion to the Wall instead? If I’ve mastered riding him, we can remain there while you sail to King’s Landing to fetch the others. If I don’t, you fly him back. At the very least, it’ll give you a chance to survey our defenses and, possibly, our enemy. I wish to get to Castle Black as soon as possible, you see.”

“You want me to leave my dragon behind with you?”

“If you intend for me to ride at all, such a thing would be inevitable. We will undoubtedly have to lead different forces, atop different dragons. It’s not as if such a plan wouldn’t put me at risk as well.”

“How do I know you won’t steal him the first chance you get?”

“How do I know you won’t burn me alive the first chance you get?” Jon grunts, annoyed. “We need to trust one another to some extent, Queen Daenerys, if we’re to win this. But, if you wish, you can fly alone. I shall head North as planned.”

Whatever that plan was. They still weren’t sure if they’d both ride North together, or sail for White Harbor, or if Sansa would do either alone while Jon sailed for Eastwatch-By-The-Sea. Much of it was still up to whatever the travel reports said.

“Why must you Starks make everything so difficult?” the Dragon Queen replies.

“We’re the children of the North. The North breeds hard people,” Jon answers. “But you’ll need to decide soon if we’re to fly. There’s little time to waste.”

Daenerys sighs and gets to her feet. “Give me an hour to confer with my advisors. If you don’t get an answer by then, go about your business as planned.”

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Daenerys:

They’re not two steps into the hallway when her Hand insists they speak alone in his quarters. “Briefly.”

She resists the urge to roll her eyes.

Tyrion was demanding more and more of her time these days, and she’s growing weary of it. Perhaps, if their private sessions yielded more productive commentary, her feelings would be different. But far from being the critical, leveling councilor she’d wanted him to be, Tyrion had turned out like so many others: always ready to tell her what he thinks she wants to hear. The awe. It’s a handicap of being a Mother of Dragons. One cannot ride them, employ them without inspiring it. An entire religion has declared her the blessed savior. And it’s not just them who may believe it.

Daenerys thought, when she first encountered this sardonic, quick-witted little man, that she’d finally found a counterbalance to those who followed her without question. Tyrion’s certainly still useful and intelligent, but he’s proven as susceptible as the rest. He believes in her too much. He no longer questions her, despite the lengths she’s gone to in order to provoke him.

She’d hoped for a proper confidante. Someone to share the burden with. But no. Just another
disciple.

She notices the anger in Tyrion’s manner, and her heart rises. Perhaps he’ll finally say something. He’ll criticize her. Better late than never.

They cloister themselves in his solar, and Daenerys paces in circles, wringing her hands as Tyrion takes a seat by the window. He watches her silently until she finally loses patience.

She fumes. She wagers that neither Jon nor Sansa would do something like this, demand to speak, then just sit and stare, afraid of saying whatever they need to.

“Well, Lannister?!?”

“You’re too good for them. They keep refusing your offers, the only reasonable answers. Your Grace, I beg of you, tolerate this no longer. Fly your dragons to the Wall, destroy these monsters, and make the Northerners kneel before you.”

Daenerys’s fists tighten. Tyrion had been the one most opposed to this alliance from the beginning. He believed she should take her empire in full. Even when she’d made her pact with the Greyjoy’s, he’d questioned her afterwards. Of course, that was one of the last times he’d questioned her again. Since, he’d just told her to believe in what was rightfully hers, that all should kneel to her.

He’d also told her that the Starks would be a breeze to subdue, that they were desperate and easy to manipulate. Proud, hence their terms for the parlay, but that the true defiance and ambition of the North died with Robb Stark. That they’d maybe show defiance when it comes to protecting their people, but otherwise would be pliable. That Daenerys was the answer to their prayers, and that now that they’d shown strength by insisting on location, they’d be more than happy to kneel to her. That any hesitation or resistance would be quickly quelled.

“Robb Stark was the young wolf, but these two are another matter entirely. Sansa didn’t say a word of resistance or put up a fight against our marriage. It was only when I invited her to speak in private that she expressed that she’d never want me to lay a hand on her. The only time she ever told Joffrey ‘no’ was to protect some random, drunken knight. As for Jon Snow, he only ever wanted to be a ranger, never showed much ambition or instinct. He utterly idolized the life in the Night’s Watch. Terrible social instincts. They want your dragons and army to save them from the Others. They’ll fall quietly. You are their savior.”

It’s clear to Daenerys that her Hand had the impression that the Starks were a stupid, unambitious lot. How wrong he was. And she can tell how much he can’t stand that. Tyrion has always prided himself on “knowing people.” He was the only one of their advisors to have significant personal history with both Jon and Sansa. That they proved him so thoroughly wrong in the areas in which he is supposed to be an expert, fooled him, more or less, probably crushes him.

And he wants her to be the empress/demi-god everyone expects her to be. Ever since she returned to Meereen, it’s been this way.

She’s tried to explain to him about the balance of power, about the danger of an autocracy. He’s just responded that with dragons, there is no balance of power, and that she is meant to rule. That she could put as many little institutions in place as she wishes, that it will not change the fact that she, and she alone, could have them burned away at a whim. That she’s the only one worthy to lead. Absolute rule from one power is no danger if it’s hers.

Even when he argues with her, his position is that all should be hers.
She’d presented a fellow queen with a chamber pot, for pity’s sake. After that meeting, Tyrion had decried Sansa’s “pithy, ungrateful” response. “She’s with child! It’s a considerate offering!”

Daenerys wants to scream. This role he and so many others want her to fill is crushing, stifling.

But she tries to catch him now. “If that’s your position, perhaps we should have done away with all of this and just flown for the Wall once the throne was secured.”

That had been his suggestion months ago. She’d insisted on trying the diplomatic route. But if Tyrion agrees with this statement now, he’s saying she was wrong before. Tyrion loathed to admit either of them can be wrong.

He hesitates, as she knew he would. “You did what you felt was right in your heart. And your diplomacy shall be remembered. It is not your fault if the Starks are as stubborn as the Wall itself. You did your best.”

Daenerys shakes her head. “I don’t want the Starks to kneel to me. I don’t need them to.”

She envies them. She feels it ever more keenly. Before, they seemed so in sync, of course. A unified front by every measure. But with this last meeting, she saw that it wasn’t just a front. The two of them, huddled on that bed together, papers between them, heads bent. Nothing carnal at that moment, yet oh-so-intimate. Still speaking and working as one without preparation. Everything, including the burden of leadership, shared completely.

That’s something she craves every bit as she does the love. It seems no matter how many people she surrounds herself with, she grows more alone every day. And no one understands. She’s all alone atop this pedestal, one no one will let her off. Even the most uncouth of her advisors either bite their tongues or speak honeyed words.

Daenerys sometimes thinks of Daario, who could be cloying and reckless, but still managed to actually speak to her as a person from time to time. She can’t imagine that his position would be too different from Tyrion’s, but she does think that were he here, he might at least argue a bit about assuming that the Starks are/were weaklings. And he wouldn’t frame a proposed invasion as any sort of righteous act, he’d be honest about it simply being about power. He wouldn’t pretend that she should take the Three Realms because she has some sort of right to, or because it’s her right. He’d state simply that she should take the Three Realms because she can. And that, at least, would be more honest. It wouldn’t serve to delude her.

She’s afraid of herself, of what she’ll become, of what she’ll bring upon this world. Of what could be done in her name. Daario, at least, would be honest about what they were doing. Tyrion tries to convince her that it’s the right thing to do.

Daario’s all the way back in Meereen, now.

And even he couldn’t be depended on completely. He was still hopelessly in love with her, still a dishonorable brute, even if he was honest about it.

Tyrion stares at her, clearly surprised. “You don’t need them at all.”

A shiver runs down her spine at this. “Maybe I do. The North certainly does.”

“The North, like every other place, needs the Mother of Dragons.” Tyrion gets to his feet.

“Oh, stop it, Tyrion!” She can’t take anymore. “Stop it! Stop doing this! I’m not a bloody god! I don’t want to be!”
“And why not?!” He practically bellows this, stunning her. Gods, it’s worse than she thought! He catches himself, takes a deep breath, and lowers his voice. “You’re more merciful than the others I’ve known.”

Drogo called her the Moon of his Life, he never claimed that she should be the Moon itself. She wants to weep. Drogo. If Drogo were still alive, he’d be what she wants, what she needs. He would be her partner, her Sansa.

Daenerys’s eyes narrow. Her voice is soft, but it drips with bitter disappointment. “I thought when I took you on, I could trust you to tell me ‘No.’ To temper my impulses. To be the voice of reason. But you’re like all the rest. You can’t, or won’t, look past the myth, and tell me when I’m going too far.”

Tyrion sputters. “Too far? Your Grace, you can fly! Thus far, you’ve only sought out what is rightfully yours. And beyond that, there are no limits for you. I knew that the day I saw you fly out of that pit—”

“Stop it—”

“Please, Daenerys, that day I saw all the legends and dreams of my childhood come to life. The magical, advanced, powerful, unstoppable, lost Valyria I thought I’d never see, return. That age and realm of invention, of wonder, of all manner of art, invention, expansion that was once lost to time reborn from the ashes. I saw all that was possible once more. You think it’s a coincidence that after years of desperation and fruitless attempts to revive the dragons, you manage it just as Ice demons we’ve not seen since the long night return? You think you’d have gone from begging on the streets to an empress if you weren’t meant to rule? You’re not just the Mother of Dragons, you’re the mother of a new age!”

Daenerys scowls. “The last Valyria was lost for a reason, Tyrion. A New Age cannot be built by one alone.”

“No, but it can be led by one, begun by one, if that one person is someone like you! Someone who can build an empire from a fallen name! Hatch dragons from flames and a corpse! Look at something deformed, stunted, drunken, and malformed and see worth...”

She’s reminded of her conversation with Jorah in Qarth years ago. When he laid his heart out at her feet, declared her a miracle.

And she realizes that this is not just run-of-the-mill awe and worship. It occurs to her that it was Tyrion who suggested that she leave Daario behind, so that she could make a political marriage with a nobleman of Westeros. That his eyes are kinder to her in a way that couldn’t be affected due to status. That she’s only heard of him drinking too much anymore after she’s returned from a trip away.

Weren’t Jorah and Daario enough? And at least Daario questioned her.

Dany finds a seat and puts her head in her hands. “I don’t need a lover, or a worshipper, Tyrion. I need peers. I need honesty. I need limits. Especially now. I respect a man content to fill those needs, not one eager to be whatever he thinks I want.”

“...Your Grace?”

“I don’t want to found a House of all-powerful, world-conquering despots. I want the world I save to be a better one. I don’t want to repeat the mistakes of my ancestors.” She closes her eyes. “I’ve been
more conscious of their hubris as I’ve taken the Iron Throne. And I’ve tried and tested all around me
to see what path they’re content to lead me down. I’ve tested you. And guess what?” She looks up at
him, dead in the eye. “You’ve failed.”

Tyrion gapes. “...I...”

“I begun a vital negotiation by presenting a queen with a piss-pot! I violated my own agreements.
I’ve risked this entire enterprise for no reason other than to provoke the whole time we’ve been here.
And you’ve not said a word. Your only advice has to be even more hostile, even more controlling,
brake even more promises. I can’t trust you. The only people who have held me accountable for
anything have been the Starks. I have more cause to trust them than you. My own Hand.” She stands
and stares him down. Never has he looked more a dwarf to her. “You’ve become everything you
hated, Tyrion. I don’t want to follow your example.”

There’s a long silence. A very long one.

Tyrion closes his eyes, tears leaking from them. “I’m not used to believing in anyone, or anything,
Your Grace. I don’t know how to handle it, and I’ve failed you. I beg your forgiveness.”

Jorah had insisted on her forgiveness, demanded she grant it. But Tyrion begs. He does not try to
excuse his actions. He just admits weakness and begs her to give him another chance.

Better.

Daenerys takes a deep breath. “Tell me, Lord Lannister, what answer should I give the Starks?”

Tyrion’s mouth and he looks up at her, hopeful. He reflects on this for a while. “Do as the king
suggests. Take Viserion, fly with him to Castle Black. You should know your enemy and your
battleground at the first opportunity. If he learns to fly, sail from Eastwatch to King’s Landing and
fetch the others. If not, take Viserion back down. ”

“And where should I send you?”

Tyrion sighs. “To the city to arrange for necessary men and supplies to move North. There’s not a
moment to waste, there. Give Tarly some post guarding the south. When you get to the Wall, do not
act dominant with the Lord Commander. The Watch are meant to be apolitical. King Jon will know
that. You must know it too, or they won’t trust you. Be mindful of their history with the Starks, and
Jon in particular. If possible, make a stop at Winterfell to pay your respects at some point. Neglect no
opportunity to demonstrate your new friendship. Tone down the pomp and finery. You have
dragons, that’s enough. The Northerners are not all that partial to opulence. They see baubles and gilt
and they’ll wonder why your gold is going to that instead of food and blankets.”

“The Starks have donned finery.”

“To project strength and security to the right people on special occasions, yes. But I assure you, you
visit the queen at Winterfell, and you’ll find her in woolen dresses she made herself. The finest thing
you’ll likely see the king in is his Stark cloak—also made by his wife, I bet.”

Daenerys nods. “I get it.”

“I’m not exaggerating.”

She stops for a moment. She knew Westeros ladies learned to sew, but always figured that extended
to small garments and ornate embroidery. Not major, practical garments themselves. All the ladies
back in King’s Landing seemed to order most of their wardrobe.
Still, it doesn’t bother her. “I rode with the Dothraki for a year. I think I can keep things modest enough for the North.” She takes a deep breath. “Shall we send word to the king and queen?”

Daenerys returns to her chambers after dispatching a note to the Starks that she and Jon should leave at dawn. As she prepares for bed, she is surprised by a knock at her door.

“Enter,” she bids as she brushes her hair in the mirror, assuming it’s Missandei or one of her handmaids.

It’s the other queen. Daenerys freezes, watching her visitor through the mirror.

Sansa Stark enters, hands locked together at her waist, posture more stiff than usual, hair in a braided bun, draped in icy silk. Daenerys drops her brush.

The other queen fetches it with what should be her usual daintiness. But there’s something about her movements at this moment that make the Dragon Queen break out in gooseflesh.

Sansa moves up behind her, and only now does Daenerys fully appreciate just how much taller the Stark woman is than her.

She can’t remember the last time anyone has had this effect on her—Viserys? Drogo? But she finds herself unable to move or speak as the queen of winter raises the brush by its silver handle and asks, “May I?”

Daenerys nearly jumps out of her skin at the sound of the woman’s voice. At first, she moves to take the brush from the other woman and decline. But she stops herself, and nods instead.

The other queen’s touch is featherlight as she takes one long, silver-gold lock from the back of Dany’s head in hand and begins running the bristles through it.

The Dragon Queen hasn’t felt this way in years. You’re the Mother of Dragons, she reminds herself. She hasn’t had to do that in years, either. Somehow, that fact actually makes this worse. This woman knows exactly who she is, and she doesn’t care. It’s more terrifying than any of her brother’s rages.

“Forgive me,” Sansa finally says as she continues to brush Dany’s hair. “This is quite a liberty I’m taking, I know. But I couldn’t help it. Your hair is just so beautiful…”

She says this as if she’s thinking of ripping it out of Daenerys’s skull.

“…and honestly, I don’t think the two of us have had enough opportunities to speak alone. Woman to woman. Queen to queen. We’re both in such unique positions, after all.”

Dany swallows and tries to get ahold of herself. “True. Perhaps when the war is over.”

“Perhaps. Still, it’s a long time to wait. And I do wish we didn’t have to part ways at dawn.”

“I doubt it’s my absence you’ll be feeling most.”

“True.” Sansa slowly tames Dany’s hair, piece by piece, her technique meticulous. “Do you have a particular way you like to wear it when you fly?”

“Hmm?”

“To keep it out of your eyes, keep it from flying everywhere and getting knotted. Some sort of bun, perhaps? I have to tear through my own hair if I so much as ride without braiding it. I can’t imagine managing it after flying through the air.”
Daenerys clears her throat. “I just tie it back simply.”

“You have a long journey ahead of you. Probably longer than you’re used to. And those winter winds should not be underestimated. I could do it for you, if you wish. I don’t mind.”

“Oh, I couldn’t ask you to—”

She’s cut off by the look Sansa gives her in the mirror. “Queen Daenerys, I’m trusting you with my husband. You’re telling me you won’t even trust me with your hair? I know what I’m doing, I assure you.”

“O-of course.” Daenerys forces her rational mind to win out. Queen Sansa will not harm her. The woman needs her.

But a threat is coming. She’s handled threats before. “I’m in your hands.”

Sansa begins braiding. “It must be wonderful to fly,” she says, “seeing the world grow smaller and smaller beneath you, rising above it all, seeing the world. I used to dream that I was a bird, you know. Not just small dreams, but strong, vivid ones. I swore I could feel the wind beneath my wings. I’d even dream that I was a bird who thought she was a girl, and tried to use my hands, only to find I had wings instead. I’d be a falcon, or a blue jay, or even one of the pigeons that eat garbage off the streets of King’s Landing. And the moment I realized I was a bird, I’d take to the air and fly, higher and higher, further and further, until the world disappeared. Then I’d wake, back in my cage. I even dreamt of eating worms! And tasting them!”

She giggles. Daenerys swallows.

“I can’t say I’ve known the taste of worms. But I… There is great freedom in it,” she agrees.

“And great peril.”

“What?”

“Sometimes, usually after my worst days—the ones with Ramsay, or when Joffrey had me beaten, or just one that seemed worse for no particular reason, I dreamt of being a bird. And I wouldn’t just fly. I’d take off, and go higher and higher, faster and faster, not stopping. The air would get colder as I got higher. And I’d get so weary. My wings would ache and my heart would burn. But I wouldn’t stop. It could get frigid as any blizzard. My heart would feel like it was about to burst, but I’d keep going until I literally couldn’t anymore. My body would freeze, or my heart actually would burst, or I’d simply be unable to move anymore. And I’d fall.”

“That must have frightened you.”

“Oftentimes, even as I fell, it wouldn’t frighten me half so much as waking up. I haven’t had a bird dream in a long while, though. Not since finding Jon again. I often dream of being a direwolf.”

“Like Ghost?” Daenerys asks, wide-eyed.

Sansa shakes her head. “Not Ghost. I’m not sure if you know, but Ghost was part of a litter Jon discovered with my brothers. There were six pups. Two female, four male. Just like us. We all got one. Mine was Lady. One day, on the road to King’s Landing, there was an incident, and my sister Arya’s wolf Nymeria bit Joffrey. Nymeria ran off, and no one could find her, so Cersei took Lady’s head instead, even though she’d done nothing wrong. My father was the one to do the deed, actually. Otherwise, one of Cersei’s butchers would have done it, and delivered the queen the pelt. Lady’s bones are buried at Winterfell now.”

“I’m so sorry.” Daenerys has observed Jon with Ghost. It’s clear what’s between them goes beyond
the relationship one has with a pet. The wolf seemed as close to his master as the dragons were to Dany. She imagines someone killing one of her dragons as hatchlings. Her heart twists within her chest.

“Sometimes I feel like I have her back,” Sansa says. “Now that I’ve found my family again. I dream of being her. She wasn’t an albino, like Ghost. She was the prettiest of them. Small, sweet, with shiny, silver fur and bright, yellow eyes. Sometimes, in my dreams, Ghost is there, running beside us. But I’m always her. My brother Bran’s wolf, Summer, was killed as well. He’s had dreams like that, too. I like to think they’re both still alive, through us.”

Daenerys’s mouth goes dry. “It’s a lovely thought.”

Sansa nods.

At this point, Daenerys’s hair is woven into a collection of braids.

“Pins?”

“What?”

Sansa smiles. “Pins. For your hair. I need about a dozen.”

“Oh!” Dany opens one of her drawers and retrieves some.

There’s a few moments of silence as the Queen of Winter begins lifting the braids and arranging them.

“I only started bringing Lady back after I found Jon again, though.”

There’s an awkward moment of silence. Their eyes meet through the looking glass. If Sansa dropped one of those pins, it would land with a thud.

Sansa finally continues. “Before that, I was a bird, killing itself in an attempt to escape. So I have some idea of how dangerous flight can be. But I imagine that a flyer as experienced as yourself could keep him safe, correct?”

Here it was.

“Yes. You have nothing to fear from me.”

“I hope so. And so should you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Sansa jams one of the pins in more harshly than the others, causing a sharp pain in the back of Dany’s head. The Dragon Queen yelps. Sansa’s eyes narrow.

“Because if something happens to him, you’ll have quite a lot to fear from me.”

She is gentle with the pins again. Daenerys says nothing. Sansa finishes her work.

Daenerys’s silver-gold locks are not dressed so much as they are sculpted, in an exquisite pattern of interlocking, overlapping folds and weaves that clutch her scalp. There are no uncomfortable tugs or binds when Dany moves her head. Nothing feels strained. She looks a bit like she’s been crowned with her own hair. It distracts her, briefly. Especially when Sansa holds up a hand mirror behind her so she might see the back.
Then her visitor leans over. “See how perfect that is? Not a strand out of place. It’ll stay that way, and so will Jon. He shall depart your company and that of that dandruff-colored lizard of yours, in a condition I find satisfactory. Otherwise, not even Baelerion the Black Dread can protect you, everything, and everyone you love safe from my wrath. I literally turned my last husband into dog food. And I didn’t need dragons to do it. So when I see my husband again, I shall have nothing to complain about. Understand?”

“Threatening me has rarely gone well for people,” Daenerys says, growing bold again. “I am Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Empress of Dragon’s Bay, Grand Khaleesi of the Dothraki, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Princess of Dragonstone, Protector of the Realm, Breaker of Chains, and Mother of Dragons!”

“First of all, you’re not anymore, technically. The Seven Kingdoms have dwindled to five. You relinquished all domains in which the First Men reside. I rule them now. Second of all, I know all of that. And I don’t care. I mean what I say.”

Daenerys takes a deep breath. “I see no reason that you should be so threatening and hostile. We are allies, I have supported you, given you all that you want.”

“You’ve promised it,” Sansa answers, “A different matter altogether. I’ve been promised quite a lot in my life. Promises are words, and words are wind. I take no more chances, especially where my family is concerned. My life has been characterized by people underestimating me, making promises, and deceiving me.”

Daenerys nearly deflates. Her fear and anger become sympathy. “I know what it is to be deceived as well.”

Her heart aches. And she realizes something: she wants this woman to be her friend. Even those closest to her cannot completely fathom the position she’s in. But this other queen can. If I were in her position, would I act differently? Really, the only difference in their behaviors is that Dany would probably be more public with her threats. But her instincts would be the same. Especially after Drogo. “And if I prove that I am not deceiving you? If I make good on my promises?”

Sansa takes a deep breath. “There may be some trust between us.”

Dany wants that. She wants someone who can understand her, who she can understand. She bitterly envies what the Starks have. Two people so uniquely suited to share and relate to one another in regards to such a unique position; one that almost requires isolation.

The higher Daenerys has risen, the lonelier she’s become.

Sansa Stark straightens up and smiles. “Sleep well, Daenerys Stormborn.”

“And you, Sansa Redwolf.”

The Queen of Winter sweeps out of the room, and Daenerys swears she can feel an icy wind in her wake.
The King of Winter

Chapter Summary

The last night, the last day.

Chapter Notes

Guys, my regular beta has to buckle down for her A-Levels, hence why this is so late. I'm still looking for a new regular beta, though I want to thank Hannah/sassy_classy_ass/dragonchristianlady97 and our temporary beta Kat/kattyshack/madmajwithabox for helping!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa:

When she returns to their chambers, her husband is still absent, arranging travel with their retinue. But he does as she asks and leaves an open piece of parchment on her desk: a copy of the letter he presented to Randyll Tarly.

Eager to read it, she practically flies toward her desk.

To Randyll of the House Tarly, Lord of Horn Hill from His Grace Jon the White Wolf of the House Stark, First of His Name, King of the Three Realms of the North, the Trident, and the Vale of Arryn, Lord Consort of Winterfell and the Dreadfort, Commander of Moat Cailin, Warden of the North and Protector of the Realm, greeting:

Perhaps this message shall come as a surprise. It may never have occurred to you that you may be among those I hate most in this world (at least, among those who still live). A lot of people have killed those closest to me. Some even killed me themselves. So hopefully you have an idea of my distaste for you if I count you among their rank. Or not.

I’ve felt this way for years, on behalf of your estranged son, Sam. You may be shocked to hear that I count the son you terrorized and exiled as one of my closest friends and confidantes. It probably baffles you, I’m guessing. We’re both military men, skilled in arms and tactics. I suspect we’re both in the habit of repressing our emotions. Despite the length and effort I’ve put into this letter, you may be surprised to hear that I myself am not normally a wordsmith. I prefer a blade to a quill or books, it’s true. Sam arrived to The Wall fat, scared, and hopeless with a weapon.

And perhaps the finest man I’ve known.

Samwell may have been cast out by you, but I want you to know that now, he is among the most valued men to the King of half of Westeros. Scared he may be, but he’s the bravest man I know. Not just because he’s killed a White Walker, because he saved a woman and child from a terrible fate, because he faced an army of wildlings, but because he was so terrified while doing those things.
He was terrified to tell me about you, about what you did to him, about the Hell you made his life until he left. Do you have any idea what it says about what you are when the best thing you ever did for your son was send him to a frozen, criminal-infested outpost for the rest of his life? That he found more love, strength, and belief there than in your home?

Yes, he found strength and courage in miserable conditions, but that is no credit to you, My Lord. I’m sure you can’t really conceptualize that it’s actually because Sam found sympathy and support rather than mere cruelty there. Or that actual fighters found value in him.

See, I suspect the only idea you’ve really ever had is brutality. You’re lucky enough to have gotten by on that alone. Unfortunately, the world we live in tends to reward that, which is easily the worst thing about it. But it saves no one.

Sam wrote to me, by the by, and told me that Gilly let her wildling heritage slip. He told me of your reaction as well. I’m sure your reaction to Tormund Giantsbane will be more restrained. After all, neither Tormund or myself are scholarly types who are terrified of you or impoverished young mothers without a home.

I want you to understand that whatever you may believe, you have nothing to be proud of in the pile of corpses you’ve produced. There are many great killers. Men everywhere, for eons, have been trained to accomplish the same things. The only ones who did anything special were the ones who applied these skills to try and make the world a better place, to improve and save lives.

You haven’t done that. Sam has, though. Even if he did bring a “filthy wildling” into your home in the process. I find it amusing that you consider the wildlings such a threat.

You see, if I were to weigh the numbers, it would be forces you’ve aligned with that have proven a greater threat to the people of Westeros than the Free Folk. Congratulations, Lord Tarly, you know how to kill. So can everyone else above the age of three. You’re neither singular, nor qualified, nor worthy to say a word against those of us who have managed more than just cruelty. The best thing you ever produced was the very son you rejected, and I’m just glad his gifts are not being wasted by you any longer.”

Sam was in many ways rich, fertile soil. But fool that you are, all you saw was dirt. Brilliant, braver than anyone I’ve ever met, kind, resourceful, dutiful, inventive, intuitive. I was robbed of one of my best men and greatest assets when he left for the Citadel.

I’d much rather have him at these talks than you. Somehow I suspect you won’t prove to be of much use. But Sam would. He knows how to play politics, you see, and he knows our enemies, and he’s read so very much about so many useful things. I really don’t understand what you’re useful for.

Sincerely,

Jon Stark, King of the Three Realms

Post-Script: Suspicions confirmed! Thank you for going out of your way to prove me right. My Lord, you’re a person who may know how to effectively produce corpses, but you’ve given no indication of worth beyond that. Throughout this whole talk, you contributed the least of anyone, I dare say, in this castle. The scullery maids have contributed more than you have. Despite your military record, the only thing I’d ever trust you to accomplish would be making my own people hate me. In my lifetime, I’ve never met anyone so proud of their own aggressive ignorance. I have no use for you. I have generals of equal and/or greater skill than you, and they manage their accomplishments without having a pig’s turd where their hearts should be. I pity Queen Daenerys that she must suffer
you as a vassal. I’m sure she (and, if I have to guess, your family and subjects) is very much looking forward to your death.

Sansa gapes at the parchment for a while. Not diplomatic in the least, but Jon waited to give this to Tarly after the man himself took diplomacy off the table, so she can’t bring herself to mind. It occurs to her that a response was commanded of Tarly, as well. She wonders if Jon has gotten it, yet.

She’s torn between urges. Part of her wants to run downstairs and find him before Lord Tarly responds so she might witness it for herself.

The other part of her is feeling too passionate from a combination of her meeting with Daenerys, the impending good-bye she must make with her husband tomorrow morning, and the unleashed veracity of this message. She’d never seen Jon get quite so verbose in either an effort to cut a proud shithead down to size or to praise and defend his friend. Usually, he expressed himself to others with short, to the point declarations.

It’s as much a thrill as seeing him fight with his fists or a blade, which on its own tends to be quite stimulating. But unlike Lord Tarly, that’s not the limit of her husband’s prowess. Despite the impression some people had of Jon (an impression she herself harbored for a short while after they were reunited), he’s able to fight off the battlefield as well. He has wits, a willingness to use them, and intuition.

Sansa knows about what Lord Tarly did to Sam, though she’s never met Jon’s friend herself. Jon told her about it all. And everything she knows about the man makes this letter all the better. It’s not just a dressing-down, it’s a dressing-down tearing apart the very things that this foul man likely prides himself on. Tarly cast aside his son for supposedly being useless, unworthy, and weak. Jon has confronted Tarly with the actual limits of his own use, his own failings, the uses Sam had that his father was too stupid and unworthy to recognize, and how Sam and many others are just as strong or stronger than Tarly. He destroyed all of the arguments behind Tarly’s supposed “manly” values and “righteous” anger. Explained to him why no one likely values him any more than he valued his poor son. How all his supposed interests in “making Sam strong” or “making him into a man” were worthless and ineffective, while everything he despises in fact, ultimately made his supposedly “worthless” son into a hero.

Every sentence is carefully crafted to destroy the ego and pride of this man and confront him with what he truly is. A failure.

It’s devastating, really. Insight as a weapon. The written word, the very thing Tarly despised his son for loving, as a blade.

Hatred and anger directed skillfully at the right target, on behalf of a worthy and deserving survivor. An expression of hate that is, at its heart an act of overwhelming love for a soul who was denied it for so long.

Jon’s right, as well. Men in this world are raised to be weapons. To kill. To be otherwise as a man is to be disparaged and abused. Gifts like Sam’s are rarely nurtured or valued. Jon, despite being capable of great brutality that he’d likely be celebrated for, is not the blunt instrument most men are raised to be. He’s not just a swordsman or a commander. He has a mind capable of so much, of effectively working off-the-battle as keenly (or, in fact, probably more keenly) as on the field. And he has a heart big enough to cover Westeros.

And he’s all hers.

Sansa often finds herself returning to that old mindset Joffrey, Cersei, Petyr, Ramsay, and so many
others trained her to have. Where she feels weak, stupid, just a shallow, empty, pretty face. At fault for what’s befallen her because she was too weak and stupid to stop it. She could never have imagined herself having the conversation with Daenerys she just had.

Often times, it’s thoughts of her people, her family, of Winterfell, and all that they expect of her, need from her, that will shake her of this. But that isn’t always enough to build her back up.

Then there’s this man. This man. This man who has saved thousands from White Walkers, who saved his lord commander’s life when he was practically a boy and earned himself his Valyrian Steel, who was elected Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, whose loss was greeted with a desperation to bring him back to life by men like Davos Seaworth, who protected her and helped her get her home back when all he wanted was to find someplace warm, who found and gave them all their direwolves, who loves his outcast friend so much that he confronted that friend’s abuser in a manner that suited his friend more than his own methods, who commands the respect and love of people through courage and deeds, who puts others always before himself…

He loves her. Not just out of obligation, but because of who she is. He knows her, accepts her, understands her, respects her, sees her as an equal, as crucial, as talented and trustworthy, as someone he needs to keep going. So much so that he demands she be given the same respect and authority he has. And he adores her. He’s chosen her.

Jon knows how to pick out worthy people. He’s picked her, so she must be worthy. Joffrey, Cersei, Petyr, Ramsay… They were all dead, all failures and monsters. They thought she was weak and stupid, and where did it get them? Jon thinks her strong and clever, and… She’s not proven him wrong. She’s saved his life. He does rely on her. And she’s rewarded that, hasn’t she? Ever since they’ve forged their partnership, she has risen to the occasion, has accomplished a great deal. Jon was proven right to trust her. Their realm is relatively secure, they have crowns, they’re alive, they’ve reunited with their remaining family, they’re poised to defend their home with dragons and enough men to challenge their enemies… And all of those things wouldn’t have been accomplished without her.

Jon saw her as being as worthy and skilled as himself, worked to put her at his level, and he’s been proven right. The one who had faith in her has benefitted from it immensely. Those that saw her as no more than a pawn, as stupid and weak, have come to miserable ends.

It’s that knowledge that often gives her the strength to do things like threaten the Mother of Dragons, lead armies of Vale knights to Winterfell, and debate the keenest political minds in Westeros. It’s not just that a wonderful man values her, it’s that she’s proven him right.

She’s the equal of this man. This man. A man capable of things like this. All at once strong and brave and clever and dutiful and selfless and intuitive and loving and righteous and powerful.

...And handsome, as well.

And he belongs to her. She belongs to him. They belong to one another. Even the Mother of Dragons knows it.

Sansa was so alone for so long. Now, a man capable of love like the one that burns through this letter, loves her. Is coming back to her. Chose her above all others.

Because she’s not just beautiful. Beautiful women are a dime-a-dozen. But because she’s strong, brave, intelligent, powerful, intuitive, loving, talented, kind, and everything else he wants and needs. She is. She can reduce this heroic, ferocious, unstoppable dragon-direwolf to a puddle of overwhelmed affection.
And there’s only so much time. What if she couldn’t find him, and he came back after she went looking for him? They’d waste more of the precious hours they have left before he leaves for Castle Black.

No, she shall stay and indulge her passions until he returns, then indulge them some more, with his help.

She rises from the desk, banishing all thoughts of wights and politics from her mind. No time for that. Sansa only has hours left with the man she loves. All thoughts are for them now.

She goes to the bed and considers taking off all of her clothes, greeting him naked as her Name Day. She’s already flushed from head to toe, burning, and wet between her legs. Her gown seems stifling. But she also has this desire to have him strip her.

So how to greet him with a shock while dressed?

Sansa smiles as the idea comes to her. She needn’t be completely dressed, right? She moves from the bed to the mirror, and lets her hair down, adjusting it somewhat so it’s how he likes it best. He just loves, loves her hair.

She kicks off her shoes and goes back to the bed, laying on her back and hitching up her skirts. This isn’t just about Jon at this point, as her cunny practically throbs for some manner of relief. She parts her legs and reaches between them.

At first, Sansa strokes herself through her silken smallclothes, with the aim of getting them as soaked as possible. But before long, she panting and burning from within. Frantically, she yanks the silk down her thighs and touches her bare cunny, going for her nub and stroking it with two fingers.

All the while, she’s thinking of Jon, of his face, his body. The hard planes of muscle on his chest, stomach, and arms. His scarred skin. The softness of his lips. His beard rubbing against her skin, his curls gripped between her fingers, his nimble tongue, his nimble but strong hands. His moans. His eyes when they meet hers as they always do. The way he seems to say ‘I Love You’ with them just as he’s saying it with his mouth, as if he can’t be satisfied with only one expression of adoration at a time.

The way he always stays with her when he’s finished. How he always waits until she moves or speaks to roll off of her. How he immediately pulls her into his arms and against his chest when he does. The release isn’t enough for him. He wants her, needs her, loves her for far more than that.

She moans his name, uncaring. She wants him so badly, it’s like a madness. She almost stops herself, not wanting to peak without him. But she can’t stop herself, she’s so, so close---

“JOOON!” She cries his name as the peak hits her. She gasps. Her sex throbs. And while she relaxes a little, she can’t pull her hand away. It’s not enough.

“…Seven Hells…”

Sansa opens her eyes to find her husband, still in his cloak and boots, standing at the door. His eyes are the size of saucers, his mouth hangs open, his skin is flushed.

She looks at him. “What the… what the fuck…” She’s not used to saying that, but she says it now with fierce conviction, “…Do you think you’re doing, standing there? You should be over here ripping the clothes off of both of us!”

He scrambles to remove his boots and cloak before sprinting to the bed.
Jon:

He’d figured tonight would be a special and active night for them. His thoughts were consumed by the matters at hand throughout the day, but even so, at the moments when he felt on the brink of insanity, he did comfort himself with thoughts of the night ahead of him. It was the only thing that consoled him after word came of the Others, especially given that it meant he’d be leaving for Castle Black so soon.

His mind is exhausted, though his body is restless. He’s had no time for the yard, for a proper walk or any exercise today. He’s spent this one at tables, or standing around, or negotiating with Sansa on the bed. But he sees the benefits of that now.

As he walks back to their apartments, he’s done for the day. He’s done all he can do. He can’t handle anymore fear or worry or planning or debates or numbers or complications. He’s terrified, yes, so is everyone else. But the thing that no one talks about when it comes to fear--- both your own and that of others--- is that it’s exhausting.

He literally needs to stop. He’s got hours left before he sets off for months, possibly years of fear, battle, danger, cold, sacrifice, and loneliness. His mind was fixed.

Even the delight of Lord Tarly’s reply couldn’t interrupt his focus once he took his leave of the men. And Lord Tarly had walked out to the main courtyard, and, stony-faced, begged for forgiveness to Jon and his men (even Tormund), before the whole court. He’d even presented gifts. A fine gilded dirk for Jon, and a bracelet for Sansa of interwoven lines of gold and silver. He listed his failings and promised to write his son an equally repentant letter and set aside some funds for Sam’s family when he returned to Horn Hill.

He didn’t really feel sorry, clearly. But he humiliated himself out of fear and obligation. Jon would make sure he honored his promises.

And as satisfying as that was, once Jon retired, his mind raced to the woman waiting for him. This has to be a special night in many, many ways. It’s the last they’ll have for who knows how long. And this is the last time he’ll be able to build up reminders of just what he’s going to be fighting for and why it is so very worth it. It’ll be what gets him through this war.

He wants to hear her utter every sweet, perfect, arousing sound. He wants her to scream, to moan, to pant, to grunt, to whimper, to sigh, to yelp, to laugh, to whisper his name and shout it. He wants her to order and beg. All of it. He wants to re-explore her, map out and memorize the sight, smell, taste, and feel of every inch of her. He wants to get atop her and watch her back arch beneath him, look into her eyes as her hair gleams around her over the pillows. He wants to put her up top and watch her ride him, hips moving, teats bouncings. He wants to see her porcelain skin rubbed raw from contact with his beard. He wants to see his perfect, composed, controlled lady wife come apart in the best way. He wants to become jelly in her hands, at her lips.

Though he knows he has a great, exhausting day ahead of him, he wants to get as little sleep as possible. This night must be lovemaking, softer adoration in the afterglow until they’re ready to make love again, then more soft adoration in the afterglows, and so on and so forth.

He knows she intends the same. They haven’t spoken of it, but they don’t need to.

Jon imagined that perhaps when he came back, his wife might give him a very memorable greeting. But still. He’d expected to be pushed against a wall and kissed, or to find her in her smallclothes or
bathing or something.

As usual, his wife prefers to exceed any and all expectations.

He’s rendered utterly senseless by what he sees before she looks at him and orders him back to normal.

Jon can smell her sex from across the room, and he’s desperate to get closer. He can’t tear off his doublet or undo his belt fast enough. Her thighs are parted, but shackled by a set of damp, silken smallclothes. Her hair is spread out in all directions on the pillow. Her bodice is partially undone. Her skin is flushed. She’s been crying his name as she touched herself.

And she’s his. She’s chosen him. She loves him. He is the only one she wants, who she’ll have, who she needs.

It’s times like this, seeing her like this, that Jon completely forgets that he was a bastard. These moments when he’s truly a king.

Any man could get himself a crown with Sansa beside him. She is the type of woman who literally builds nations. Who can create a victory from nothing. Who ultimately saves the supposed warriors. Who is stopped by nothing. Who will make others unstoppable. Who gives dead men a purpose for living. Restores all that’s good in them.

And she chose him to build up. To make him a king. To be with. To rule with.

He’s gained her smiles and her secrets. Her trust after her ability to trust anyone should have been depleted several times over. She asked him to be her hero. She’d have no other but him, or herself. No one else.

She gives him everything he never dared hope for, because she wants to. After a life of having things taken from her, she wants to keep giving, but to him. For him.

Only him. The man who allowed her to trust again. After years of only seeing monsters of all sorts, she saw a hero in him.

Sansa actually grins as he climbs onto the bed. He positions himself so he can climb up her body from between her legs. Jon rips off his tunic and takes the silken fabric, pulled tight between her thighs, in his mouth.

She yelps as he yanks them down, pulling her legs into the air and moving to kneel. With one hand, he keeps his grip on one of her ankles, stroking it and resting it on his shoulder. With the other, he pulls her undersilk from his mouth and presses it to his nose and cheek, reveling in the fragrance of them. Of her.

His wife groans slightly and runs her free foot up his bare torso, from his navel to his chest.

“We’re still not naked, Love,” she moans. She points to his groin. “And I think I’ve spotted a friend of ours who is rather desperate to be liberated and reunited with those who love him best.”

She’s not exactly wrong. Jon’s trousers feel like they’re strangling him. Eager, he yanks them down, gasping with relief, and kicks them off.

“Ah! There you are. All better.” She pouts. “Except for me.”

When he gets face to face with her, she moans.
“I don’t care much for this dress.”

He takes the invitation and revels in a satisfying ripping sound. She sits up to free herself of the garment completely, wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him passionately as he does away with her girdle.

When they do break away for breath, he gasps, “I don’t care much for it, either,” before moving his mouth to her teats.

Gods, how he loves her breasts. The way they seem to bounce out when her girdle is removed. The way those rosy nipples of hers get so bloody hard and sit so proudly. The way touching them makes her moan and throw her head back. How smooth the skin of them are. The way he can bury his head between them and seem to escape.

As he does, he rubs his length against her mound, his stones sometimes hitting her flesh. One of her hands grip his hair, pulling it and giving him the usual thrill. Another clutches his backside. He grins Sansa will never admit it, but she likes his backside. Almost every time they make love, her hands inevitably makes it there. She grabs it, squeezes it. A few times, he’s caught her peeking when he gets up out of bed naked. He’s purposely walked about nude just to observe her at it. He’s never said a word, though. He’s afraid if he does, she might stop.

She loves it almost as much as she loves his hair.

“Jon, please,” she whimpers. He smirks and grabs her waist. She yelps as he shifts their positions. He sits up, pulling her into his lap, and lifts her hips. “Ride me,” he gasps.

His wife smiles, nods, and lowers herself.

They clutch one another as they move, kiss as they move. He never wants to let her go. What could flying a dragon possibly be to this? He becomes something new, something greater with her. He feels like he’s discovering a thousand hidden treasures within her.

When they peak, he pulls her down atop him as he lays back. She settles into him, snuggling his neck. He strokes her back and hair, inhaling her scent. She glistens a bit. She glows.

“I wish I could get you pregnant again,” he hears himself say, wildly. He has no idea why he says this, just that it’s true.

Sansa laughs, turning her head to peer up at him with those big, blue eyes. “Well, you know you can. Not now, obviously. But you come back to me, and you may seed me as much as you like.”

He clutches her scalp. “Is that a promise?”

Sansa rolls her eyes. “We’ll see how much you like it when you see how stout it’ll make me.”

“Yes, I will.” He grins.

“Jon,” she says, her color still high, “I love you.”

The way she says this tells him it’s somehow even more significant than when she usually does it. He didn’t think that was possible.

“I love you too,” he answers.

“And that’s the best thing in my life,” she whispers, “So please, please, come home to me. I need
His heart pounds. “I always thought that it was me who needed you.”

She smiles. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“You’re mad.” She props herself up and looks down at him adoringly. “Just… I don’t want you leaving without understanding what you’ve done for me. What you mean to me.”

He reaches up to stroke her face. “I know. I swear I do.”

And he does.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sansa:

His hand reaches out and takes hers as they approach the clearing. They slow their steeds, and he looks at her. “Ready?”

Nodding, she asks, “Are you?”

“Yes.”

They’re both lying, and they know it. But someone might overhear. Their eyes speak the truth.

Neither of them will ever really be ready to part again. For nearly a year, they’ve known this day would come. Jon would have to ride for Castle Black while Sansa governed from Winterfell. They’ve known this for so long. And never got used to it. It’s one of the few things they’ve really struggled to speak about to one another. They’ve discussed what’s to be done in the events of one another’s death with more ease than this.

Parting from Winterfell, from Arya and Bran was already agonizing. None of the Starks are comfortable or wholly accepting of parting with any other family member. Not after everything that’s happened. It’s the one part of their duties that they all truly have trouble reconciling with. But at least with that departure, they were still in pairs. Arya and Bran; Jon and Sansa.

But this… She’ll be alone, without one other member of her pack near. So will Jon. And there’s no denying that their bond is quite particular.

It’s hardest on him, she knows. At least Sansa is returning to Winterfell, to the others. Jon is going to Castle Black, to the site of his death. No Winterfell, no Arya, no Bran, no Heart Tree. The nature of his departure denies him even Ghost’s company.

The direwolf shall travel with Sansa to their home, and will likely then depart immediately to meet his master. But that shall take time.

Sansa even has a part of her husband within her, growing bigger and stronger every day. The nature of pregnancy placed a great deal of unfair strain, pain, and struggle on women. But it does give them this one comfort.

Seven Hells, for a while, he shall have no one but Daenerys. He’ll be in such danger.

It’s not fair. It’s so unfair.
The loneliness of it...

Such are their lives, though.

They put on their brave faces. The faces of Winterfell. Hands joined, they urge their horses past the trees onto the field.

She can feel Viserion’s heat at once. The grooms shout for the crowd— all pressed to the outer edges of the dragon’s field, as far from the beast itself as possible— to make way for the King and Queen of Winter. When they reach the front of the crowd, Jon pulls his hand, as if to go ahead alone. But Sansa squeezes it tighter. Their eyes meet again. She shall go with him to the very end.

It’s terrifying to approach, more frightening with every step closer. The creature is so large, and even the slightest movement— a quirk of the neck, an adjustment of the wing— makes noise. There’s a constant, rumbling rhythm of its breathing. ‘Rumbling’ is a generous description, it always sounds like growling. As they get closer, the more Sansa can make out the patterns and details of its body. Every scale looks razor-sharp.

Daenerys, clad in leathers, stands at Viserion’s side, a hand on his wing. The beast lays on the burnt patch of earth, its lengthy neck is bent so it faces them.

This is supposed to be the smallest, gentlest one.

The horses stop short at a certain point, refusing to go any further. Both of them no better than to try to force it, so Jon dismounts and helps her down. Their steeds take off almost immediately. Sansa wishes they could join them.

Jon and Sansa’s hands stay joined, squeezing each other tightly. Despite the emotion in the pressure of their grasps, their posture and movements are very formal. Their joined hands are raised high enough for all to see, and they walk in sync, heads held high, as if they are leading a dance.

Ghost follows them.

When they finally get close enough, there’s the requisite bows and curtseys, courtesies Daenerys takes part in.

She takes a deep breath. “Are you ready, King Jon?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I suppose.”

The royal hands finally part. Jon clears his throat. “I suppose we should start with you showing me how to mount, sit, and dismount.”

Daenerys nods.

Sansa watches the two intently. It doesn’t seem too different from riding a horse. As she observes the instructions, Ghost presses his muzzle into her shoulder. She rubs his snout nervously as she watches her husband climb onto the dragon’s back, sit, and get off ten times in a row.

Daenerys actually claps and congratulates him. Sansa quickly follows suit, though she feels the opposite of enthusiasm. Now that he can get on and off, the time has truly come.

He comes towards her, and Sansa can hear her own heartbeat. Tears well up in her eyes, and she can barely blink them back.
Jon is inches from her’s. She can feel his breath teasing her skin. His hands find her waist. Her left goes to his back while her right reaches up to stroke his cheek. She must memorize his face. Not just the sight of it, but the texture. The lines where his bare cheek ends and his coarse beard begins. The surface of the scars about his eyes. The contours of his lips. The thickness of his curls.

He blinks back tears as well. They kiss, long and deep. She catalogues the taste and feel of his mouth. The pressure of his hands. When their lips do reluctantly part, he presses his forehead to hers and leans in, as if he’s going to fall without her. Little rivers of tears mark their cheeks.

“I’ll visit if I can,” he whispers, “I’ll write at every opportunity as we move, and every day at Castle Black. I’ll send word the moment we arrive.”

“I’ll do the same. I mean--- I’ll write to you during my journey, and every day when I get home.”

His hand moves to her belly. “Tell me everything, leave out no detail. If I can, I want to be home for the birth.”

“Don’t do it if it hurts the war effort,” she warns, “Better you come home for good to raise our babe than endanger it all to meet him when he’s born. The goal is to come home and stay there, not go back and forth. And be careful. Take care of yourself. Don’t take any unnecessary risks. Stay as safe as possible.”

“The same to you, Wife,” he murmurs, “You must stay safe and well. I’m fighting to come home to you, more than anything.”

“Don’t say that…”

“I mean it. My home is what makes this world worth saving, and it doesn’t exist without you.”

“The same to you, My Love---”

“But you will carry on if I’m lost, won’t you? Please.”

“I shall try. And, Jon, if I am lost, especially if I die bringing this child into the world, you must promise to do the same, and love our babe with all of your heart. Build a new home with our son or daughter. I will do the same. If we can do that, neither of us shall truly be lost.”

“I swear it.”

“Gods, I love you so much,” she whimpers, coming apart at last. She crumbles into his arms. He grips her tightly against his chest, swaying them back and forth.

“I love you too. With all of me.”

But they can’t delay forever. So, eventually, they pull back. They kiss once more. And they stumble away from one another.

Sansa moves back and grips Ghost’s neck as Jon climbs onto Viserion’s back, behind Daenerys. They both wave. Sansa resists the urge to bury her face in Ghost’s neck when the dragon’s wings start moving. The flapping makes her skirts whip around her, but she forces herself to watch as they go up… up… and get smaller, and smaller.

Only when they’re a speck does Sansa let herself weep into the direwolf’s fur.

The court has enough decency to wait for her to recover and start back towards them. She only does
so when her face no longer trembles and she can meet them bravely. Even so, she grips a hunk of the wolf’s snowy fur and clutches him as she walks toward the court.

Uncle Edmure approaches her cautiously. “Are you alright, Your Grace?”

“As close to it as can be expected.”

“We can delay your departure to tomorrow, if you need more time to---”

“---No. We move on schedule.” Sansa swallows and calls to Davos, Reed and Royce. She wants to work. She needs the distraction. They sort of huddle together and she lowers her voice.

“Have the dispatches been made?” She inquires. Announcements of the alliance were drafted and to be sent to every major holdfast, town, and settlement from Sunspear to Castle Black, so that everyone would know of the promise Daenerys made, and would expect her to keep it.

“The ravens went out an hour ago,” Royce assures her, “Everything, in fact, is on schedule, thank the Seven.”

Sansa’s almost disappointed. A problem would give her more to do.

“Excellent,” she says, not meaning it.

She makes a point of inspecting everything in the hours leading up to her departure, desperate for a distraction.

One arises in the form of Tyrion Lannister requesting a private audience.

It’s a testament to her state of mind that she doesn’t refuse an audience. But she does refuse the private part, having Brienne chaperone her to a drawing room overlooking the courtyard. She finds him standing by the window, silhouetted by the sunlight, casting a long shadow across the room.

He turns slowly and bows. “I was hoping we could speak alone.”

“Anything you can say to me, you can say in front of Brienne,” she replies, making it clear with her tone that the matter is not up to negotiation. She shall not meet with her former “husband” privately the moment her present one has departed. He can speak to her with a chaperone, or not speak to her at all.

“Very well. I thank you for indulging me, Your Grace.”

“Of course,” she says, trying to make out his face. But shadows obscure it. She moves closer, leaving Brienne by the door, to the other end of the window. They both turn to face it. At first, they attempt to hide that they’re appraising one another until finally just altering their stance and looking at each other straight on.

“What is it you needed of me, Lord Lannister?”

He sighs. “We haven’t gotten to speak alone and I thought… I don’t know, I felt we should. Our marriage may have been a sham, but it was a sham we were in together, and I don’t think it entirely lacked warmth. At least, not until…”

Wisely, he stops there. Sansa swallows. It’s true that in the earliest days following their wedding, they began developing a sort of friendliness. They’d pitted each other, she considered him kinder than the others, and trapped, if not quite like she was, then in his own way. She appreciated his
restraint, his form of gentleness, and the fact that he actually did seem to care for how she felt to some extent. She felt kindly towards him, and showed it. They were almost becoming friends.

Then the Red Wedding happened. And even if Tyrion wasn’t directly involved, it didn’t matter. The massacre never would have been managed if not for the support and aid Tyrion had given his awful family. He bore some responsibility. Even if he was only a part in the Lannister machinations, he kept them going, and wasn’t entirely unwitting or unwilling in serving their cause. And her mother, brother, and seemingly every hope she had of being free was dead as a result.

That couldn’t be ignored. That couldn’t be forgotten. And though she’s regained some sympathy for the man in the intervening years, though she no longer hates him, she cannot, will not forgive him. She’d found her way home, gained her freedom, and reunited with what’s left of her family, no thanks to him. And so much of what she’s suffered in at least some part, is thanks to him. And decisions he’s made.

She’s not quite as harsh about it all as Jon is, but that doesn’t mean she’s given in.

The two of them shall never be friends. She feels sympathy for him, she doesn’t hate him, but she wants as little to do with him as possible.

“If you feel any responsibility for me, I ask that you cease it,” she says, “I’m not a girl anymore, and the sham is over. It’s done. They’re all dead. We’re both free, about to go our separate ways, and we both have greater, more pressing things to concern ourselves with.”

His eyes widen. “Then why are you here?”

“You are the Hand to my chief ally. I don’t begrudge you any sort of closure, if you need it. And I am nothing if not courteous.”

“I see. I remember when you were so desperate for friendship that you bonded with your lady’s maid, and even tried to plot a prank with the dwarf you were forced to marry.”

“So do I,” she replies evenly, “But that’s not the case anymore.”

“Is it just Jon, or are there others?”

“Excuse me?!” She sputters, not liking his tone.

“I mean, have you found others to be friends with, or does your husband fill that role enough?”

She clears her throat. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I have found friends.”

“I am glad to hear it. I have found friends as well.”

“Well, then, now I suggest you find yourself a wife,” she tells him. It would certainly tie up another loose end. “Casterly Rock needs an heir, after all. And I’m sure you could use someone by your side.”

“Good advice,” he says, wetting his lips. His eyes search hers.

At many points when they were wed, he’d look at her this way. Like a starving child hoping for a crisp of bread. She’d wonder what it was he wanted from her. She had nothing to give him then, and has nothing to give him now.

But she does have the courage to finally ask him, “What do you really want from me, Tyrion?”
“I… I can’t be entirely certain, Sansa. But I think… I think I’m looking for absolution.”

She steps back. “I’m sorry?”

Tyrion turns toward the window again, eyes on the floor. “That whole time… I knew what my family was, what they were doing, what they intended. I knew the horrible things they did, that they were hurting people, that they should be stopped. How could I not? I even… Gods…”

“…What?”

“…I even suspected my siblings’ involvement in what happened to Bran,” he admits.

Sansa’s blood goes cold. For whatever reason, she never considered that. “When did you start?”

“What?”

“When did you start suspecting that your brother and sister threw my ten-year-old brother out a tower window?!” She barks.

Tyrion cringes. “Almost from the moment he fell. I knew my brother and sister well. I always knew Cersei was up to no good, that Jaime was her constant accomplice. I even suspected the truth of their relationship. For years. And when Bran fell… I knew they were both absent from the hunt that day. And I observed them when the news came. I saw both of their reactions when they learned the fall hadn’t killed him.”

Sansa’s fists tighten. “You--- You--- You made him a saddle! You brought him plans for a saddle that would allow him to ride again! And even then, you knew?!”

His voice, usually so clear and strong, is a whisper. “Yes.”

A second later, he’s stumbling back, clutching his face. She’d struck him.

It wasn’t a slap, either. Slaps were for young cousins that were acting like brats. No, Tyrion earned himself a punch.

Sansa had never punched anyone before, not properly. Jon, who insisted that she know how to protect herself at least a little, taught her to.

It seems her husband is a good teacher, for Tyrion does cry out, and it takes him several seconds to even lift his head. When he does, Sansa sees the signs already: she’d blackened his eye.

“I deserved that.”

“You deserve worse!” She spits.

“I know. I’m so sorry, Sansa, I---”

“---Apologize to Bran! He’ll never walk again! He’ll never have children! He’ll never be a knight like he always dreamed! He’s dependent on others for the rest of his days! He’s sixteen, and has to suffer the indignity of being carried around like a child! He nearly died!” She can barely stay still. “He’s wanted to die, at certain points! He was only a boy! And not like one of your sister’s disgusting brood! He’s a sweet, caring, wonderful lad! Always was! And your brother and sister stole his dreams from him! From the very beginning, he might have gotten some sort of justice… Everything… EVERYTHING that happened afterwards might have been avoided if you’d just…”

What sympathy she had for Tyrion is gone. “You made Jon think you were his friend.”
“I wanted to be. I was. He needed a friend.”

“No. You were no more his friend than you were my husband.”

Tyrion closes the eye that isn’t swelling. “Sansa, I wanted to---”

“---I don’t care what you want! I wanted to be safe, to go home, to see my mother and brother again! You… You’ve gotten everything you wanted, didn’t you? You always hated your family, and now they’re all dead. You wanted Casterly Rock, you have it. You wanted power and respect, and you’re Hand of the Queen. You even got to kill your father! But I’ll never get my parents or brothers back! I’ll never get Lady back! I’ll never be able to forget the things that have been done to me! I’ll always have these scars! And all of it, all of it, could have been spared if you’d said something. Or at least not helped your family the way you did, knowing what they were! Bran wishes to walk again, and he never will. Why should I care at all what you wanted when no one cared about us?”

“I did care---”

“---Not enough to truly help me! Just because you didn’t rape me, doesn’t make up for the things you did do! The things you enabled!”

“I know.” He shakes his head. “But you asked. And the truth is, Sansa, every time I looked at you, I saw all the things my family had done. All the things I’d allowed to happen. I saw all of my guilt. And I just wanted to be forgiven for my part in it all. That’s what I wanted from you all that time. I know I don’t deserve it, but it’s what I wanted from you then, and what I want now.”

“Just… stay away from me. Stay away from all of us. Don’t even speak our names again.” She shakes her head. “I defended you to my husband. Never again. I’ll do for you what you did for us: nothing. I have no pity for you, feel nothing about people despising you. I’ll never say a word or lift a finger in your defense again. I’ll always let the world think the worst of you. The people of the Three Realms shall forever say the name ‘Lannister’ the same way they say ‘Frey’. And if you, or any of your kin set foot on our soil again, and a life is lost, you can expect no justice. Just like Bran. Tell your men to march only under dragon banners, because the lives of lions mean nothing to us.”

“---Sansa---”

“Don’t you say my name! I am not your little prisoner! I am the Queen of Winter!” She wants to strangle him. “Daenerys might favor you, but I hope everyone else curses your name along with the rest of your kin! You worked so hard to be one of them, now you are! Your queen and her dragons are all that protects you, Tyrion Lannister. And she wasn’t there to see what your cowardice wrought! You’ve exhausted any sympathy from us. You shall find no sympathy or forgiveness in me. My warmth is for those who deserve it! The Others can have you for all I care. I never want to see your face again!”

She turns on her heel and storms out of the chamber. She tries not to weep.

It’s Bran she yearns for now. She wants so badly to embrace her little brother, hold him tight, protect him.

She sends word to the Targaryen retinue that Tyrion Lannister is not to see her off. They honor this, and it is Missandei, Daenerys’s herald, who wishes her farewell.

“The good wishes of the Dragon Empire go with you, as does our initial offering. We thank you for your courage and kindness, Queen Sansa.” The young woman tells her.

Sansa manages to give her a smile. “I thank you, Lady Missandei. Please know that you are always
welcome to visit our court at Winterfell. We thank you for your aid, and are honored by this alliance. Farewell.”

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Jon:

It takes a while for him to get over the shock and fear of being so high up. His body is unused to this state, after all. And though he tries to tell himself that he’s safe, his nerves don’t obey his mind. It’s like the first few times he rode the elevator to the top of the Wall, and the first time he stood at its edge. Only now, there’s nothing solid for him to hold onto, nothing firm beneath his feet, and he moves in all directions.

He’s not used to being so dependent upon living things, especially living things he barely knows. The wind whips his face. The thing he rides burns with an unnatural heat. He clings to the body in front of him to the point that it embarrasses him.

He gets the feeling Daenerys is unused to passengers. She says little, keeping her eyes forward, but she often squirms under his fingers.

When Jon finally does start getting used to it, he almost regrets it. Thinking straight is unpleasant at the moment.

The only solace he finds from his dark thoughts and nerves are the breathtaking views. The land below him becomes a dazzling collage of greens, browns, and whites. The sun is bigger than he’s ever seen it. The world is small, and he is above it.

When he thinks of it that way, he starts to feel the thrill of it. But it’s temporary. Everything he loves is on that small world. Some might delight in touching the clouds, but Jon has done that before. The clouds and sky have no love, no loyalty, no concern. It’s just mist and emptiness.

Men were not meant to fly, he remembers one of the Free Folk wargs telling him. Daenerys is no man, but he is. She was raised to think herself a dragon. He was not.

It’s hours before Daenerys glances over her shoulder. “Time to touch down and eat.” She points ahead of them, to a vague outline of blue and grey in the distance. “There.”

He nods, eager for it.

“Brace yourself,” she tells him, “We’re about to descend.”

Jon’s instinct is to shut his eyes, but he knows he can’t. He’ll be doing this again and again. He must force himself to face it. The sooner he got used to it, the better. The world depended on him. So he stares determinedly, watching as the world gets closer, and bigger.

When they get low enough, Jon recognizes their stop: Two identical keeps on either side of a vast river, connected by a bridge large enough to accommodate an army.

“The Twins!” He says, amazed. “We’ve made it all the way to The Twins?!”

Daenerys doesn’t respond. She steers Viserion to a place beside the bridge, on the northern bank of the river. As nimbly as she seems to land, it’s still quite the jolt.

Once they’re still, Jon suddenly feels it. His stomach is utter chaos. He practically throws himself off of Viserion’s back, only to find his legs barely support him, as if he’s getting off of a ship for the first
time in years. He stumbles away, covering his mouth until he falls to his knees and retches.

When he finally finishes, he’s surprised to feel a gentle hand running up and down his back. Daenerys stands over him.

“Forgive me,” he says, wiping his mouth. Daenerys hands him a wineskin. The water is lukewarm, but it’s clean. He downs it gratefully, rinsing out his sour mouth. He starts feeling enough like himself for embarrassment to rise. How pitiful he must seem. He can’t imagine how Daenerys must see him. Perhaps something akin to Jon’s first impression of Sam. “I’ve shamed myself.”

“Not at all,” she assures him, “The first time I actually rode was Drogon. I was in a fighting pit, surrounded by enemies, when he swooped down. I didn’t think. I just hurried onto his back and we took off. All three of them had been big enough to carry me for a while by that point, but I’d never actually ridden them before. Well, Drogon lifted me up and I’ll admit, it was thrilling at first. Probably because I was petrified even before I got on. Then we finally landed, and it was an entirely different story. Have you shit yourself as well?”

Jon looks at her, revolted. “Absolutely not!”

She smiles. “Well, then, you’ve fared better than I did. As soon as I touched ground, I was ejecting from both ends. Granted, I didn’t have a saddle, nor did I have a steady ride. I’d never ridden before, and there was no one to guide him. I was flying blind.”

Somehow, this relieves him more than anything. He actually grins. “You… You shit yourself?!”

It’s not just that she shit herself. It’s that she’s admitting it.

“I think of it more like my bowels declared war on me, but yes. Keep in mind, I’d been a beggar as a child. I often had to resort to eating rotted fish. But never had I experienced anything like that before. My only mercy was that Drogon landed near a pond and I managed to get my britches off and wash myself off before the Dothraki found me. You’re not to tell a soul, by the way.”

Jon looks at her, and, for perhaps the first time, actually sees a real person. He bursts out laughing. To his surprise, she joins him.

“Now I’m just happy my wife insisted I pack spare trousers,” he says. “But I swear it. No one knows.”

“Not even your wife?”

“Why would I tell her?”

“You tell her everything.”

“Almost everything. She doesn’t ask me to compromise my honor or betray anyone’s confidence, aside from extreme circumstances. I can hardly imagine any circumstance that would require her to know this. You don’t wish for me to tell anyone, and I won’t.” He snorts. “Why would you think otherwise.”

Daenerys bites her lip briefly. “The two of you seem… formed to one another, almost. You finish each other’s thoughts. You’re rarely apart. Parting at all seemed excruciating for you two. It’s no secret that you two won your kingdom together. You certainly rule it together. Your heads always seem to be together. I loved my husband, Drogo, but we didn’t work like that. I’ve never seen you two argue, either. Drogo and I argued sometimes. And you don’t seem to have any… separate people. Drogo had his bloodriders and kos, I had my handmaids. You two… She has maids, yes,
but you spend more time with her. You seem to share the company of your advisors--- and I know you are both monarchs, but I’d think that there’d be councilors she prefers, and ones you prefer. But no.”

Jon takes a deep breath. He knows what Daenerys is getting at. He’s had similar conversations with people before. People with assumptions. Jon merely can’t tell if Daenerys was making the same ones, or simply fishing for information.

“Our positions have much to do with that. But also, we fought a war together. We were raised together. We were all separated from our family, betrayed by those around us, and found one another first. And while I know it’s common for lord husbands and lady wives to live rather separately, we were raised by Ned Stark. He and his Lady Wife set a very different example. And I was done living a separate life from family, bearing burdens alone after my supposed ‘brothers’ stabbed me. Sansa felt the same for years. There simply isn’t much that separates us. We have the same background, same home, same memories, same principles, same goals. We love the same people and care about the same things. And even our differences work together. Besides, it’s not like we always had our pick of who to trust. We reunited at a stage in our lives when pickings were slim and we’d been through things that made us hardened against trusting many.”

“I know what that’s like.”

“Of course you do,” he answers, running a hand through his hair, “Plenty of people these days know. Especially those in our position. Though, one of the upsides of having men who define themselves by not kneeling is that they aren’t afraid to tell you the truth.”

Daenerys glances at the ground. “Too bad the South has no wildlings.”

Jon clears his throat. “If you’re thinking my wife commands me though, you’re wrong.”

She looks up again, startled. “What?”

“People assume that I’m purely Sansa’s creature,” he explains, “They see that she has a place at the table, that she commands it as much as I do, they see me declaring her my true equal. And they assume it’s domination. People here take issue with the idea of people being partners, particularly rulers, and very particularly when one partner is male and the other is female. Because what man could or would ever share power with a woman unless he were somehow possessed by her? I must be manipulated, it can’t possibly be that I consider her fit to share the burden with me and value her talents. It’s true I need her, but she needs me as well. And as for seeing us argue… We do. We just do it privately. We don’t think doing so in public is productive or appropriate.”

“Presenting the ever-united front.”

“To be fair, it’s not so difficult with someone you have so much in common with. At the end of the day, we want the same things.”

Daenerys clears her throat and looks wistfully out at the lake. “If that’s the case, then why have we had such difficulty getting along?”

Jon frowns. “You were deliberately acting like a madwoman, for one. And for another, do we want the same things? I’m not sure.”

“I want a peaceful, stable, safe Westeros. I want justice and security for the people here. I want our great enemy defeated. I want my family to have a future. And I want to maintain a stable balance of power so that the world doesn’t descend back into chaos the moment we’ve fixed something.”
Jon looks into her eyes, trying to detect a hint of insincerity. “Is that always what you wanted?”

“Does it matter? It’s what I want now.”

“Maybe it does matter. Method matters just as much, I suppose. And method is based on one’s motivations.”

Daenerys takes a deep breath. “True.” She starts looking around. “I know we’ve gotten further North. But I have to admit, I’m not sure exactly where we are. Do you—–”

“---The Twins,” Jon says, “Former home to House Frey.”

Daenerys’s face goes white, and she looks up at the towering keeps and bridge with wide eyes. “So this is where—–?”

“---This is the site of the Red Wedding, yes.”

He’d been here before, when the court was traveling to the parlay. After the Riverlands were secure, they’d ceded the Crossing to House Whent, the former owners of Harrenhal. The new lord, Garren, son of Lady Shella, is a good and gracious man. Yet, when the royal retinue stopped here for the night, neither the king nor queen could stand to sleep within the walls that killed Robb, Lady Catelyn, and so many others. They’d kipped in a tent instead. Lord Garren even held a banquet on the campgrounds instead of in the castle’s hall.

Daenerys swallows. “We can move on a bit, if you wish.”

“It’s fine.” Jon walks back over to Viserion to extract some food and supplies from the saddlebag. He takes a long drag from his wineskin and gnaws on some salted pork strips.

The dragon queen watches him for a while before moving to retrieve her own foodstuffs. She sits on the ground, leaning back against the dragon’s side, legs extended.

“When I first entered the throne room,” she says, gazing at the sky, “I was more nervous than I expected. As much as I’d yearned for this moment, I couldn’t forget that this was the place where my father was slain. Where the usurper was presented with the corpses of my brother’s children. I had a similar reaction to Dragonstone. It’s where my mother died birthing me. I know my father was a tyrant and a lunatic and a murderer, but if anything, that makes things even more confused.”

Jon freezes. He certainly did not expect this level of openness from his aunt. Despite her passionate nature, she also always seemed guarded.

“If it makes you feel any better, I have no idea what to think of my own father. I grew up thinking him a kidnapper and a raper. A monster. I have no idea if that’s the truth or not. He did some awful things, but…”

Daenerys glances at him. “Ser Barristan told me stories of Rhaegar. He used to go out in the streets with his harp, and sing and play for the crowds. He’d take all the coin he received and hand it out to beggars or spend it all on a night in a tavern. I heard other stories. He was honorable and noble in battle. He loved to read and loved music. He actually hated to fight, but felt obligated to become great at it. But—–”

“---His dislike of violence wasn’t enough to stop him from sparking an enormous war or keeping his father from murdering innocents. It was only enough to keep him from protecting his own wife and children, but not enough to keep him from abandoning them to go to battle.” Jon frowns. He clenches and unclenches his burned hand.
His aunt swallows heavily. “Ser Barristan said that Rhaegar truly loved your mother.”

“My mother was only fifteen when he took her, willing or not. He took her from her family, from all manner of protection she might have if she changed her mind or defied him. He didn’t love her enough to protect her loved ones from his father. Or honor her family, or so much as assure them that she was safe or willing. He loved her enough to keep her hidden away in a tower, far from friends or family or any means of support. He left her, pregnant, to take arms against her brother, a brother fighting for her, and for the brother and father who were murdered. All while already having a wife and children, whom he didn’t love enough to protect or honor. Maybe Rhaegar thought he loved my mother. Maybe she thought she loved him. Maybe she wanted to go with him. But she was practically a child, and once she was with him, she was under his power completely. By Rhaegar’s orders, Ned Stark would have been cut down by Arthur Dayne and the rest of his guards, and my mother would have died from childbirth alone, her brother’s corpse just outside her door.”

Jon puts away the rest of his food, no longer hungry. Actually somewhat eager for flight. For the distraction.

The queen is silent for a while. “Gods… How did you not strike me when I tried to---”

“---Wouldn’t have been worth it. Especially since words would suffice,” Jon snaps, “And it’s not as if I forgot that Viserion was there. Hitting you would not have been worth it.”

“So it’s not just because I’m a woman?”


“Really?”

“Granted, it was after I’d already beaten him bloody. But he was still alive, and his skull was still intact. My aim was to rectify that. But then Sansa called out to me, I saw the look in her eyes, and I stopped and had him dragged to the dungeon. His life belonged to her, not me.”

“Given how she ended up disposing of him, ultimately, he suffered a worse fate, though.”

Jon shrugs. “There were many times I also restrained myself with the likes of Janos Slynt, who was instrumental in Ned Stark’s murder, and Alliser Thorne, who made my life and the lives of many around me utter Hell. Once, during my earliest days in The Watch, the man provoked me. And I was almost executed for attacking a superior. The Lord Commander spoke with me instead, and after that, I did not assault him, regardless of what he said to me. He eventually masterminded my murder. I hung him in full view of the court of Castle Black.”

He looks back at the towering structure of the Twins. *Why am I alive, when Robb isn’t?* He grits his teeth. *The Frey’s weren’t content with their massacre. They took Robb’s body, decapitated it, sewed Grey Wind’s head to his neck, then paraded it through the streets. They stripped Catelyn Stark’s body naked and threw it into the Trident. They slaughtered every Stark and Tully man they could get their hands on, save for the ones they took as hostages. Men starved and suffered.*

“I think I would like to take off now, actually,” Jon says.

Daenerys begins to rise. “Really?”

“Yes. Eventually, someone in the castle will spot Viserion. A welcome and scouting party will be
sent out, and we’ll have to pay our respects. It could prove a great delay.”

“Of course. When we take off, though, I want you to put your arms and legs against mine and move with me, alright?”

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is interested in beta-ing, please contact me on tumblr at wendynerdwrites.tumblr.com!
Daenerys and Jon travel to and reach Castle Black and bond on the way. The first battle ensues. Daenerys makes a revelation. Sansa comes home.

Daenerys:

At a certain point, it’s no question that her long-lost nephew is a quick learner. And thank the gods for it.

Nothing could have prepared her for the cold winter winds. This... unbelievable state. Her world for weeks is nothing but an expanse of white, everything blanketed with snow. Snow swirling around them. Winds so strong it makes Viserion lose control sometimes.

When the flurries grow strong enough that she can no longer make out the exact position of the sun, they land. Daenerys takes out a map and declares they must be close.

But her nephew corrects her, pointing out a nearby landmark that he identifies as “Hornwood”. They’re only about halfway there.

Daenerys had read of the horrors of winter, but this was beyond her most wild imaginations. And they weren’t even close to The Wall, yet.

Viserion has to fight the winds, straining himself to an unimaginable extent. He exhausts himself after a few hours at a time when there’s a blizzard, which is half the time. At one point they touch down on a snowbank so high that they’re buried in it, and have to wait for the dragon’s heat to melt the snow around them to move.

It’s not just Viserion whose movement is affected. Daenerys begins losing feeling in her hands and feet. At one point, they are forced to stop at a castle called Cerwyn. The young lord gifts them with new furs, enough to make it hard to move at all. By the time she’s covered enough to keep a semblance of warmth, she’s practically spherical.

But even that isn’t enough to keep her going forever. She’s used to the blazing heat of the Southeast. She’s a creature of fire, not ice.

She asks him if he wishes to stop at Winterfell, but he declines. “If we stop there, we’ll end up
staying too long.”

Jon is a great source of tricks to keep warm, given his year in the Watch. He teaches them to her just as she teaches him to ride.

He masters it just in time, for Daenerys wakes up one day to find that she cannot move her hands and feet at all. Jon inspects them, says she doesn’t have frostbite, and that is a miracle. But that she has to spend the rest of the day constantly warming and trying to move, not carefully controlling them.

He takes the reins from a place called “Shadowmoor” to Castle Black.

When they finally land at their destination, Daenerys almost wants to cry. The journey took them three weeks. Only to land… here.

Castle Black, the headquarters for the legendary, --centuries-old-- Night’s Watch. The heart of the great Wall, is practically a shack. Daenerys had seen so-called “manses” in Vaes Dothrak that were more impressive than this tiny, dilapidated, gloomy excuse for a castle. One tower is thin and crumbling, while another leans so much it looks like it will fall at any second.

Even as a crowd of men rush out the gates to cheer and greet them, her heart sinks. Fear cuts her as deeply as the frigid temperature. *How can we possibly face down a group of bandits, let alone an army of monsters, with a holdfast like this?*

Then Jon leans over and points out a long, thin structure that stretches from the ground into the clouds, identifying it as the “winch elevator.” Daenerys suddenly notices the shimmering surface around it. What she’d taken as a mere continuation of seemingly endless, snowy horizon she’d been staring at for weeks is, in fact, the famous, immense Wall. *Oh, that’s how.*

Once she sees the Wall, she can’t look away. It stretches unendingly--- into the sky and across the land. It shimmers, white, silver, and blue in the sunlight. Not even Harrenhal compares to this expanse. It’s as beautiful as it is terrifying. Even as she is helped off of Viserion’s back, she can’t stop staring. Jon has to shout at her to get her attention and introduce her to Lord Commander Tollet, a middle-aged mad with dark eyes and a cynical demeanor.

“Chambers in the King’s Tower have been prepared for each of you, Your Graces,” The Lord Commander informs them. “We recruited some spearwives from The Gift to attend to you, Queen Daenerys. King Jon, you’ll be attended by Satin over here.”

He ushers forward a nervous-looking young man with glossy hair.

“That’s tougher and more useful than he looks,” Tollett assures Jon, “Only three days ago, he helped slay one of the enemy’s scouts!”

Jon’s eyes widen. “But a scout would have had to have been---”

“A Walker, aye.”

Daenerys’s heart skips a beat. “They’re already here?”

“A few have gotten close. Scouting parties, mostly. The army looks to still be about a week away.”

Jon’s lips purse. “How many rangers are deployed?”

“Three score.”
“That many?!”

“Men started arriving weeks ago. Hundreds sailed into Eastwatch. Some marched in from the Hills, The Gift, and Last Hearth within days of the army being spotted. It took a week for forces from Winterfell to start arriving. Some even came by the Sunset Sea. The Free Folk built a smallport on the Western shore of The Gift. Shipments of supplies have also been coming in regularly since you took Winterfell. We’re not nearly where we need to be, but we’re far-far better off than we were when you left.” The Lord Commander clears his throat. “But enough for now. You must be exhausted. The rooms should be ready for you, and we’ll be able to meet properly at Your Graces’ earliest convenience.”

“Any messages for us?”

“None have arrived yet. Ravens are slower now. Certainly slower than dragons.”

They adjourn to their quarters, and Daenerys is impressed to discover a roaring fire and even a steaming bath waiting for her, along with three fur-clad women of varying ages. They don’t curtsy to her, but the eldest, a woman with missing teeth, smiles. “Welcome, Daenerys, to the Crows’ Castle.”

“Where?” She hadn’t heard that before.

“Caste Black. We call the ‘Watch’ crows.”

“I see. Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, ah—–”

“Nyra, Dazelle, and Winnie.”

“And you’re wildlings?”

“Free Folk,” Nyra insists.

“Right.”

As irreverent as her new attendants are, they prove to be good workers. Daenerys almost weeps with relief at the hot bath, and she finds the bed similarly cozy, the mattress heated with coals. The rooms are not grand by any means— unadorned oak furniture clearly made to accommodate a man, and black wool draperies--- but they’re clean enough. Daenerys passes out almost the moment her body touches the linens.

When she wakes, she’s informed that a day has passed. She panics at first, demanding to know if Jon has risen yet. She is not content to be excluded from any of the meetings he takes with the Lord Commander. But the spearwives assure her that though King Jon woke hours earlier, he has only dined in his chambers and visited the top of the Wall since.

“He said they wouldn’t start their sessions until you were ready. Though King Jon did want you woken within the next four hours.”

Daenerys sits up. “Well then, let’s not waste anymore time.”

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Jon:

In the dead of night, Satin pounds on the door and charges into the room. They’re here.

Jon has been sleeping in most of his clothes since they arrived, so getting dressed takes half the time.
While he mostly prefers to dress himself, he’s grateful for Satin’s help this time. Chain mail doublet. Plate gauntlets. Leather trousers and boots. White Surcoat with crowned embroidery in glittering silver across his chest and back, by his wife’s hand. Cloak, by the same woman. Fur-lined hat beneath a plate helmet. Leather gloves lined with rabbits’ fur. Longclaw sheathed and sharpened. A collection of dirks. A quiver of fresh arrows and a longbow strapped to his back. A shield of the finest Northern Ironwood--- as sturdy as any metal, with far less weight--- engraved with his royal sigil, is strapped to his left hip.

I shall not die today, or tomorrow, he tells himself as he ventures from his quarters, Satin by his side, to the courtyard balcony. Men rush around---- Brothers in black, soldiers sent from vassals, Wildling men.

Edd waits at the balcony, fully armed, Daenerys beside him. He’s in his blacks. She’s in leathers and furs with only accents of plate at her wrists, her head, and her middle. She has spurs, water, and a bag. Her only weapon is an odd, curved blade.

“Your Grace, I fear you are under-equipped!” Jon says at once, nonplussed. He’d assumed Daenerys had packed adequate equipment and weapons. If not, that could and would be a problem. It wasn’t as if The Watch stocked much armor that would fit her. “Where are your blades, where is your armor?”

“I have my Arakh,” she replies, tapping the hilt of the strange weapon, “A Dothraki sword. It’s faster, lighter, made for a mounted warrior than a western blade. And I have my leathers. The less weight Viserion has to carry, the better.”

“But what of the cold? What of protection?” Daenerys had only just started getting used to the weather.

“Everything I do should happen at a range. I’m going to be atop Viserion’s back, flying high above our enemies, attacking with fire. I’m not much of a melee fighter. I’m here to ride dragons and burn our enemy to the ground.”

Jon swallows. “Are you sure?”

“I am.”

He knows this tone well enough at this point to know not to argue with her. He looks at Edd. “How many? Where are they coming from?”

“The Northeast, and it doesn’t appear to be the full army,” Edd says, motioning for the winch to be opened. The four of them step in and begin to rise. “The men have spotted about five hundred wights, some of them mounted on dead mammoths.”

“Any Walkers?” More dragonglass arrives at Castle Black every day. They were made into daggers, forged to edges of swords, shaped into arrowheads. But there’s still a very finite supply of them. Most were shipped in from Dragonstone, which had only started sending the substance since the treaty was signed. As for the steel… Well, it was rarer than ever. Word was sent to every House in Westeros and beyond to either lend their blades, or to come to The Wall themselves and wield them. Any and all other pieces of the precious metal (such as jewelry, or decoration) was ordered to be melted down and delivered.

New Valyrian Steel hasn’t been produced since the Doom. The secrets to its creation were lost along with the dragonlords’ city.
“Only a few, they say. No more that ten commanding the corpses.” Edd clears his throat. “I’ve already given orders for barrels of pitch to be thrown, for the catapults to be armed. Flaming arrows are being shot. But they’re almost to the base of the Wall.”

“How many men at the gates?”

“A thousand. Seven hundred foot soldiers, three hundred cavalry. All of them armed and trained with bows and dragonglass.”

Jon begins tapping his foot, mentally shouting for this stupid winch to go faster.

“Viserion is saddled and ready to come to me when I call,” Daenerys informs him.

Jon nods and bites his lip. Only five hundred wights and a handful of walkers? Jon has seen for himself the kind of numbers the Night’s King commands. Even for an initial force, it’s scant. But this was no scouting or raiding force, either.

“Are the Walkers at the front or the rear?” He asks.

“The rear.”

The King of Winter swears.

“I don’t think they intend to breach the Wall today,” Jon says, “This is not a battle they expect to win.”

“Then why---?”

“They’re not here to defeat us, they’re here to see what we have. To test our defenses to prepare the true army.” Jon grits his teeth. “They want to draw us out to show our hand, then they’ll retreat. The Walkers are at the rear because they intend for at least one of them to retreat and report.”

Jon looks at Daenerys. “I want Viserion in the air as little as possible.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Summon him at once, then fly him to the rear. Focus and aim only at the Walkers. Don’t even look at the wights if you can help it. Let none of them get away. Burn them as quickly and thoroughly as possible, Scout the surrounding land, especially in the direction of the Northeast, and end any Walker scouts, then return here. I don’t want anything to get back to the Night’s King, especially about Viserion. Fly high, above the clouds.”

The winch finally reaches the top and Jon hurries them out. “Summon him now and do it! Go!”

She shuts her eyes and raises her arm. A minute later, the cream-and-gold dragon appears, flying from a southern field, and lowers himself to hover at the edge of the Wall. Daenerys grabs the ridges of his snout, and Viserion lifts her, turning his long neck to drop her onto his back. Daenerys straps herself to the saddle, bellows some orders in High Valyrian, and the immense beast flies up and away, quick as a shot.

It leaves the men atop the Wall gaping.

“What are you doing?!” Edd barks, “We have a battle to fight, you dumb shits! To arms!”

The men jump back to their work, their commanders resuming orders. Jon scans the forces, then the landscape.
There they are. It’s a full moon, and most of the snow glitters in the moonlight. But a great chunk of it is darkened, interspersed by tiny, blue lights, moving, coming towards them, appearing as a creeping blemish. At the very rear of the scourge are ten larger blue, glowing shapes which almost appear to be floating.

Directly beneath them are the men promised, interspersed by burning pyres.

“We’re going to need nearly everyone who can fire a bow. As many as we can fit up here, and at least three hundred more on each side of the Wall. I want nonstop fire. Do not light the fire trench until Daenerys has killed the ten walkers and the wights are within a few yards of the trench itself. Everyone else is to be brewing pitch, preparing the trench, handing off weapons, preparing to be called, and throwing bodies to the flames.” Jon hesitate, and cringes. “I also want word put out that anyone who balks at burning one of our dead shall be thrown on the pyre himself.”

Edd gapes. “But Your Grace—–”

“---Every corpse on our side becomes an enemy if they are not burnt. If we let that happen, the enemy shall have invaded our own ranks. We take no chances. They burn, or we do.”

Edd swallows. “Of course.”

“I’ll take eastern half up here,” Jon says. He glances at his squire, who shakes. “Lad, are you up to charging back and forth, keeping the Lord Commander and I in contact?”

“Aye, Your Grace. But… I have pissed m’self, Sire. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care. Flood the ramparts if you wish, as long as you keep moving.”


“King Jon.”

Jon takes off for the Eastern post. His second-in-command turns out to be one of the Liddles, a burly mountain clansmen who greets Jon with a half-hearted nod, grunt of, “Yer Grace,” all while keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the enemy.

Just what Jon needs.

He orders a small section of the weaker shots under his command to go and fetch more pitch and arrows. He shouts directions on aim.

The black blemish draws nearer. Jon shakes.

Damn it, where is--- Finally, they see an enormous jet of orange flame in the distance, showering down upon the Walker furthest to their right. Striking from the East. Perfect.

Jon sighs, reassured, and takes up a bow himself, shouldering himself to the edge.

Still, he’s nervous. Where is---?

As if she can hear his very thoughts, a massive torrent of flame showers down on one of the Walkers in the distance. The one furthest to Jon’s right. Daenerys was striking from East to West. Perfect.

I am not dying today or tomorrow. He knows this. I am going home. He hopes this.

Not that they go down easy, though most things do go, if not as planned, then close to as intended,
albeit with some mishaps here and there.

The fire trench, a long, snaking pit they’d dug a hundred and fifty yards out, filled with wood and pitch with connected wooden pillars rising out, was lit as the wights neared, creating an almost instant wall of flame. The front lines of the monsters tried to stop in time, but the forces behind them did not. Many wights were pushed in by the marchers behind them, and the ones that weren’t stumbled, trampled, and halted.

Unfortunately, the blaze wasn’t easy to control, and a number of men were wounded, even killed by the flame wall. One man ran after catching fire, burning people and areas around him. Jon would later learn that four men and one well-disguised woman perished from their own pyres, and that four more were badly wounded.

The trench was Sansa’s idea. She’d been jointly inspired by the stories of Mance Rayder’s siege on the Wall and her own experiences at Blackwater. They’d begun building it months ago.

It still wasn’t a bad one. Fifteen wights were destroyed for every one of theirs who were hurt. But they clearly needed to learn to handle it better.

All the enemy forces that were not killed by the Wall were slowed down, giving the Wall bowmen and Daenerys more time to pick away at their numbers.

By the time that the wights managed to breach the trench, Daenerys was flying Viserion back to The Wall.

Jon runs to the winch and makes for the ground at this point. When he gets to the elevator, Daenerys and Viserion are hovering there.

“Viserion and I are not finished. The Walkers are gone, we’re going for the wights.”

“You could harm our men!”

“Our men are just as likely to be hurt by facing the wights head on. Go tell them to retreat and take cover.”

She takes off before Jon can say another word.

But she turns out to have the right instincts, waiting for the right commands and requests to be issued before swooping down on their enemy and setting them ablaze.

It finishes the enemy quickly, but does cause damage. The trench is lit further, and the dragon fire proves hit and close enough to not only case a section of the Wall to melt, but literally roast some of the closer men who took cover beneath metal shields. Pieces from the melted section of the wall broke off and crushed soldiers. Some men atop the wall fell to their deaths.

Combining that with the number of men who perished in melee combat before Daenerys swept down, their casualties were a total of thirty-seven, with two dozen wounded.

Their attackers, in full, were wiped out by mid-day. The fires were all quelled before dusk.

Thirty-seven is a relatively low number, considering. And every body was burned. Especially compared to five hundred wights and ten white walkers.

Every death was a tragedy, and Jon wishes he could spend time acknowledging that. But the damage to The Wall was the most pressing concern. So many more could die, they all could, if it wasn’t fixed
Daenerys is surprisingly shaken after the battle. Jon, shaken himself, does try to comfort her, albeit awkwardly.

“You… You did… You were effective.” You also melted part of our Wall. But he pats her on the shoulder. Reprimands for that can come later. Jon can’t help but wonder about Daenerys’s battle experience. He knows she has plenty of it. Perhaps she merely needs to talk.

If she does, she gives no sign. Instead, she takes to the air, telling them that she’ll be back by midnight.

Viserion is spotted landing by then. Jon rides out to meet her and Viserion in a vacant, partially-scorched field a few miles south of The Wall.

Daenerys had been sitting beside by her dragon, face buried between raised knees.

When she looks up, though, Jon stops dead. Her violet eyes are stricken with fear.

“Jon, I… I flew north. I found another enemy camp.”

He gapes, unable to stifle his shock. “What?!” She was only supposed to go South! Seven Hells, has she exposed herself already?!

Daenerys stares off into the distance. “After we won, I just… I don’t know. Their eyes, Jon. Those horrible eyes! And their bodies! The cold! I couldn’t… I couldn’t stop. I had to keep flying. I felt— I knew— that if I headed South, I wouldn’t stop, and I’d never come back.”

"They didn't see you---?"

"No." She says curtly. "I flew high. There was no sign that they knew I was there."

He takes a deep breath. His sympathy is truly with her, but she’d seen the enemy. Jon kneels down beside her and lays a hand on her shoulder. He’s seen this before, too many times. The best thing to do was talk to them, listen.

“I… When you found them, did you engage them?”

She shakes her head. “No. Though if that’s because of sense or cowardice, I am not sure. But they’re about another moon’s turn away. And their army is…” she trembles, and her voice becomes a whisper. “We were… We were flying so high, Jon. Higher than we’ve ever flown. And yet, everywhere I looked below, they were there. Stretching from horizon to horizon… over mountains and hills. I shouldn’t have been able to see them at all from that height. But those eyes… those tiny, glowing, blue lights…”

All of a sudden, she’s yanking at his collar, pulling him so his eyes are staring into hers, huge and all-encompassing at this distance. “Jon, this was nothing. Nothing. What we fought tonight is a drop in a pail.”

Jon swallows, resisting his instincts to knock her hand away and jump to his feet... “I see.”

“Hundreds of thousands, easily.” She releases him and throws her head back.

Jon opens his wineskin and hands it to her. She empties it.

He sighs. “I feared as much.”
She doesn’t even bother wiping her mouth before looking at him in shock. “Feared? As in, suspected? You fathomed this?”

“Their armies are built from every person who has died and was never burnt. Going back… Who knows how long. I saw the Night’s King raise hundreds of dead by merely moving his arms. They’ve been back for a while now, years at least. Craster sacrificed generations of sons to them, so probably decades.”

“How have you not given up?”

Jon looks at the ground. Daenerys is now past speaking, she’s questioning, and concerned. She wants comfort and distraction. He’s almost afraid to share too much with her. But she needs this, and he needs her.

“I almost did. I almost ran away, from the Wall, to the South, to the furthest, hottest place I could find. I wanted to. I was determined to, in fact. After I was raised, I made up my mind. Let the other’s handle it, if they could. They’d earned the burden. If they couldn’t, well, at least I’d get to live in warmth and comfort for a while instead of dying in this wasteland. I felt I’d earned it. I’d worked so hard, and in return, I was stabbed by my own Brothers. I died for the Watch already. And I didn’t see how or why I would make much of a difference, anyways. We were all probably doomed regardless. I’d been killed by a boy of twelve name days. If we were all going to die, I’d get some happiness and safety before perishing.”

“What changed your mind?”

Jon takes a deep breath. He’s been here before. He’s been on both sides of this conversation. And he knows that if this woman is to go on, she needs sincerity. Part of him wonders if he may need this as much as she does. “I suppose I could say it was one thing, but it wasn’t. It was a series of things. I intended to run and find someplace warm. And, in fact, I did find warmth.”

“But I thought—”

“—It ended up coming to me,” he responds, leaning back against the dragon’s flank. He wonders if she knows what he means. Perhaps, if she’s ever felt this way. It strikes Jon that he knows far more about this woman’s achievements, political motives, and war record than he does of her personal life. She’s spoken of Drogo on their travels, that she loved him. Perhaps she does know.

“…Oh.” She does.

Jon nods, thinking back on that day. What would have happened if he’d left Castle Black just a little earlier? A day? Or even an hour? But he realizes he doesn’t want to think about that. So he focuses on what did occur.

“I was literally packing my things, when word came that the gates were being opened. I went out into the courtyard, not really expecting anything. Then she rode in,” he looks off into the distance. He can see her, more or less, as if it were happening here, now. “At first I couldn’t believe it. I never thought I’d see any of them— the Starks— again. Last I’d heard about Sansa, she’d been taken by the Boltons. I was certain they’d killed her, just like they killed Robb. And even if she were alive… I never expected anything like that. The Sansa I knew was a little girl who couldn’t stand it if she so much as got a smudge of dirt on the hem of her dress. But she arrived grown and… for lack of a better way of saying it, a mess. I’d seen rangers returning from months beyond the Wall who’d looked more put-together. Chapped skin, rings about her eyes so deep and dark it looked like someone had blackened them, hair everywhere, clothing ragged, shaking, so, so thin…. And certainly not dressed right. Sansa, who always looked like a princess. Just one thin, ragged, threadbare cloak
"...And you knew then," Daenerys says this softly, clearly engaged. Her breathing has slowed. She’s calmer. He doesn’t need to ask what she means by that question.

"...No, actually. I knew it was her, and when she’d dismounted and I made it to the ground, and I was sure I could hold her without breaking her, I ran, and I scooped her up. And despite how obviously cold she was, I felt warm, truly warm, even safe, for the first time in years."

"Then you knew."

"No." Jon wishes that she’d stop saying that. It’s starting to get awkward. It might seem anti-climactic and unromantic, and he doubts that it paints what he has in the best light. But it’s the truth. His story, especially this part of it, may be combined with what he shares with his wife, but it’s not so simple. This is something that was built, brick by brick. It wasn’t sudden. It’s 'not like the songs’, as Sansa has said. In the songs, he'd have realized he was in love with her the moment he saw her again, and immediately swear to fight for her, for Winterfell, for the North and all the realms of men. Seven Hells, they still thought themselves siblings at the time. That’s why she came to him in the first place. And she had no idea about the Others at the time. Jon just wanted to get them both away from everything. They’d suffered enough, given enough, as far as he was concerned. Both of them. They deserved to flee. “I brought her into the castle, got her some warm clothes, food, a bath, a bed. We sat by the fire with some ale. We shared some memories for a while. Then we told one another what had happened to us. I told her what I had seen, what had been done to me. She told me what the Lannisters, Baelish, her Aunt Lysa, and, worst of all, The Boltons had done to her.”

"Drogo did something similar, when we were together. After Viserys died, he didn’t have any interest in his son crossing the poison sea to sit on some 'Iron Chair', as he put it. His son would be a great Khal. We were in love by then. " Daenerys leans back. "Our relationship... It didn’t start romantically, you know. I was sold to him by my brother. He was rough with me. I was scared and miserable. But I learned to adapt, to communicate. I started to see Viserys for the pathetic retch he was, unworthy to take the Iron Throne even if he could. So I started wanting it for myself, for my son. When Viserys died, Drogo saw no point in fighting. But I wanted it. Still, it wasn't until an attempt was made on my life that he swore he'd take Westeros for me. Vengeance is a powerful motivator.” She sounds more understanding now, but she still doesn’t get it.

Jon shakes his head again. “Not powerful enough for me. The only thing that changed about my plans was that I now intended to take her with me. She asked me where I intended to go, I told her I intended for us to flee together. I actually thought she’d be happy. I’d already started imagining it. We’d go to Dorne, or book passage to one of the Free Cities. We’d find somewhere pretty, warm, and safe to live. I’d find work, take care of her. We’d spend the rest of our days in the sun. I even started trying to remember what I knew of the Free Cities and figure out which one she might like best.

“But she wasn’t happy. Despite the fact that she’d just literally risked her skin to escape from there, her only goal was to go back to Winterfell. She insisted we take our home back, somehow. In her mind, it was the only thing to do. To me, it was the one thing we couldn’t do. The one place we couldn’t go. She insisted she’d find a way, do it with or without me.”

"That’s very bold of her," Daenerys remarks, "Until Drogo died, I wouldn’t have considered that."

"Well, before you ask, no. That didn’t change my mind in the least. I believed that she was still recovering from all she’d suffered, that she wasn’t thinking straight, that after a few days, she’d see
sense.”

She snorts. And Jon cannot help but nod when she does. It is funny, really.

“Days passed, and I found myself rather overcome. Far from ‘seeing sense’, she seemed to grow more determined. After every-thing. I couldn’t even be sure if she’d told me everything, but what she had divulged was so horrifying… And all she wanted now was to get her home back, the home she’d been violated and tortured in. Not just for herself, but for all of our family that still might be alive --- she still hoped they were--- For the North, the seat our family had governed for thousands of years. Despite how hurt she was, within and without, despite what she’d been through… She’d witnessed such horrors. She’d lived such horrors. She knew what awaited her. But that didn’t matter. None of it would keep her from her home. She wouldn’t give up. She wouldn’t give in to fear. And it wasn’t stupid, blind determination, either. She knew all too well what she faced, and she wasn’t planning to rush in. But she was determined to find a way, a smart way, to get what she wanted.”

Jon now looks to the sky. “I don’t think I’ve ever witnessed such courage and strength. I don’t think I ever will.” He takes a deep breath.

“Then we got a letter from her husband, informing us that he had Rickon, that he was Lord of the North now, threatening to slaughter everyone in the Gift and the whole Watch, make me watch as he fed Rickon to his hounds and had his entire army rape Sansa before having his dogs eat me alive. When I got that letter and reached the part of what he’d do to her, I stopped reading. She grabbed the paper from me, and read the rest aloud. And she was determined as ever. That got me to agree to rise against Ramsay and get Winterfell back...” Jon shakes his head. "But even then, my intention was to flee to the South the second Sansa was secured as Lady of Winterfell.

“The night before the battle, which we were certain to lose, Sansa told me that Rickon was as good as dead, that there was no way we’d save him from Ramsay. Then she told me that if we lost, she would not go back to Ramsay alive. She would kill herself before he got to her. I tried to argue, but she was certain. Then I went to Melisandre, the witch who had brought me back, and told her, quite simply, that if we lost, I would stay dead.”

Jon purses his lips for a moment. Daenerys hands him his wineskin, and he takes a long drink. “The next day, I watched as Sansa was proven correct and Ramsay murdered my brother right in front of me. I had broken ranks, ridden out into the open as fast as I could to save him, and it was no use. Before long, the small army I had was completely surrounded and overwhelmed. I was at the center of it, drowning in bodies, bloody, waiting to be cut down. And my thought was not of death, but of how I wouldn’t get to apologize to her, how badly I wanted to see her again. Winterfell and the rest of the world could get smashed to bits. But Sansa... In the back of my mind, I thought that maybe, somehow, I might get away, I might escape. And maybe, just maybe, I could get to her before she ended things, and we could flee. And I found myself actually pulling myself up over the crowd, trying to climb over everyone. I just wanted to see her again. Save her.”

Now, he snorts. “Of course, that was the moment I did see her again, on horseback, leading an army of knights that rode in and quickly dispatched Ramsay’s army. Saved us all. Won us the day. I had to watch another friend die, first. And then, after all that, I came face to face with the man. Not for the first time, of course. We’d parlayed before the battle. But at the parlay, he was still just threats. I didn’t really know him by that point. All I’d seen were taunts and abuse of animals. But after the battle, after Rickon died in my arms, I knew him. The man who had killed my brother, and my friends. Who had done... had done such hideous things to my sister. I started beating him, bare-fisted, only stopping when I heard her voice. I looked up. There she was, regal as a queen. I left him to her.”
There's a short period of silence. And Jon notices that neither of them are breathing.

“I realized then that I was in love with her. Madly, desperately. And, if anything, that made me even more determined to leave at the first chance I got. I was disgusted with myself. She was my sister. And she'd already been through so much. The way she looked at me... My heart just kept reforming, shattering, reforming, and shattering again. I had to leave. I had to. A raven came telling us winter was here. Then the lords all arrived. The lords who should have declared Sansa as their Lady or Queen or whatever they wished— their liege.” Jon clears his throat. “Then Little Lyanna Mormont had to look at me. And those fools just had to follow her lead, the lead of a girl of ten, and declare me king.”

Daenerys interrupts him again. “You’re not going to tell me that at that point, you still—”

“---I was scrambling, trying to find the quickest, easiest way I might abdicate to her, secure her place, and go,” Jon admits, "Indeed, the only thing that kept me from rejecting those calls for me to be king, I think, was that smile she gave me, and the thought of how I couldn't possibly leave her to fight this enemy alone. But every day I was falling more in love with her. Growing more dependent on her. And it terrified me. What if I reached a point where I couldn't control myself?" He shudders. "I don't mean physically. I'd never lay a hand on her. But emotionally? She'd just spent months upon months being raped. And, at the time, we had Petyr Baelish skulking around. A man who claimed to love her, who had secured the Knights of the Vale for her so we could win. The man who had sold her to the Boltons in the first place. He was obsessed with her mother. And obsessed with her. She was keeping him at arm's length, but keeping him around long enough to gather what she needed from him. The North was poor, ill-equipped, beaten. Winter had arrived and we had a terrifying enemy to face in the North, and enemies to the South. Sansa felt it was her duty to keep him hanging, you see, so she could gather as much evidence and influence, and as many resources as she could from him before destroying him. We needed his wealth, his connections, his secrets. Then there were the fawning lordlings who saw her as a pawn. She was always being pursued this way, seen as a piece of meat and a pawn. The object of constant lust and machinations. And I was her big brother! The only man she probably felt she could trust. The only one not to see her that way. And I was so afraid that one day, I'd not be able to control my emotions anymore. That I'd tell her the truth and she'd know. What that could do to her... I'd never forgive myself. So I tried to find a way to convince myself that Sansa could handle the enemy alone. I'd give her more preparation, if I had to. But surely, she could do this. After all, she'd won an entire battle with no prior training, just her wits. She'd restored our House when all thought it was dead. She'd stared down her raper. She was manipulating her enemies for the good of the North. And she was the one who deserved the crown anyways. Surely, it would be her, not me, who would be the savior Melisandre had spoken of. After all, Mel had thought Stannis was her Prince Who Was Promised before, and she was wrong. Maybe she's wrong again. That maybe I was just a means to an end, the end of getting the real savior to stop the White Walkers."

"You thought Sansa was Azor Ahai Reborn?" Daenerys, to her credit, doesn't laugh at this. If anything, she sounds interested.

Jon shakes his head. "Not exactly. I didn't believe in any of that. The prophecies or the sort. But I wanted to convince myself that it was fine to leave Sansa, leave the North, before I could hurt her. But then Arya returned. And Brandon returned. And I just... I finally knew it was no use. I was reminded more and more every day of all the things I could, and should be fighting for. And even if Sansa might be able to handle things on her own, she shouldn't have to. And I knew what I wanted to fight for. I gave up. I wasn't going to flee. If Sansa could stomach playing Littlefinger and face down Ramsay Bolton, I could live with repressing my feelings and save the people I loved. I decided that I would die saving the world, leave it to those I loved. I'd face the enemy again, and I would not let them win. I would not let them have my family.”
Jon runs his fingers through his hair, a bit winded. How had he told her so much? “You should know, that isn’t my plan anymore. I want very, very much to live through this. I am not going to die at my enemies’ hands. I am going to destroy them, then go home, live with my wife, raise our children, and rule our kingdom. I have everything to live for. And that’s how and why I'm still here. Why I haven't given up on us winning, and why I haven't given up on myself.”

They’re silent for a while. Jon continues to gaze at the stars, making out the constellations. The Archer. The Warrior. Garth’s green hand. He hears gasping. And after a few seconds, he realizes what it is and looks at his aunt, alarmed. Her shoulders shake and her face is in her hands.

Seven Hells. He thought he’d talked her down. “Are you---?”

“---You’re so lucky,” she snaps.

Jon pauses. No one has ever said that to him before. “How s--”

“Lucky you, with so much to live for!”

This is certainly a surprise. “What are you talking about? You have plenty to live for as well! You have three dragons and an entire empire! Millions across the world worship you! You’re---”

“---I’ve never had a real home,” Daenerys snaps, “You were raised in Winterfell, with a family who loved you, you returned to it, with a family who loves you. With a wife and a child coming. I spent my childhood going from city to city, begging on the streets. With a brother who was angry at the world and everything in it, but could only show his anger to me. And did. Often. Who would have let forty-thousand men and their horses rape me in order to get his crown. I was sold to Drogo, traveled with the Dothraki across Essos. And the moment I started building a new family, my husband and unborn child were taken from me. I went from Qarth to Astapor to Yunkai. I had my dragons, yes, but they eventually became dangerous. People close to me betrayed me, or died, or left. Or I had to leave them. My own people, even the very slaves I’ve freed began to hate me. And no matter how much I conquered, I still couldn’t find what I was looking for. I thought it was in Westeros, with the Iron Throne. But when I finally returned, I find that half of it wants nothing to do with me, and that it’s all about to be destroyed by ice-monsters anyways. I’ve become so powerful that those closest to me, the ones I rely on most, can no longer tell me the truth. I can’t trust them. I try to make them, but all of my efforts have resulted in my one remaining blood relative deciding that he loathes me.”

He gapes. His heart sinks. “Daenerys, I never loathed you, I disliked you, yes, but that’s changed---”

“---Even if you came to love me, what does it matter? You’re going back to Winterfell when this is over. I’ll go back to King’s Landing. Alone again. Forever.”

“That’s not true!” He insists, truly surprised to hear this. It seems mad. Yes, Daenerys had lost much, but her situation was far from hopeless. “Gods, Daenerys, you’re still so young! You’ve built an empire, you’re building an empire. You’ve restored the Targaryen line. You will have such an incredible legacy to leave to your future ch---”

“---Wrong. There are no future children, Jon. When I lost my son with Drogo, there was blood magic involved. Our son was not only stillborn, it was deformed. Expelling him was violent. It shredded my womb. I was cursed. I’ve been barren for years.”

Words fail him. “But…”

“It’s not just about children, Jon. It’s the fact that no matter how much I build, no matter what I do
for the rest of my life, it won’t matter. It’s all for nothing. I spent my whole life determined to restore House Targaryen. But it ends with me. I die, and with me, so does everything I’ve built. I have no one to leave it to. No way to continue my work after I’m gone. No one to inherit my legacy.” She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand. “When I’m gone, every part of my empire will probably break apart, fighting for the titles and power. Why shouldn’t they? War will probably break out, people will probably die. No heir to keep things together, to hold all claims. Oh, and then there is the little matter of my dragons. Who is going to control them? Keep people safe from them? Things are dangerous enough while I live. But once I’m dead? What shall be my true legacy, Jon, aside from chaos?”

Jon goes white. He feels like a mountain has just been dropped on his head.

The worst part is that he doesn’t have an answer for her. Not a real one. This has consequences. So many consequences. It throws everything, everything into question. It’s a crushing personal tragedy for Daenerys, yes. And he needs her in fit condition, both mentally and physically. But he has a responsibility to act. This could be a tragedy for millions. And Daenerys has kept it a secret.

There’s no time for blame, for anger, for accusations. None.

There’s only one thing he can think of, really. He rises. “I need to discuss this with the queen.”

Daenerys knows which queen he means. She looks up, clearly horrified. “No. You can’t. No one can—”

“—She needs to know, actually. Both of us should have known for a while. This matters. It directly affects us. She’s already carrying a Targaryen child. And she is the sovereign of over half the continent. This isn’t up for debate, Daenerys, I’m sorry.”

Slowly, Daenerys gets to her feet. “Yes. Of course,” she says, strengthening her voice. “I shall write to her as well. And I… There’s no time to waste. I must depart for King’s Landing as soon as possible. And I will need to visit Winterfell myself, speak with her. You’ve learned enough to handle Viserion on your own for a while.”

“I agree. Please see to those matters. Time to head back to Castle Black.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sansa:

Winter has come. And it knows the enemy is arriving with it. Desperately, locals try to clear the roads of the ice and snow, and it only becomes harder the further they go North. Sansa almost regrets not sailing, to spare them the labor of making room for her wheelhouse and retinue. But no, roads would have to be cleared regardless of how she traveled.

She’s often stuck in areas, and uses the time to write letters or visit the locals. She surrounds herself with people as much as possible, in fact. But she’s dreadfully lonely. Ghost is the only piece of her family with her.

Throughout the journey, she grows more ill, vomiting regularly, suffering almost blinding headaches. She doesn’t bundle herself up in furs so much as she drowns herself in them. It’s not just herself that she has to keep warm.

Winterfell takes over a month to reach, and Sansa’s not even passed the gates when she first sees her sister. Arya rides out to greet her about three miles from the castle.
The two sisters embrace, tears freezing to their cheeks in the frigid weather.

“I’m so happy you’re home,” Arya whispers.

“I’m so happy to be home.”

She means it, too. In fact, she can barely stand to let go of her sister. She’s missed her siblings so, so much. Especially after leaving Harrenhal.

Arya surprises her by hitching her grey mare to the wheelhouse and opting to ride beside her in the carriage the rest of the way to the castle. Her sister rattles off a catalogue of news, statistics, gossip, and updates.

“Letters from Jon are waiting for you in your quarters,” Arya tells her almost immediately, “And letters from Queen Daenerys. Lots of letters from all sorts of people, actually.”

Sansa’s heart skips. She’s written to him on the journey, but not as often as she intended to. And she received no letters herself. The traveling conditions were just too much.

“What do they say?”

“We didn’t open them. But I imagine they tell you plenty. He and Daenerys arrived at the Wall eight days ago.”

She sighs, relieved. “What of the enemy?”

“They threw their first offensive two days prior. They were repelled by Viserion and the forces at the Wall, thankfully. But mostly they took out wights, not the Walkers themselves. Only a few dozen losses on our end, thankfully. Jon has mastered riding. Daenerys is supposed to have taken off for King’s Landing this morning to fetch the other two. She is due to sail from Eastwatch-By-The-Sea. The Wall’s numbers are now in the thousands.”

Sansa nods, absorbing the information quietly. “And here?”

“People are going in and out every day. Fighting-fit men and women going North. Sick, elderly, children, non-fighters settling here or heading south. We’ve been managing well enough, though there are some matters you need to attend to, particularly regarding the stationing of troops and the supply dispersal. Some foreign correspondence has arrived as well, addressed to you and Jon. Not just from the South, either. The Ironborn and some leaders in the Free Cities as well. There’s even a message from Qarth, though I can’t imagine what they want.”

“It’s the largest trade center in the world. They get everything, hear everything, from everyone and everywhere. They care a great deal about their businesses. Westeros is a large chunk of the world markets. It’s natural that they pay attention.”

Sansa smiles. If they are writing to Winterfell, it is a great acknowledgement. The trading capital of the world was writing to them, asking for their attention. Yet another count toward Stark power being legitimized in the eyes of the world. The right people are starting to take them seriously.

When they enter the courtyard, Arya helps her down, and Sansa practically flings herself at Bran, squeezing him with all of her might and love.

She feels warmer, stronger, more hopeful now that she’s home and with her family again. Though she’s urged to rest first, she insists upon touring and inspecting the keep. By the end, she almost weeps with pride at the work her siblings have done in her absence. The grounds are clear,
construction is on schedule, people are fed, the household budget is balanced.

“Beautiful work,” she says, embracing them both again.

“We had help,” Bran tells her sheepishly, “Glover and Forrester. Lord Manderly’s brother. Lady Dustin.”

“I’ll thank them as well, then, at dinner tonight.”

She returns to her bedchamber, and her mood deflates slightly. She’s thrilled to be back in familiar surroundings, but the sight of her rooms is bittersweet.

Even after he’d been declared king, Jon gave Sansa the Lord’s Chambers, while he took the ones which had been kept by Lady Catelyn. Though Lord and Lady Stark slept together in the Lord’s bedchamber, Lady Stark had kept the private suite designated for the Ladies of Winterfell.

The Lord’s chambers were primarily the domain of Lord Stark, therefore. After him, they were inhabited by Roose Bolton, with Lady Walda taking Mother’s chambers. The suite’s history of rustic, martial male inhabitants had shown. Much of the furniture between the Lord’s and Lady Chambers were switched out, including the beds. Most of Lady Catelyn’s things, though, had been designed for a Tully lady—blue and red draperies, gilded silver trout on many of the moldings, and fish carved into wood. Lady Walda hadn’t had the opportunity to change it, thank the gods.

Jon suggested Sansa use some of Winterfell’s treasury to redo some of the furnishings. The conversation had startled her, as she’d assumed, as King in the North, that he would be in control of Winterfell’s treasury. He’d insisted it was hers. “You’re still Lady here. It is your money, your castle, your lands. I’m your impoverished relation.”

It actually led to one of the more significant acts Jon made in establishing her power and authority. He petitioned her court and the Small Council for an income. This prompted gasps from everyone, who assumed, just as she did, that the King’s income would be, well, all the current Stark holdings.

“The Stark Holdings belong to Lady Stark,” he told them.

When he was granted an “income”, it prompted Sansa to propose an entirely separate royal treasury, one which wouldn’t be controlled by the “Lord/Lady of Winterfell”. The various men who didn’t like the idea of the state treasury being owned by her readily agreed. And it was a good thing, too. She made sure to maintain her role as the liege of all the Northern lords, keeping that income and status intact, but the royal treasury would be another matter. Essentially, she used the opportunity to draw more funds from every lord in the Three Realms with their full consent.

And since there was no time or resources to create a whole new royal seat, Winterfell would have to remain the king’s residence, the capital, and the home of the treasury.

When most of them figured out what she’d done, most weren’t even mad. If anything, they were impressed.

Jon especially. A percentage of the Royal Treasury was set aside as his official income, a portion was put into savings, another into investments, the rest to public works. House Stark had to pay a high percentage---percentage of contribution to the treasury would be based on rank, and so the Lady of the North (her), the Lord of the Trident (Uncle Edmure), and the Lord of the Vale (Robert Arryn) paid the most.

Putting the program together was exhausting, especially since near the end, Jon fell ill and had to stay in bed. So she had to act as regent and Lady of the North. Even after, Jon remained ill for a week,
and she had to continue to act for him, which included a visit to Deepwood Motte.

Only to return home to find that her chambers were redone. The drapings were white, grey, and blue, rather than red and blue. Half the Tully moldings were replaced by Stark wolves.

Jon paid for it with his new income.

Looking back, Sansa couldn’t understand how she didn’t realize then that they were both truly in love.

During the first two moons of their marriage, Jon remained in his rooms. They spent every evening together, alternating between each others’ solars. But he didn’t share her bed.

After their revelation, however, he spent every night in bed with her. He even had a wardrobe and some trunks brought in, and had a new rack of hooks for his things mounted to the wall. Officially, he hadn’t “completely” moved in, still leaving the bulk of his things in the old bedroom so as to keep up appearances. People still thought them siblings. But they were going to change that once they returned from Harrenhal and had prepared their statement to the world about Jon’s true heritage. Whether they were going to go with the truth or the claim that he was Uncle Brandon’s was not yet settled.

It’s not even settled now, she thinks, looking around the bedchamber wistfully as her maids work. Some unpack, some assemble her things, some help her out of her things, others bring in her copper tub and hot water for her bath. She finds she has twice as many maids now as she had when she left. New girls, Free and smallfolk by the looks of them, moving cautiously, eyeing Ghost warily as they move. She’s not surprised. They’ve been doing everything to provide work and shelter for those who needed it. Clearly Arya and Bran decided their personal staff was a good place for some as well.

She’s surrounded by people, and yet she feels so lonely, like a piece of her is missing. They were supposed to return here together. Jon should be moving the rest of his things in.

As far as most of the world knows, they’re still half-siblings.

She’ll sleep alone in their bed.

Perhaps not tonight. Ghost would be here. But after that… The wolf is tied to her, close to her, yes. They have a bond. But ultimately, he’s Jon’s, not hers. He belongs with Jon. He must go to Castle Black, sooner, rather than later.

“Mya,” Sansa says to her most trusted maid, “Do you know if Princess Arya and Prince Bran left my correspondence in my study?”

“Yes, Your Grace, they have.”

Sansa nods and heads for the door. She often does work in the bedchamber, but everything important inevitably ends up in her study, where things are more secure. In the heavily locked, secure drawers of Father’s old desk she finds dozens of letters. When she returns to the chamber, her bath is drawn, and she orders them all out.

Her instinct is to read Jon’s latest, first, but she stops herself. Jon, for all his claimed lack of talent in regards to words, actually crafts the loveliest letters to her. While nearly all of them chiefly discussed matters of state, even from the beginning, even before they knew how the other felt, he’d toss in a sweet, affectionate section near the end. As their relationship progressed, and as Jon spent more time as king, both his ardor, vocabulary, and phrasing improved.
Not that he was stupid before. Words he used in the newer letters hadn’t been unknown to him before. It was that he became more used to employing them, especially since he was no longer living amongst the mostly common men of The Watch.

Also, she suspected, he went out of his way to try and impress her.

Her husband is no poet. But, if anything, that makes his messages all the better. He makes an effort with something he is not accustomed to, but also doesn’t try to be anything he’s not. He’s himself. And he makes a special effort for her.

But she eyes the tub of steaming water and resists the urge. She has to get in before the water goes cold. And she also needs to start reading. She’s not opposed to reading in the bath, necessarily, but not Jon’s letters.

Not even he knows this, but she keeps and saves them all. And she doesn’t want these ruined. So she sighs and sets those aside.

Instead, her eyes fall on one of three letters from Daenerys Targaryen. It stands out the most because it’s enclosed in scarlet parchment that screams ‘URGENT!’ And, of course, it’s the one with the most recent date.

Sansa fetches a letter opener from her desk, breaks the seal, slips out of her clothes, then climbs awkwardly into the bath, holding the paper well away from the water line.

The letter is enclosed in stiff, fold scarlet parchment, but it is written on regular yellow paper inside. Sansa settles in to read.

To Her Grace Sansa the Red Wolf of the House Stark, First of Her Name, Queen of the Three Realms of Winter, Queen in the North, Queen of the Trident and the Vale of Arryn, Queen of the First Men and the Andals, Princess of Winterfell, Lady of Winterfell, Harrenhal, and the Dreadfort, Commander of Moat Cailin, Wardeness of the High North, and Protector of the Realm from Her Grace Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals, Dothraki, Ghiscari, and the Rhoynar, Queen of the Empire of Dragon’s Bay, Great Khaleesi of the Dothraki Nations, Queen of Southern Westeros, Queen of Meereen, Astapor, and Yunkai, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Lord of the Five Realms, Lady of the Great Pyramid, Princess of Dragonstone, Protector of the Realm, Breaker of Chains, and Mother of Dragons; Greeting.

Just from the greeting she feels a chill go down her spine. While it was technically in the correct, traditional format, it was long even for Daenerys. And there was more than just the length. Sansa had been trained in reading between the lines of everything. And she does it now.

For one thing, Daenerys has drawn out her own already excessive list of titles--- She’d changed “Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men” to “Queen of the Dothraki, the Ghiscari, and the Rhoynar”, which already encapsulated many of the other titles. She called herself Queen of the Dothraki, there is no need to list both “Great Khaleesi” and “Great Grass Sea” as well. And if she preferred calling herself a Khaleesi, leave out the Dothraki from the “Queen of” section. “The Empire of Dragon’s Bay” was made up of Meereen, Astapor, and Yunkai, so she need not list herself as “Queen of” each city individually after she’d written herself as Queen of the Empire. “Queen of Southern Westeros” was also somewhat superfluous, if she was listing herself as “Lord of the Five Realms” as well.

But, Sansa notices, Daenerys also draws out Sansa’s titles. “The Three Realms of Winter” were the North, the Trident, and the Vale (of Arryn, Sansa noticed that was included), so after listing her as Queen of the Three Realms, listing her as Queen of each of them individually was pointless. She
declared Sansa a Queen of the Andals as well. Then she listed Sansa as Commander of Moat Cailin and Lady of Harrenhal. Technically, that was true, as the Starks officially hold both, and have been the Commanders/Stewards of Moat Cailin for centuries. But Moat Cailin was never usually listed among their titles, and they’d deliberately not included Harrenhal in their styles. Then there was “Princess of Winterfell”. A title that was hers and wasn’t. She’d been Princess of Winterfell, and sort of still was. She’d more or less been Princess of Winterfell since Robb declared himself king, and was formally recognized as such after she and Jon took back Winterfell until their wedding/coronation. Now, she is queen.

Daenerys is “Princess of Dragonstone”, but that title was a bit different. “Prince/ss of Winterfell” was a general title/title for all close heirs of a monarch--- Bran and Arya are styled/titled as Prince and Princess of Winterfell as well. The Prince/ss of Dragonstone title was for the heir apparent of the Iron Throne for the Targaryens (though Robert had altered it to “Lord of Dragonstone” and given it to Stannis to keep even after he’d supposedly had children), but it wasn’t just a royal style. It was an actual fiefdom and position. The Prince/ss of Dragonstone had their own, separate fiefdom that signified their place in the succession but also gave them their own place to rule and their own position. As sitting King could and did hold the lordship themselves, and would be listed as “Prince of Dragonstone”, but it would eventually be passed to his heir to rule until they take the throne.

But “Prince/ss of Winterfell” was more a style than a title. Sansa is/was also Lady of Winterfell, which was the actual lordship/title for the castle. Between taking her home back and her coronation, Sansa officially titled herself as “Princess Sansa of House Stark, Lady of Winterfell and the Dreadfort”, while Bran continues to be “Prince Brandon Stark of Winterfell” or “Brandon of the House Stark, Prince of Winterfell, and Arya remains “Princess Arya Stark of Winterfell” or “Arya of the House Stark, Princess of Winterfell.”

Even when Sansa was a Princess of Winterfell, she had lordships of her own, and was Head of her House, which took precedence. Now that she is queen, however, she’s as much “Princess of Winterfell” as Daenerys is “Princess of Westeros”. Also unlike the Dragonstone title, it does not signify any actual holdings. The ruler of Winterfell is still “Lord/Lady of Winterfell”, which Daenerys lists Sansa as immediately after “Princess.”

But it’s not just the lengthening. There’s also the clear nervousness in the handwriting.

Also, Sansa notices, is how careful Daenerys is with the phrasing of their respective titles in terms of the new alliance. Both of them have Andals among their citizens, and she lists both of them as Queen of the Andals. She reduces the old “Lord of the Seven Kingdoms” title to “Five”. She calls herself Queen of “Southern Westeros” instead of “Westeros.” She remembers to mention that Sansa is “First of Her Name”--- something that only applies to monarch regnants, not consorts, and that she’s a Protector of the Realm. Daenerys, who had fought acknowledging the Starks so hard, who gave the impression that she didn’t take Sansa seriously, is taking care to not only adhere to all the formalities and designations that Sansa is due on paper (including things that Sansa’s own subjects often forgot), but went beyond that.

Indeed, her bloating of their titles actually made their respective styles look roughly equivalent.

It’s no accident. There are a few explanations, and it doesn’t take Sansa very long to identify the correct one.

I write to you the morning after our first battle with the great enemy. I report to you with pride and happiness that we were utterly successful in destroying their first reconnaissance force and prevent them from bringing any new information about the enemy. The Wall sustained some damage, but nothing permanent. Furthermore, as I stated in my last letter, I am confident in the king’s ability with
the dragons, and shall be leaving Viserion behind at Castle Black and leaving for King’s Landing today to fetch Rhaegal and Drogon. I depart on this day, sailing from Eastwatch-By-The-Sea to the capital.

Despite this, I also have distressing news. First, right after the battle, Viserion and I embarked on our own reconnaissance mission and found the enemy’s main army. Nothing could have prepared me for the immensity of it. I am not sure what your own expectations of the threat were, but I can say that mine were exceeded by far, and that the king, after I recounted what I witnessed to him, said that it was “as he feared.”

We have a long, hard war ahead, Queen Sansa. Even united, thousands will likely die. Hundreds of thousands. Know that I will be increasing the amount of aid sent by any means possible.

In fact, I believe you will be needed more than ever. I know this is a great burden, as you are already governing the homefront on your own, handling the long winter, supplying our armies, carrying a child, etc while the king and I are on the front lines, atop the dragons. But I fear, given the extent of the enemy’s army, that our alliance may not be enough. Perhaps enough to win---eventually---but not without nearly devastating our respective populations.

Our best hope is to acquire other allies, from the East. And I don’t mean my territories there (which will already be at our disposal). We need to court allies from places like the Free Cities. Or even Qarth (a place that you, specifically, would have to court. I’m not exactly beloved in that city). If possible, we might even try to enlist the Summer Islands. Anywhere, everywhere, anyone, is my point. Anyone who can and will help. The more help we get, the more lives spared and the quicker we win.

Please, do whatever you can to bring in new allies. Tell me what you need from me, and I’ll try to provide. I recommend taking my Hand, Lord Tyrion Lannister, as your partner in this.

You may also want to start in Pentos, with a powerful man, Magister Illyrio Mopatis. He helped mastermind my return and sent me Tyrion. He’s an invaluable asset, and the richest man in Pentos. If anyone can help us, he can.

I’m afraid that there is something else I must tell you. Depending on how many messages you’ve read before this one, there’s a lot of news to report, but most of it you’ll find in your husbands letters.

This matter, however, is one I only hope you learn of from me.

I don’t know if Jon decided to tell you in his own missive, and if he did, I don’t know if you’ve read it. If you have, you probably know what I’m talking about. If not, though…

Sansa feels her heart rise up to her throat. She knows that every word so far has built up to what comes next. And she’s not sure she wants to know what that is. Usually, when someone writes this much flattery and encouragement, it's because they want somethign.

It began six years ago, when I was married to the mighty Khal Drogo. My brother was gone, I was accepted as Khaleesi by the Dothraki, and carrying Drogo’s son. My husband and I were deeply in love, and he had promised to take the Seven Kingdoms for me and our son. To build up supplies and numbers, he did what the Dothraki do, and pillaged communities with his khalasaar.

During one such raid of a Lhazareen area, I was confronted with the brutality involved in these practices. Among the horrifying things I saw being done in my husband’s name was the gangrape of a woman. I interceded on her behalf to spare her further pain, and claimed her and all the women and children of the community as under my service and protection. This enraged my husband’s
bloodriders, who wanted the spoils of their efforts. My husband defended me, but one of his was so
defiant that a fight commenced. Drogo won, but was wounded.

The Lhazareen woman I’d spoken for, Mirri Maz Duur, turned out to be the Chief healer and
priestess of the village. She offered to treat him.

Believing her grateful and loyal for protecting her, I let her. I didn’t like the Dothraki’s approach to
healing, which was almost nonexistent. She betrayed me, causing what should have been a
superficial wound to spread infection throughout his body. The Dothraki do not follow weak men,
and a khal that cannot ride is no khal. Drogo’s illness caused him to fall from his saddle.

The khalasaar began rebelling and Drogo was dying. I begged Mirri Maz Duur to save my
husband, by any means. She told me there was a way, but that a life had to be traded for a life. We
sacrificed Drogo’s horse. One of Drogo’s rebelling men was so disgusted with the magic that he
shoved me, and I collapsed.

When I woke, nearly the entire khalasaar was gone, and so was my son. I’d produced a hideous,
oversized, dead son with scales and wings. The delivery nearly killed me. That was the life I truly
traded. One that turned out to be no life at all: Drogo was breathing, his eyes were open, he could
sit up, but he was gone. His body was an empty shell: seeing nothing, saying nothing, hearing
nothing, thinking nothing, doing nothing. The wights I saw at the Wall were more animated.

My “healer” was a witch who cursed us as revenge for the raid. When I confronted her, she was
defiant, shameless, and told me that I’d be barren until the sun rose in the west and set in the East.

Ever since, I almost never get my moons blood, and when I do, it’s heavy and painful. I’ve been
examined by healers, maesters, septas, and midwives the world over. I’m barren. Completely
barren.

Sansa knows exactly where Daenerys’s story is going the moment she sees the mention of
pregnancy. And yet, when her eyes actually falls on the word “barren”, she seizes up and begins to
sob.

She also notices that as she’d continued the letter, not had she gripped it tighter and tighter, but she
had also neglected to keep it above the water. The red parchment was two inches under, not only
soaked by staining the water.

Her bath now looks bloody.

Horrified, Sansa flings the letter away and scrambles out of the bath, screaming for her maids.

Mya and three others run in and cry out when they see it.

“YOUR GRACE! WHAT HAPPENED?!?” Mya grabs a cloak off a hook, runs to cover her, and
begins inspecting her queen. “Where is it? Where are you hurt?”

“It’s not blood…” Sansa responds. Or maybe it was that, too. Maybe the bathwater is red from dye
and blood. “At least… Some colored paper… I dropped it in and the dye ran…”

Instinctively, her hands go between her legs. When she raises her fingers, though, they’re unmarked.
No blood. She clutches her belly. It feels calm. As reassuring as that is, it also seems mad at the
moment.

My sweet babe, she thinks, don’t you realize what this means?
“...The prince...” Mya asks, shuffling Sansa to the bed as the girls start disposing of the bath.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong,” she answers, climbing under the furs. “But call Septa Clara, just to be safe.”

“What happened?”

Sansa cringes. How is she supposed to answer? Anything severe enough to have this effect on her would get out, and it would inspire panic. People know her as being so composed, always. She remembers who she is and sets her jaw.

“Nothing.” She says in her most commanding tone. Her eyes like daggers, she looks from Mya to each of the other girls. “Nothing at all. You have nothing to say, understand? This did not happen. Tell Septa Clara I merely want a post-journey check-up.”

“But---”

Sansa cuts this girl off with a glare. She’s painfully young, a year or two younger than Arya, with chestnut curls and a hooked nose. Common-born Mountain clan by her clothes, accent, and posture.

“---What’s your name, Girl?”

“Wh-what?”

" Your name. ”

“Alys, Your Grace.”

“And where are you from, Alys?”

“Adderdell, My Queen.”

“Well, Alys, I know that they don’t have kings and queens in Adderdell, but now that you’re here, there are things you should know. When a queen says nothing happened, then nothing happened. My word is law. And everything I do, every moment of my time, is service to the realm. All I say and do, I do to help and protect you and the rest of my people. Even as I bathed, I was reading crucial correspondence. So, if I insist nothing happened, then you should know that I say so in order to protect this country. Any resistance, especially during these troubled times, wastes valuable time, and sabotages and endangers everyone and everything from the Wall to Pinkmaiden. Do you want to sabotage and endanger everyone, Alys? Do you hate your country?”

“No, Your Grace! I only want to help and serve!”

“Well then, what happened here?”

“Nothing, My Queen. Nothing at all. You said so.”

Sansa forces the most gentle smile she can. “Smart girl. I am pleased to have such a quick learner attending me. After you’re done here, Mya will bring both of you to the kitchens and get you extra loaves of fresh bread to take home. Still warm from the oven.”

“Yes, Your Grace, thank you, Your Grace.”
The Queen of Winter

Chapter Summary

Sansa's family, correspondence, and family correspondence.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Ohdede!

Sansa:

She and the babe are fine. Ghost is curled up at the foot of her bed. She sits, snug and warm, back against the pillows, sipping lavender tea, reading her husband’s latest letter.

_Sweetling, my entire life I’ve strived to be honest, forthright, honorable, and kind. To help others. In fact I have lost my life in the effort to do right by others. And I try so hard not to hate others, to maintain my composure, my empathy, my sympathies._

_I swear to you, My Love, I did not lose my temper when she told me. I showed as much restraint, courtesy, and understanding as I could muster. Right up until she told me, we were actually bonding. I’d been trying to talk her down, reassure her, share with her. I told her private, kind, even intimate things to make her feel better. And when she responded with this… news… I did not raise my voice or blame her or accuse her of anything. I got to my feet, told her I had to discuss it with you, and we went back to the Keep._

_But now, alone in my chamber, writing to you, I…_

_I wish I were immune to fury, self-pity, bitterness, ill-intentions. I wish my thoughts and intentions towards others could always be sympathetic, gentle, kind, and pure._

_But now… It’s a good thing Daenerys found passage back to King’s Landing at such short notice, because I don’t think I could have stomached her presence much longer without, at the very least, bursting in on her and bellowing every negative thought I’ve ever had on her. And that’s the charitable scenario._

_I want to strike her. I want to attack her. I loathe her. I swore to her I didn’t before. But she’s made a liar of me._

_I hate myself for that, and I hate her even more for making me feel this way._

_I’m just so angry. At her. At myself. At both of my fathers. At my grandfather. At the witch who cursed Daenerys. At the Night’s King. At Edd. At Janos Slynt. At Varamyr Sixskins. At Melisandre. At Alliser Thorne and Olly and all the others who drove their blades into my flesh. At all the lords who didn’t come when we needed them most. At the Freys. At the Lannisters. At the Baratheons. At your mother. At Ramsay Bolton and his foul father. At the Karstarks and Umbers. At every useless,
selfish, pampered, proud, fat lord sitting comfortable in their towers, warm beds and bellies full as thousands starve and freeze, as the enemy marches on The Wall and the winter winds blow, uncaring about the enemies we face, the danger or suffering, too wrapped up in their own shallow desires for wealth, power, and pleasure to truly help, expecting everyone else to take care of things while they go on with their comfortable lives. I’m angry that some of them are right.

I’m angry at Lord Commander Mormont, for tolerating that stinking leech, Craster, and for surrounding himself with the worst of his men and getting himself killed, leaving the Watch to me. For continuing to give Alliser Thorne the authority to bully recruits, many of them lost, desperate men, all in the name of “toughening them up” but did nothing but break them down. I’m angry that the Old Bear never interfered, only offering any sort of solace to certain favorites and ignoring the rest of the men Thorne targeted. For sending me out to a frozen wasteland.

I’m angry with Halfhand for making me kill him. At Ygritte for leading the wildlings to us. For hesitating that night at The Wall, forgetting to check around her and cover herself, and letting Olly shoot her. I’m angry at Baelish for selling you to the Boltons and betraying Father. I’m angry with the people who helped him. I’m angry with Father for not trusting the wrong people and being taken. For lying to us all our lives. For agreeing to be Robert’s Hand. For bringing you with him. For never even bothering to make up something about my mother when we were children, if only to grant some sort of closure.

I’m angry at Sam for leaving Castle Black with Gilly and her baby when I needed him most. I’m angry at you for being right about Rickon and not telling me about The Vale. I’m angry at every able-bodied man who isn’t here, protecting this world. I’m angry at every lord, lady, and king who let the Watch deteriorate for so many generations. I’m angry at Arya for not telling us about Braavos. At Bran for not telling us the truth about my parents. At Robb for marrying that random woman and not keeping his betrothal.

At everyone and everything.

And this…

This latest thing is so hard because what happened to Daenerys was terrible. She did not deserve that. She’s suffered, and she continues to. I want to feel sorry for her, I want to feel all the right things.

But I don’t. I bloody hate her. Does she not care that this is not just about her?

She could have been honest, at any time. Instead, she tried to manipulate us, speaking of the Targaryen line and birthrights and all that… All while knowing that she will never actually be able to continue her line. Knowing that she has no one to control her empire or her dragons when she was gone. She was demanding we give her all of Westeros, all while knowing that everything she has will probably fall apart when she dies. Speaking of the future, of peace, being capable of neither. And knowing it.

Finding out that I was her nephew, the only other Targaryen. Knowing I have a child on the way. And not telling me. I wonder if she ever would, had I not spoken to her when she was vulnerable. Even proposing I leave you and our child for her, when she knew that such a union would be fruitless anyways. Keeping us ignorant. The only other Targaryen and the woman carrying a Targaryen heir.

Not even thinking to let us know that our children might be the only future there is for so many people. Not even hinting.
Knowing we’ve never wanted her throne. Knowing we want a future in the North. That we want to be left alone.

All this time, keeping this secret.

I know it isn’t her fault that all of it—- the empire, the dragons, the throne—- might fall to us. Someone stole her legacy, her ability to provide a future, from her. She can’t help that.

But she lied to us. Knowing everything that’s at stake—- including everything she’s built—- she lied to us.

What is supposed to happen if she dies, Sansa? What do we do?

Part of me wishes I could keep this from you until after the baby is born. You’re already shouldering so much. I don’t want to upset you. I don’t want to risk it. But I can’t, can I? I’m sure the very idea offends you, but it’s impossible anyways. You have to know. You’re a part of this. This could very well affect you more than anyone.

You need to know.

The only other person who knows is Missandei. And we’re to keep this secret possibly forever. But I don’t have to tell you how much this changes everything. We have to act. We have to think. We have to come up with something. This has to be handled; sooner rather than later.

I’ve always tried so hard to be honest and true and good, Sansa. And last night, I was so open with her. I’ve never once lied to her.

Why can’t she or anyone else seem to do the same

My Love, I’m so sorry. You deserve better. I wish I could go back and change things so that you aren’t drawn into this. I wish I weren’t so selfish as to decide that the one thing I wouldn’t do to free you is stop us from marrying.

I’ve read the letters you sent. They’re my source of warmth in this awful place. The dragon just burns. The hot water scalds.

I’m not sure what we’re going to do, Sansa, but more than ever, I am determined to come home to you. Whatever Daenerys may leave us, I will not have you and our babe face it alone.

I’m not really angry with you. I’m sorry I said that. I love you.

I just want to actually stop fighting at some point. And stop being afraid. For myself, for you, for everyone. How am I supposed to do that if the Iron Throne is forced on us?

Are we to be at war forever?

Am I going to end up going from the war in the north to war in the south to settle a power crisis.

She’s crying, just a little. What answers can she give him? Perhaps if the three of them were together… Seven Hells! They just were! And that woman didn’t say a word!

Sansa is just so tired.

There’s a knock on her door. Probably another person with yet another letter to inform her about yet another disaster.
So of course she grants entry, giving Ghost a command. The direwolf pads over to the door and knocks the bar down.

The impossible happens when the door opens: Sansa smiles. Even laughs.

Arya pushes a wheeled table into the room. It’s laden with a tray, plates, their brother. Bran perches on the edge, brows quirked, limp legs swinging back and forth over the edge like a child’s.

“You didn’t come down to dinner. So we thought we’d bring it to you,” Bran announces in the most heartwarming way possible.

Sansa immediately puts the letters aside and clasps her hands. “Oh, you’re too good to me! I’m so sorry, but I was—”

“---Exhausted and busy, we figured,” Arya tells her, “And don’t worry, we gave your regards to the court.”

Arya stops the table right at the side of the bed, and Bran lifts the tray. Sansa smiles and moves over, patting her side for her brother to climb on. He does, but continues setting the food out before her as Arya pours some mulled wine.

“Sit with me while I eat,” Sansa encourages them. She’s missed them so much, and can tell the feeling is mutual. She begins gathering up the letters strewn about her. “Arya, would you put these on my desk?”

Her sister nods and does as asked while Bran uncovers a plate of salmon, green beans, and boiled potatoes. Sansa begins to eat, but nearly chokes when she sees Arya squint at the red letter.

Her brother teases her to eat like a lady. Arya looks up from the paper, and Sansa knows she saw it. She pleads with her eyes. Arya leaves the letters, grinding her teeth as she moves back to the bed. But the look she gives tells Sansa that she’s expected to tell Bran.

“How are you feeling?” Their brother asks, oblivious, “You have rested some, right?”

“I’m in bed, aren’t I?”

“In bed, working,” he replies, “You think I don’t know any better? I’m a cripple. I do plenty of work in bed. You still look tired.”

“Thank you.”

Bran grunts. “You know, we did manage to keep this place from collapsing while you were gone. One more night can’t hurt.”

“You don’t know that,” she replies after swallowing a mouthful of potatoes, “Or do you?”

He scowls. “No, I don’t. Not for lack of trying, though.”

“Don’t try too hard.”

“Take your own advice,” Arya remarks, “It’s not just you who needs rest, after all. You don’t want to strain that babe before it’s even born. It’ll have enough to deal with after.”

Sansa catches her eye. The younger Stark sister is impatient. It’s clear the queen shall not even get to finish her meal before she has to say it. She sets her utensils down, washes her food down with some tea, and wipes her mouth.
“Then stop being so trying,” she snaps before taking a deep breath, “Bran, there’s a new development. As it turns out, Daenerys Targaryen is barren.”

It’s not that she didn’t intend to tell them. It’s that she wanted to do it on her own time, collect her thoughts first. Daenerys asked for secrecy, but Sansa isn’t going to shoulder the weight of this alone. She owes the dragon queen nothing.

The others are silent. Bran’s mind clearly races as he absorbs this reality and all its nasty little consequences.

“I don’t think I need to say that this doesn’t leave the room,” she says, more as a prompt for them to react than a command. They both know better.

Bran’s face is ashen. “...There’s no chance?”


“How did it happen?”

She recounts the story from Dany’s letter. Bran and Arya both shake their heads.

“I hate magic,” Bran says sourly. Sansa’s heart sinks. She knows Bran includes his own gifts in that category. Not that he sees them as gifts.

“I’m sure it all depends on how it is used,” she insists.

“Yes, like if you’ve used it to kill people,” Arya adds, her voice similarly bitter.

Sansa groans. She knows nothing of magic, or what her siblings have truly experienced. Aside from her brief encounters with Viserion and, arguably her contact with the giant Wun-Wun, she’s never encountered a supernatural force before. Bran had his greenseeing, Arya had the Faceless Men and the priests of R’hollor, Jon has the White Walkers, the wildling wargs, and his resurrection. What can she really say to them?

Ever since Lady’s death, Sansa has suspected that some part of her is dead. All of her siblings, save for perhaps Robb, had encountered the supernatural. Not just brief interactions, either. Jon was declared “The Prince That Was Promised” and is a dragonlord, Arya was chosen to join the Faceless Men, and Bran was chosen by the Three-Eyed Raven to be a greenseer. Even Rickon spent an extended period with Jojen Reed. Sansa, though… She was the Stark child who probably believed in magic the most out of them growing up, and yet she is the only surviving one not initiated into some form of mystical tradition, or acquire special abilities.

Bran is likely a warg, based on what he’s told her of his experiences when Summer still lived. Ghost still thrived. Nymeria is out there somewhere.

But Lady is dead. And she died so early. And ever since, Sansa has felt something within her missing. Destroyed. Killed, like her wolf. Perhaps the part that would have made her magical.

Not that she wants to be magical. Arya, Bran, and Jon were only haunted by what they’d undergone. But that was the one part that bothered her: it made her incapable of offering proper commiseration on this matter.

She cups her brow for a moment, and her siblings quiet. She shakes her head.

“What do you want to do?” Bran asks quietly.
She appreciates how he phrases this. Not ‘What are you going to do?’. Not ‘What can be done?’ Not ‘What does she want?’ or ‘What does Jon want?’ Nor ‘What do you need to do?’. ‘What do you want to do?’.

Still, the queen snorts. “I’m not sure. And I doubt it would matter if I could. It’s not as if I can dictate that sort of thing.”

“You’re the Queen of Winter, of course you can,” protests Arya.

“That’s exactly why I can’t, though.” She shakes her head again.

This is what her sister doesn’t understand, will likely never understand. The trait that’s the foundation of so much of who she is--- her tomboy inclinations, her rebellious nature, her general wildness. The very thing about her which has served her in many ways and hindered her in others. Why she wasn’t a ‘lady’ as a girl. Why she never truly gave her life over to the House of Black and White. Why she fought with Joffrey so long ago. Probably why Nymeria is still alive and why the Lannisters didn’t take her captive.

Arya could never, would never really belong to anyone or anything. She could belong with things, of course--- the family, Needle, Winterfell. But only by her own will and desire. She could possess, but never be possessed. Live with, live through, but never live by anything but her own terms. They were the only terms she would ever truly accept.

Meanwhile, Sansa grew up completely accepted the role of a proper lady, being the property of her family and later, her lord husband. For Sansa, it was never about what she wished to do, but always about what she could do, and rarely for herself alone. She mastered fashion, sewing, history, language, music, manners, dancing, reading, and writing because she could, and because it meant excelling and serving the expectations and requirements of the world around her. She ignored Joffrey’s obvious flaws for so long because she was supposed to be his lady love, her Father had promised her to him. Even when she did act on her own behalf, for her very survival, she did so based on what was wanted or needed by those around her. It was why, even after being raped and tortured within her own home for months on end and abandoned by all of the North, despite the odds, despite having to eventually resort to seeking out Littlefinger’s support, she was still determined to take Winterfell back. It’s why she silently supported Jon when the lords declared him king, why she married Jon despite all the anguish the entire affair caused her at first, why she didn’t murder Tyrion Lannister back at Harrenhal.

All of that was because she didn’t belong to herself, and never would. She belonged to her husband, to her family, to her home, to all of the Three Realms and every person in them, from the king himself to the lowliest urchin. Every decision she makes is about them. What serves them best.

Sure, she’s adjusted her views on what that means over the years. She no longer considers obedience, demurity, or deference to the world’s standards necessary. She’s learned to trust her own strengths, thoughts, and talents, even many of her instincts.

But, ultimately what she does is all in service of those who she belongs to.

“What do you want to do?” Bran asks again.

She glances at him in frustration.”Bran, I just---”

“I didn’t ask you if it matters.” Bran puts his hand over hers. “I just want to know what you want.” Sansa groans. “I told you, I don’t know.”
“Then just think. And say it.”

“It would hardly be—–”

“——That’s not what I’m asking.”

“Just say it, Sansa,” Arya urges.

Sansa grinds her teeth and holds her breath for a moment. “I want you to stop asking me what I want.”

“Go on.”

She groans in frustration. “I want you to stop asking me what I want, and expecting an answer. I want to not think about it, because it doesn’t matter. I want you both to try and understand that. I want you to accept that thinking about it actually hurts, because I know it’s a waste of time, that it’ll never matter, that I won’t get it, and that it will just upset me. I want Jon to be here, because he actually understands this. He doesn’t ask me what I want, not generally, because he knows it would hurt me to think about it, and it would hurt him to hear it because he can never give it to me. I want Lady back. I want the White Walkers to disappear. I want this winter to end now, and to get a summer that never ends. I want to run away with my husband and live with our family far away, far from the suffering and obligation and memories. I want to stay here and have my child come into this world, grow, and eventually rule this place. I want to end the war. I want to feed, shelter, clothe, and protect everyone. I want the Lannisters and Targaryens and Freys and Boltons to have never existed. I want to be someone else. I want to keep my crown and kingdom secure. I want to never wear a crown, sit a throne, or service the kingdom again. I want to be safe, happy, healthy, and loved. I want to do everything, be everything, that is needed. I want peace. I want Cersei Lannister, Walder Frey, Joffrey, Littlefinger, Jaime Lannister, Roose and Ramsay Bolton alive again just so I can kill them all. I want Father, Mother, Robb, and Rickon back. I want this child to be the strong, healthy boy that the world would expect an heir to be, who will never have to doubt his value, who will be just like his father, who would be accepted and celebrated by all. I want this child to be a strong, and a sweet girl who can help me establish a tradition that would make the world a better place for every daughter, whose hair I can brush and braid every night, who I can teach to sew, just like Mother did for me. I want Daenerys to be married, to already have a dozen children so that we’d never have to be troubled by the Iron Throne again. I want your legs back. I want your womb back. I want to go back in time and stop all of this horror we’ve lived from ever happening. I want to tell everyone to leave me alone. I want to stop caring. I want to fall asleep. I want a thousand gowns of the finest silks, velvets, linens, and lace, in every color, except the colors I don’t like. I want furs and cloaks and shoes and jewelry and ribbons and stockings and gloves and everything else to match. I want enough lemon cakes to stuff the Great Hall. I want pregnancy to be a bliss and childbirth to be painless. I want my children to never know suffering. I want my husband here, in this bed, with me. I want life to be like the songs. The happy ones. I want to see Daenerys’s dragons melt the iron throne, then promptly drop dead. I want Jon and Daenerys here so we can make real plans about the succession. I want everyone in the world to be happier, kinder, stronger, and, most of all, smarter. I want to spend every night dancing and making love and spend every day… dancing and making love. I want horses to smell of roses and honey.”

She stops talking, gasping for breath.

There’s silence for a while. Long enough for Sansa to catch her breath and say, “Now do you get it? It doesn’t matter! And it shouldn’t! We’d all probably have more of what we want, and what we need, and be better off, if everyone stopped paying attention to what they want and spent more time on what everyone around them needs. That’s not going to happen, ever. I can’t change that. I can
only control what I do. Nothing else.”

Her siblings gape at her.

Arya speaks first. “Sansa… You’re one of the most powerful people in Westeros. What you do affects everything else.”

“Yes, but I can’t ensure that it will have the intended effect. I can order a group of men to go clear a road, and it can work. Or a blizzard can come along that’s strong enough to kill them all. Or one of them can unknowingly be carrying a plague that he ends up spreading to the area that I sent him. Or they could be killed by bandits. Or turn out to be bandits and terrorize the region. That isn’t going to stop me from trying to build roads, but I cannot and will not expect that my efforts will always be rewarded. But I try. And I don’t focus on my desires or intentions, I focus on what is.”

She sighs and sets her tray aside, looking at her belly. “I aimed to become pregnant before I knew Jon was a Targaryen. My intention was to provide an heir for the North. It still is. And even after I knew who my husband was, I never intended to saddle our child with that legacy. Daenerys was sterilized years ago, before I ever could have imagined I’d end up here. Now, despite my best efforts and intentions, my child may be the last dragon. And the last wolf. I’d do anything to spare them that. But there’s only so much I can do. But the best I can do is face the reality now.”

“How do you choose to face it, though?” Bran asks.

Sansa shakes her head, “Thoughtfully. There’s much that still has to be determined. And I haven’t had time to work out full plans.”

“She just got the news hours ago!” Arya snaps at their brother. “Of course she isn’t sure!”

“Right. I’m sorry. I just…” Bran takes a deep breath. “I’m afraid. But I’m going to help you.”

“We’re going to help you,” Arya insists, taking her sister’s hand.

The three of them share smiles. It’s good to be home, it truly is.

Eventually the other two take their leave. Arya offers to share her bed, but Sansa declines politely and kisses her goodnight. For a while, Sansa lies in the dark, staring up at the canopy, hands folded over her middle, just thinking.

Despite the speech she gave to her siblings, the more possibilities Sansa considers, the more sure she is that this has only a single conclusion: one way or another, Daenerys’s empire will come apart.

She’ll tear it down herself if she has to.

Her sleep proves fretful, and she wakes early, knowing that she is unlikely able to fall back asleep. She lights some candles, puts on her dressing-gown, and goes to read the rest of her correspondence.

The missives from some of the foreign powers prove… interesting. While trade is discussed, so are their relations with Daenerys. Inquiries of how they managed to convince the Dragon Queen to loosen her grip are made. So are assurances that the upset in trade in the east makes the west more important than ever. Qaarth seems particularly eager to afford the Three Realms generous trade agreements and send aid.

Cities like Volantis, which practice slavery, are also among the more generous salutations.

The subtext of much of this is clear. They want Daenerys tamed.
Apparently, her work back east was more disruptive than Sansa realized. And it makes even more sense now why the Dragon Queen bid Sansa to handle this.

Some might consider this good news, think this means that the eastern powers want the same thing she does. But they don’t, not really. These people don’t care a fig about a safe and prosperous north. They just want the woman who has upset their trade to go away. There’s no doubt in Sansa’s mind that they’d happily let Daenerys take all of Westeros and all of her children if it kept her from their continent.

Seven Hells, Daenerys could be reading a letter from them right now promising to do all of that in exchange for her staying out of their affairs.

Sansa doesn’t trust the honor of slavers, the very lowest of the low. She doesn’t want to help slavers.

She looks out the window. Snow falls, fast and thick. Another force could be attacking the Wall right now. She can’t do nothing. Sansa hangs her head and begins drafting replies. They all go roughly the same way: We’d be happy to host representatives from your city here at Winterfell, on the condition that they only include hired help in their retinues while on our soil.

After that, she sets them aside to be properly copied, and begins her letter to Jon.

My Love,

I don’t blame you for being angry. You have more right than anyone to feel this way. Just please know that whatever comes, I am yours. I will always love and support you, do whatever I can to help you. Your burdens are mine, your fears are mine, your rage is mine as well. Never think to conceal it from me...

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Jon:

Despite the frigid weather, Jon really only feels the chill against his cheeks. He feels like he’s burning within his furs as he flies Viserion further north. Snow melts against him the moment it hits him.

He’s higher than he’s ever been: above the tallest mountain, above the Wall. The day is cloud-strewn and snowy, but he feels like he could touch the sun, if he wished it.

But that’s not his purpose. He flies further north, slightly to the East, just as Daenerys instructed him. He must see it for himself. He must.

Even if he doesn’t want to. Even if, when he starts seeing signs of a settlement off in the distance, he glances away for a second before urging Viserion on. Even the dragon himself seems a bit nervous, his pace a bit slower as they make their way towards the campground.

They fly above the clouds for secrecy, but it also makes things a bit harder to discern. But not enough to keep Jon’s blood from running cold as he watches as the uniformly white ground below him starts glowing with a cerulean hue.

The glow does not disappear. It goes and goes, until the last vestiges of untouched, white, icy land has disappeared from his rearview. All is blue. A violent, overbearing, cruel color. Jon never thought blue could be a violent color until he looked into the eyes of a wight. Now, he feels like he’s shrunk down to the size of a gnat, and is flying right above one of those unforgiving, lifeless, yet burning eyes.
There are hills in the distance, possibly even mountains, and the hoard covers them, coats them. They almost as if they’re trying to engulf the pale grey sky itself.

In the daytime, as it turns out, his enemies are no less frightening. Jon can almost feel their skeletal hands reaching for him. Dizziness overtakes him slightly.

They’re not fighting an army, they’re fighting an entire species.

Jon knew that, right? He knew that.

But he realizes now that he hasn’t truly understood what that means until now.

Even now, he sees one of Lord Stark’s grand maps of Westeros in his head. The one that still hangs right behind the desk in the lord’s study that his wife now uses. The one that stretches from the borders of the Lands of Always Winter to Sunspear. He sees that Westeros, normally golden from the color of the parchment, being stained with this same blue. Starting from the very top, but moving down, like a waterfall, spreading and making the entire continent glow blue.

He sees Winterfell, he sees the wights climbing over the walls, just as they did at Hardhome. He sees Bran and Arya falling dead. He sees his wife, hiding in a cabinet, trying to quiet a crying bundle in her arms. He sees... Gods, he sees the shell of what was once his little sister, her skin gone pale and her eyes glowing, ripping the cabinet door open and pulling a struggling Sansa out. He sees the wight-Arya rip the howling child from Sansa arms before gutting her with Needle. He sees his wife crumble, and Arya take the child. He sees Sansa rise again, her blue eyes now twisted, cruel, wrong, her whole being pale. He sees them both presenting his child to the grinning Night’s King...

Months ago, Jon had told Bran about Craster’s Keep, about what Craster did to his sons. He asked his young brother if he had any idea what the Walkers did with them. Bran nodded and told him.

Innocent babes, infected with this evil. *His* innocent babe...

He looks around at all of this, and he wonders why he didn’t convince Sansa to take Daenerys’s offer and have the child in King’s Landing.

Jon realizes, after several minutes, that the journey here was shorter than Daenerys said it would be. Meaning, this mass was closer than before. All of them.

Blinking back enraged tears, he digs in his heels and orders Viserion to turn and take him back to the Wall. He has to tell them. He has to warn them.

As they fly back south, Jon’s mind races around a single question.

*Why?*

Bran said that the White Walkers were created by the Children of the Forest to fight a war against men millennia ago. But that war is long over. The last of the Children, according to Bran, died recently. The White Walkers tried to invade, but were defeated by Azor Ahai.

Why are they coming here now? Their cause is gone completely--- the Children are extinct. Bran even claims that the last Child died at the hands of the Wights. They’re creatures of ice, snow, and the magic of winter. What could they possibly want with the realms of men, anyways? And why now? Why attack now, of all times? Why not a century ago? Why not during Aegon’s Conquest?

What do they want? If it’s the death of humans, why not do it before? Why take so much time to actually attack? It’s been two years since Hardhome, so why not attack before now?
This isn’t the first time he’s asked these questions. He’s asked Bran for answers, but his gifted younger brother merely shakes his head.

“I can see them sometimes, even hear them. But I don’t understand them. I don’t know.”

When Jon returns to Castle Black, Edd finds him at once. “How many? What did you see?”

Jon bows his head. “Half a million, at least.”

Edd’s face loses what color it had. “Seven Hells. Right now, we have at most—”

“---Forty-seven thousand,” Jon replies, having seen the latest estimates, “Less than a tenth of their numbers, even with the most generous estimates. Seven thousand more are due from the North. Twenty-five hundred from the Riverlands. Eleven thousand from the Vale. And the initial estimates for the first reinforcements from the South are twenty-three thousand. Leaving us between ninety and ninety-one thousand in total in three weeks’ time. If we’re lucky, with two more dragons in addition.”

He sighs. “Still, not the worst odds we’ve faced, eh, Edd?”

“We managed to hold the Wildlings off for a single night, Your Grace. We’d have eventually been crushed if not for Stannis.”

“I am aware, Edd!” Jon snaps. “But we’re better prepared, better trained, better manned, and better led this time.”

“Yes, My King.”

Jon groans.

“...I have some good news, My Lord.”

“Oh?”

“An important arrival has come. He’s waiting in your chambers.”

Jon doesn’t need to ask who Edd means. He breaks off into a run for the King’s Tower.

He finds Ghost laying by the fire, a pouch strapped to his massive neck. The wolf gets to his feet and Jon runs to embrace him.

“It is so good to see you,” he whispers into the beast’s fur. “I hope the journey wasn’t too rough.”

The wolf pulls back in reply and licks Jon’s face affectionately. The King of Winter smiles. A piece of home has come to him.

He glances at the leather pouch at Ghost’s neck. “You have something for me, do you?”

The animal sits and Jon removes the pouch. He takes it to his usual chair by the fire. Inside, he finds papers and several small parcels, all of them carefully wrapped and sealed with a crowned direwolf sigil.

Sitting and removing these parcels is like a balm for his soul. There are multiple letters, written on colored parchment. One is blue, another green, one is the traditional yellow-gold, and the rest are pink. One of the pink ones is marked ‘Read this first’. Jon sits back and unfolds it.
My Love,

You may wonder why I would send you letters this way, instead of by raven. Quite simply: I couldn’t stand to send Ghost to you empty-pawed, and I can’t bear to think of you alone. I feel so guilty, being here at home with the others while you’re out there. I wanted you to have some home with you.

So these messages are not going to be my standard letters, updating you on politics and such. I want and need you to have something to escape to. Something untainted by our troubles. These, and any pink messages you may receive from me in the future, are love letters. Nothing more, nothing less.

The papers enclosed consist of them, as well as personal letters from Arya (the blue) and Bran (the green). The pinks are mine. You’ll find happy little memories, the most hopeful and delightful plans and dreams I have for us, poems, and letters just speaking of home, summer, family, my love for you, and various other beautiful things. One of them also happens to contain a… description, of sorts. The sort which cannot be read in polite company.

The packages are a few tokens. A couple of warm tunics I made, two underbaked pies from home (for you to heat over your own fire) and the recipes for them. A few other foods/ingredients you’re unlikely to enjoy at The Wall, a couple of personal favors.

You may want to open the gold paper first, though. Be careful, please, not to tear any of it. You’ll understand when you see it.

All of my love,

Sansa

Post-Script: Be aware that my regular letters shall be unchanged in rate and content.

Jon feels his heart swell up so much, he can barely breathe. As instructed, he takes the gold paper first on to find that it’s one very large piece of parchment containing a smaller, pink message within its various folds.

The unfurled gold piece reveals a drawing made up of a series of curves and lines. It take’s Jon a moment to realize what he’s looking at, but when he does, the tears truly begin to fall. Hands shaking, he looks at the pink message.

Here I am, officially into my fifth month. I’ve made an official edict for the castle that once our babe is born, that I’m not to be allowed to ingest anything from a certain list of foods, including lemon cakes, until I’m back to my old size. As embarrassing as it is, especially showing it to you, I thought you’d like to see what havoc this child of yours has wrought upon my figure. I’m developing a belly like Lord Manderly.

In fact, my waist has expanded by eleven and a half inches! The septas say there’s so much more coming. In fact… Well, Jon, as it turns out… By a woman’s fifth month, she isn’t supposed to have grown quite this much.

Indeed, this level of expansion really only happens if the mother has gorged herself far too much and puts on weight easily. Or…

Well, if she’s carrying more than one child…

Jon drops the paper, hands shaking. His eyes fix upon the sketch of Sansa’s belly. Sansa does not put on weight easily. None of the Stark children did. Indeed, once they returned to Winterfell and began
eating properly again, the maester and the septa became concerned over how long it took Sansa to get herself back to a healthy size. Arya ended up taking even longer, but Sansa was a close second.

Aside from her weakness for lemon cakes, his wife is as careful with her eating as she is with everything else.

Hands still shaking, Jon picks up the letter again.

Well, in usual cases, by this point, Septas and maesters are usually able to feel a woman’s stomach, see how she’s carrying, and possibly predict the sex of the child from it. But when the septas examined me, well…

I haven’t been over-eating, Jon. I am apparently carrying both high and low.

So it seems we’ll have twice the blessings when my time comes. I hope this pleases you.

No, that’s silly. I can easily imagine your reaction. But before you leap through the roof with joy, please note that this means that I’ll have twice as much to complain about when it happens.

When the war is over, I expect two very, very, very nice gifts for this. One will be you, home, as unscathed as possible, ready to trade in your blades for burping little bundles and riding dragons for riding me. I mean it, Stark. And I swear to the Seven Heavens, Seven Hells, to the Old Gods, the New, the Drowned, the Light, and the Others themselves, you are going to return to us. I will find a way to drag you back from the afterlife if I have to (not as if it hasn’t been done before). I am not doing this without you.

My second gift should be something beautiful and extravagant.

I think it only fair, since I’m giving you two children now. Possibly more, if things go well.

And they shall be our heirs, Jon. I carry the next king or queen of Winter inside me now. I hope you understand my meaning.

Unless you bid otherwise, I shall endeavor to send you more pictures like this from here on out. One of the Septas, Janelle, is talented with art. Indeed, I intend for her to do our portraits. I’d very much like to have some portraits to send you while you are away.

Enjoy the rest of the package.

-S

He does indeed. He finds the frozen, half-baked pies and calls for Satin to bring him the proper pan with which to bake them in. He laughs over Arya’s letter, full of complaints about how Sansa won’t let her go to the Wall yet and how she expects her to pose for their portraits, as well as stories about which knightly ponce passing through landed on his arse at the end of her blade. Bran’s message speaks of his visions, of Summer, of speculations about the babes, of excited plans about the sort of uncle he wishes to be, and is filled with all many of questions about the armies, the knights, the men, the battle strategies, of what it’s like to fly a dragon.

But still… twins. Twins. Two babes to greet him when he comes home. A boy and a girl, perhaps. One of each all at once. A son and a daughter. Or two strong sons, or two sweet girls. The concept of it. The power. The joy. He’d never lack for the patter of little feet, giggles, and squeals throughout the halls, always have someone to bounce upon his knee, always have a cheek to kiss, a student to teach. He imagines holding both of them at once, one in each arm, both looking up at him. He and Sansa wouldn’t have to fight over who got to hold the babe now, they’d each have one.
Twins. They’d never have to feel alone. A double dose of new life, joy, and Starks in the midsts of these awful times and devastating winter. One to teach how to fight and ride. Another who would make him darling needlework projects like their mother taught them.

His wife sends him some truly fantastic gifts, and not just in the form of news.

Some extremely comfortable tunics, a cap to wear beneath his helmet, some gloves and a beautifully crafted and decorated dragonglass dagger bearing their intertwined, gilded initials at the hilt.

He thinks that’s his favorite.

Then he opens what turns out to be a selection of satin ribbons, each a different color.

Those come with a note instructing him to pick his favorite, snip off a small bit to send back to her. The rest of his chosen ribbon he can use to tie her favor to his wrist. And when he returned, well…

... I have more of each color here, and you will return to our apartments one night to discover me, wearing it. And nothing else.

He’s not sure if this is simply passion, or further attempts to motivate him to come home. As if he needs more motivation. The thought of the twins also managed to inflame him, with thoughts of her fertility, his virility. That she carried not one, but two of his children, was plenty arousing in its own way.

Then he reads some of her other messages.

...I believe I may have developed a fixation without realizing, Darling. With your beard and mustache. In particular, the feeling of your facial hair rubbing against my thighs. They have felt oddly neglected since we parted. They’re not the only parts of me which do...

...All my life, I wanted to be the perfect lady. But I’m afraid that when thinking about you, not only do I abandon these ambitions, I outright reject them. Rather passionately, in fact...

...I can’t stand to think of you alone in that awful, cold place. Not without me there to keep you warm in as many ways as we can imagine...

Those messages he decides to hide under his mattress. It amazes him. Sansa has written him love letters before, some of them with a naughty hint here or there. But nothing this explicitly passionate. It’s so surprising that it honestly makes him wonder if perhaps her condition may be responsible.

Not all the messages are like that, of course. Some are exactly the sort of love letters he’d expect from his wife. Some merely discuss the future. Things like what they might name their children, alterations they might make to the castle to house their family, whether or not they’d employ a septa, if they might travel when all this is over, if they should form a royal guard of their own.

She writes to him as if they were an average Lord Husband and Lady Wife. And he knows why; this is an escape. Solace. Refuge. A way to pretend temporarily that so many lives didn’t depend on them, that they merely belonged to themselves.

They don’t, of course. But pretending otherwise might make it easier.

Still, Jon eventually has to put those fantasies aside and focus back on the War when his pie is baked and his meal is ready.

The Others send stronger and larger forces each time. And it’s gotten harder and harder to eliminate
them. Multi-pronged offenses launched at Eastwatch and Shadow Tower have occurred as well. Forces have had to spread out, even sending scouts to the abandoned holdfasts to keep the enemy from passing through them. Jon suspects that the Night’s King is still unaware of the dragons, but Jon waits for that to change.

The problem is, the more that they have to spread out the forces, the more dependent on Viserion the defense of Castle Black becomes. The Enemy has some knowledge of the Wall’s holdfasts. And many of those holdfasts have been abandoned.

More and more people arrive daily, and work on reconstructing the other holdfasts has been underway since Jon took the throne, but limited resources and harsh conditions meant the work went slowly. Many of the Southern troops were sensitive to the cold, and falling sick when assigned to command posts aside from Castle Black, Eastwatch, and Shadow Tower. The most experienced, cold-tolerant men, including wildlings had to be sent to the other posts as a result.

Thus, the primary holdfasts were mostly manned by men with less experience with the Wall, the Watch, and this form of combat.

There were further tensions, particularly between the Free Folk and the rest. Most of the Northerners and Watchmen had made their peace with their former enemies, but the Southerners were less malleable. Jon found it a bit rich, given that the Southerners are the ones who rarely actually had to fight them.

Even among the pure Westerosi, tensions arise. This House has a blood feud with this other House, this region hates the other. This person sided with this person. The War of the Five King’s had only made it worse. A common enemy doesn’t unify as quickly as popular wisdom suggests. Factor in the dispersal and transport of supplies, and morale drops.

It makes him all the more impatient for Daenerys to return with the other dragons. And that bothers him. The dependency on the dragons is a handicap, one they must overcome sooner rather than later.

The Watch was just too whittled down, too ill-equipped. Rendered utterly unprepared to fulfill the very purpose it was created for.

Never again. Never, ever again.

He can’t help but think about all those generations of men who had given up their lives to freeze up here, die unremembered, without family or wealth or comfort, all in the name of protecting the realm, only for the time to come for the Watch to fill its purpose and be completely incapable of doing so, dependent on dragons and the late, reluctant aid of comfortable, spoiled lords who had neglected them for generations. What was it all for?

The sacrifice, the fighting, the loneliness, the service, the suffering? To be reduced to a dump to send the likes of Janos Slynt?

The thing that preoccupies Jon the most, perhaps, is all the waste. The Watch has been around for centuries upon centuries, for the express purpose of guarding the Wall and the realms of Men from this enemy, but was reduced, neglected, and ignored too much for it to be much more than a prison by the time this enemy arrived.

It might not be so bad if the realm was capable of defending itself and supplying the Watch well enough at the right moment, but no. As those fickle lords and king’s ignored The Watch, they were exhausting their time, their gold, their men, their lands, and their resources on squabbles over titles and uncomfortable thrones. Who is/was king of this and that. There shall be nothing to be king of if
they lose.

The War of the Five Kings, as much as it connected to him in a personal level, was a drain. Mostly for the North. When Robb was crowned and took the armies south, he brought with him nearly every able-bodied man. It may not have been too bad, had there been no attacks, but it left the North itself vulnerable to things like the Ironborn raids, leaving castles, villages, and roads to go unrepaired, harvests to go ungathered, resources stolen, people stolen or rendered immobile, stores and treasuries plundered. The same was more or less the case in the Riverlands, and there’s only so much the Vale could do.

The Boltons bled the vassals of much of what was left, as did the Freys.

Meanwhile, the South was running itself ragged over the Iron Throne. Even the Reach was affected, with the raids Euron Greyjoy led on their shores. The Lannisters, it turned out, had exhausted their mines, even as they’d put the crown in debt to them and spent fortunes on their armies, on redesigns of the Red Keep, on personal effects for Cersei, Joffrey, and the rest of that brood, on disastrous weddings.

They leaned on the Tyrells, who are ultimately as strong and wealthy as their harvests, used much of their military strength, leaving the Reach similarly undefended. By the time that alliance was broken, the Ironborn were set to raid the Southern shores and many of their best leaders were dead.

So many lives lost, and for what? None of those people ultimately got their crowns. Stannis might have won immediately if Renly hadn’t decided to try and usurp his brother. Stannis might have had the Stormlands and the Reach behind him from the beginning. If the Tyrells weren’t so obsessed with marrying into the royal family at once, they might have betrothed Ser Loras to Shireen and back Stannis themselves. The North might have bent the knee, and the War might have been over in a couple of moons, Ned Stark avenged, the other Starks still alive, the nation unified, and the last few years being focussed on preparing for the real enemy.

It’s not just the War of The Five Kings, though, really. Jon thinks of the utter waste that was the Dance of the Dragons.

The Blacks and the Greens… What had they done? Split Westeros apart, burning the land and killing dragons, and all for what? Aegon II may have technically “won”, but ultimately, Rhaenyra’s line carried the Iron Throne. The rest of the dragons died out under her son, Aegon III, and some said he let it happen after watching his mother get eaten alive by one. If it weren’t for that war, the dragons might have lived on. Maester Aemon might have brought one to The Watch. Jon may have discovered his Valyrian abilities before now, might have saved the lives at Hardhome.

All these petty conflicts, the Blackfyre Rebellions, and for what?

Now, all they have to protect themselves are leftovers. Higher quality leftovers than they had before, yes, but leftovers nonetheless. Waiting on an army they should have had years ago, one mostly untrained to handle, let alone fight in, the conditions at The Wall. Against an enemy they know little about, in need of weapons that are in painfully short supply.

It might be easier with some more leadership. As much as it pains him to admit it, he was waiting on Daenerys to return not just for her dragons. There are plenty among their forces who clearly see him as a usurper, a boy, anything but a king. At the very least, a foreigner. The presence and command of their queen would likely be a great boon for morale and his own authority.

Jon runs his fingers through Ghost’s fur as he goes over reports. He’s given orders for a new holdfast to be set aside, and for spearwives and other women-at-arms, willing and able, to be enlisted. They’d
need an entire holdfast to themselves, in order to keep them safe from rapers. And they’d need commanders of their own. Female ones.

Arya, in fact, wrote to him of it in a different letter. She wants to come to the Wall and take command. Not a high post, she assures him, but a command of her own.

Jon’s not ready to do that. Arya has become quite skilled in combat, true, but fighting one on one and commanding troops are entirely different matters. Arya has plenty of experience with one, but none of the other. She’s absurdly young, has been home less than a year, and Jon already fears bringing her to the front lines enough. Giving her a post where he can’t keep an eye on her is inconceivable to him.

If his little sister is going to fight this enemy, he refuses to let her do it alone. He’d never forgive himself if she ended up dying without her big brother with her. After all she’s been through, she deserves at least that

He’s recruited some spearwives for command, ones who had served as such for Mance. But there are Westerosi women volunteering who are unlikely to enjoy serving under only wildlings. Pickings were slim, though, as some families, even those who had permitted daughters to take up arms, were uncomfortable with the idea of their women possibly outranking their sons. It’s utterly maddening.

An offer has been extended, but it’s one that is as bad as the idea of Arya coming, albeit for different reasons.

Ellaria Sand, Princess of Dorne, has proposed three candidates: her stepdaughters, Obara and Nymeria, and her eldest daughter, Tyene. The infamous Sand Snakes. The ones who murdered their cousin and uncle to “avenge” their father, who murdered Princess Myrcella and attacked her in violation of the laws of hospitality. The same laws which the Freys and Boltons violated with the Red Wedding.

Even better: she mentioned in her letter that she was consulting the crown about it as well.

Jon likes to think of himself as open-minded. But in this case, he considers the delivery of actual snakes to take command posts in this army to be more appealing.
The Future

Chapter Summary

Daenerys heads back to Castle Black and makes some promises. The Enemy attacks with full force. Sansa receives visitors.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, to ohdede!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Her Grace Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals, Dothraki, Ghiscari, and the Rhoynar, Queen of the Empire of Dragon’s Bay, Great Khaleesi of the Dothraki Nations, Queen of Southern Westeros, Queen of Meereen, Astapor, and Yunkai, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Lord of the Five Realms, Lady of the Great Pyramid, Princess of Dragonstone, Protector of the Realm, Breaker of Chains, and Mother of Dragons; from Her Grace Sansa the Red Wolf of the House Stark, First of Her Name, Queen of the Three Realms of Winter, Queen in the North, Queen of the Trident and the Vale of Arryn, Queen of the First Men and the Andals, Princess of Winterfell, Lady of Winterfell, Harrenhal, and the Dreadfort, Commander of Moat Cailin, Wardeness of the High North, and Protector of the Realm; greeting:

Please note that I have received word from my husband that he is alive, well, and ever devoted to me, but that he is highly distressed for a variety of reasons. I have taken measures to try and alleviate some of the emotional toil. I offer congratulations on your joint victory. I am also taking your advice and I am in communication with a variety of potential foreign allies. Indeed, when I arrived home, I was presented with a number of messages from powerful nations.

The matter is well underway. I shall alert you on the most important developments. One is the request that your treasury contribute to our coffers, so that we might better afford to receive and lodge the diplomats. Enclosed are estimates of the assistance we shall require, with detailed expense reports.

Your last letter distressed me greatly, I admit. Please know, you have my boundless sympathy for what befell you in the Dothraki Sea. I know what it is to be betrayed and violated intimately. It’s permanent, regardless of how it may appear to others. While I was not inflicted with your unfortunate condition, I know what it is to have something like that never leave you, to have a shame that must be locked away, to have it inhibit you, soil you in the eyes of others. I don’t know exactly what you must be going through, but I do have an idea. You don’t know how much I wish I could help.

We women must endure so many tragedies and cruelties in life. We’re people born as things, raised as things, treated as things, seen as things. Inferior things. Things to be used. Indeed, I’ve even read works by various “great minds” and philosophers who liken us to animals. Many write of us as defects with only one use.
And, of course, there are still a thousand ways in which they’ll find for us to do it wrong. And, if we can’t do that one thing, or do it “right”, we’re worthless. To be shut away, if we’re lucky. Killed, if not. I recall one point during my betrothal to Joffrey, after my father’s death. Joffrey said I was stupid, that his mother thought so too, that she feared I’d give him stupid children, and that if I did, he’d have them and me killed.

I am convinced that to much of the world, we’re in the position where we are no more than burdens, whose existence is only seen as justified by one, unfortunately crucial need. That many men would be happy to have us all killed, and are resentful of the fact that we have this one use in which they cannot do without. That we should be thankful that they use us this way, because it allows us to live despite our “defect” status. That even those of us who “manage” to have other skills/uses, that they’re just things that men feel they “let” us do in between births, things that would/could be done better by men, if men were to debase themselves by doing “feminine” things.

It’s why we’re always expected to be happy to be praised as beautiful, feel great shame if we are not, that the worst charges levied against us are apparently a lack of desirability, or supposed carnal contact with a man not designated as our owners. It’s why one of the first insults to be imposed upon a woman is “whore”, why women who are raped are shamed, why our supposed greatest achievements are what we look like and how many sons we have. Why, even the histories of women who have defied these roles, regardless of volume or accomplishments, are seen as exceptions, rather than an indicator that we are capable of more overall. It’s why most of the songs are of us being “saved”. Why I was suspected, called a Lannister and a Bolton by vassals (despite how I was forced into the matches), and not crowned, while my “brother”, who had brought wildlings to the North and possibly deserted the Watch, was dealt no suspicion and declared king with fervor. Why I, as a child, was embarrassed by and complained of my poor sister, Arya, who was not seen as beautiful or proper because she had “male” interests. Why your brother thought nothing of selling you off to Drogo. It’s why nearly every family name and fiefdom is carried on through the male line, despite how much more secure and easy the opposite standard would be.

It’s why I was married to Tyrion and to Ramsay, for their Houses to take Winterfell. That, despite the nature of the marriages, the injustices, the violation it would be, that this was a valid way for them to do this. It’s why I was so afraid of conceiving a child with Ramsay: not just because of the personal violation, but because I feared “betraying” my family by producing a “valid” Bolton heir to Winterfell. All while being terrified of not conceiving, as if I proved “useless” to the Boltons, Ramsay would subject me to an unspeakable death, or a fate even worse.

It’s why our lords insisted on “witnesses” to the consummation of my marriage to Jon. Why, before Jon and I confessed our feelings to each other, I wept when my blood came after our wedding.

It’s why my Aunt Lysa lost her mind. Why she had her unborn child poisoned out of her by her own father, why she had so many miscarriages and stillbirths by her loathed husband, why it drove her so mad.

It’s why we hear so much about the “failure of women” to provide children, their infertility, when we almost never hear about the possible incapability of men. Why Maegor the Cruel went through so many wives who “failed” to give him an heir. And no matter how many queens he had, he produced no children. And it just had to be six healthy women in a row who were the problem, not him.

Even those of us women who seem to have risen above all this, who have achieved power, who are privileged, who have authority of our own, we are still shackled in some ways. The only proper ruler is the one who does not belong to his or herself, and knows it.
This applies to both men and women, of course. And of course men must still produce heirs. Part of the reason Bran is not king is because his condition renders him sterile. And they can be subjected to unwanted marriages. But they still, are always, the “owner” of their wife. It’ll ultimately be the wife who suffers more from an unwanted marriage than the groom.

They’re not the ones blamed if something “goes wrong” in that area. They still get to be the heirs over their sisters, regardless of skill or worth. They still get to have as many dalliances and bastards as they like with little to no consequences. While a woman, even ones as pure and dutiful as Queen Naerys, can be persecuted for even a whisper of infidelity, regardless of validity. The Blackfyre Rebellions are the result.

Those of us women who might have a claim to something (only if there are no viable male alternatives, of course), end up being pushed into being. I was the heir to Winterfell for years and all it brought me were two miserable marriages so my husbands could seize my family home.

And even those of us who manage to rise above that? People like us? There shall always be the special pressure. This matter will always be our failure. It’s why Jon felt no fear, just sympathy, when I bled after our wedding, while I was terrified and ashamed of myself. It’s why my pregnancy is only source of joy and excitement for him, and why I am still so scared.

This matter for you would be far, far different if you were a man who was sterilized some way. We both know this. Not least because we were raised to see this thing as the one thing we’re useful for.

The political aspect amplifies it, of course. But this will never be a mere succession crisis. It’s a feminine failure.

It’s not your fault. The world loves to find the fault with us, and we are taught to help them. And perhaps you feel you do deserve some blame for your condition. Would you be blaming yourself if you were a man? If Drogo were alive, would he blame himself for allowing you to keep that witch around? He had the final say, after all. Do you think it might occur to him that maybe the fact that he had you riding around constantly, near such violence, bouncing around on that horse all day, especially someone so young and so unused to such a lifestyle, might have contributed? Do you think he’d wonder if maybe his seed wasn’t strong enough? Men are not raised to think of these things.

Unfortunately, though, this isn’t just a matter of loneliness. You’re not in a position where you can just have your own, personal tragedies. One of the few advantages of being a fishwife instead of a queen is that your infertility doesn’t affect the lives of millions. There is no one in this world, perhaps, who can feel this pressure as keenly as a queen, even the queens who rise above kings themselves.

I understand. I’m so afraid, Daenerys. What if my experiences with Ramsay mean something within me is broken? I’ve had a healthy term so far, but what if I can’t make it to the end? What if something goes wrong, and I lose any ability I may have had to produce children? What if I’m not strong enough?

I feel I should tell you, Daenerys, that I am having twins. It could be a great triumph, I know. I’m sure Jon is delirious with joy (I’ve sent him a letter informing him, but as of writing this, I haven’t gotten a response). And I’m excited as well. But I’m also so afraid. Not one, but two children to carry and birth at once. Twice as many things to go wrong. Twice the strength required. Two children to birth, in winter, in the midst of a war, while I must attend to so many things. I fear for them, myself. I fear for everyone. And, as it turns out, any “failure” on my part could devastate not just myself, but all of Westeros.
I say all this because I want you to know that I truly, honestly, deeply feel so much sympathy for you. I do not hold this against you. I will not say I know exactly what you must feel, but I am close to it, I can imagine it.

But it’s because I am in the unique position to understand that I also can’t merely extend sympathy and comfort to you. And while your condition is not your fault, you do bear some responsibility for the state things are in now, thanks to your concealment.

If I had known beforehand, I feel that perhaps the burden may have been easier on all of us. Especially given the current state of things. This is a matter of such importance, delicacy, and, frankly, urgency, one which has such a momentous impact on our agreements and plans, that it is the sort of matter that would really be best handled if all three of us were together to discuss it amongst ourselves.

Jon is the best of men. The most loving and sympathetic of them. The man that actually can and will help the women in his life. The best man for a situation like this. Men aren’t supposed to be able to respect, care for, empathize, love, and believe in women the way he does. He is still a man, of course. He can’t fully grasp all that this means on a personal level on his own, but he knows that, and he does the best he can do, and has enough sense to defer to us, the ones who do, in many ways.

But he can’t and won’t be excluded from this. He’ll never feel the pain of birth, the discomfort of pregnancy, the stigma of “failure” in this manner, but these are still his children. This is still his future. He can’t and won’t tell us what is right when producing a child, but once said child is produced, he has as much say as we do. These are our children, at the end of the day. They will have his eyes, his laugh, his skin, his height, his hair, and/or his hands. They will have his names. They will be the ones to preserve all he’s done after he is gone from the world. They will possess his heart in a way he, a prodigy when it comes to love, will have never thought possible.

And he is, in many ways, the center of all of this. He is your heir now. He has no choice. He thought he did, but he doesn’t. He is why our children shall be tied to the legacy you have created, regardless of anyone’s wishes. He is the link to the throne we tried to reject. His life is now not merely tied to yours, but woven into it. And, thus, so is mine. Therefore our children as well. And despite everything he’s tried, he’s been robbed of the choice to break away from your world and create his own.

My husband shall not be robbed of any more choices, Daenerys. There can be no more secrets from you. He is not a pawn. We are all fighting, risking so much, for everyone’s future. If he is to be put into this position, he will be allowed to dictate what that means.

And so will I. We’re woven together now. Your future is not your own, Daenerys. Nor is your legacy. I’m sorry. It isn’t fair. None of this is. But we’re all pushed together.

If it comforts you, you may call these unfortunate circumstances fate, or destiny. I just think of them as circumstances. Circumstances that might have been different had we known of this sooner. When we were all together and could have communicated and prepared better, perhaps.

Now, we are separated, physically. And long-distance communication can only do so much. All of us are growing ever-more endangered by the moment. By our enemies, by our responsibilities, by this pregnancy. You are going to fly up to Castle Black soon, but even then, what time will you have to properly handle all of this. You are going to be fighting. Either of you could die at any moment. Both of you could. I am in Winterfell, two children growing in my belly by the day, handling everything short of the actual combat.

Let it be known, Queen Daenerys, no, I will not seek out the assistance of your Hand. In fact, for
reasons I do not feel comfortable disclosing in a letter (yet another limitation that affects our ability
to handle this issue because we didn’t know before), I should inform you that Lord Lannister is in no
way welcome in the Three Realms. We are your ally, not his. I shall be happy to work with nearly
any of your ministers, but not him (or Lord Tarly). If you wish to send someone to collaborate with
me, I suggest Lady Missandei, Lady Olenna, Lord Grey Worm, or even Lord Varys. Your Hand has
relinquished all rights to be welcome in the Three Realms. Indeed, I advised him to have his troops
march here under your banners and not his. Lions shall not thrive in winter.

I hope he doesn’t know your issue, Queen Daenerys. If he tries to interfere with this matter, he will
regret it.

Since matters of life and death are now resting within my body, My Queen, they shall be handled on
terms that best suit me. After all, if I am driven too far, all chances for Westeros to find peace may be
lost.

I don’t want to tell you what to do. I respect you as a fellow queen. I sympathize with you. I want the
best for all of us. But I am a mother now, and as it turns out, not just of children or even just of half
of Westeros, but possibly all of it. I shall not be reduced to a brood mare. Not for you, not for
anyone.

So, Your Grace, I’m afraid some changes and arrangements must be made for the realm we’re all
trying to save. Allowances must be made on your part.

It’s not fair. You didn’t ask for this. None of us did. But all we can do now is control our own
actions. It’s not about us. It never was. It never is. Your destiny may not be what you expected.

I advise you to make your way to Castle Black swiftly, Queen Daenerys, write me every chance you
get, and be patient. If possible, see if you can make a visit to Winterfell at some point. And be as
open and honest with Jon as possible. I don’t expect you to spill all your secrets in letters to me, but
you will tell him everything.

You have not lost your legacy, your future, or your worth. You have not even lost your chance for a
family. It’s not going to be like what you had with Viserys. You’ll have to learn what that means.
And you’re going to have to make further allowances as to what your legacy shall be. We’re part of
it now.

Your Sincerely,

Sansa Stark, Queen of Winter

Daenerys:

The days are shorter, the city colder, and the aura overall more tense. The crowds gather and cheer
wildly when she touches shore. Her court is assembled to greet her. She eschews most pleasantries
and bids her ministers to rattle off all relevant facts and reports as they first stop at the Dragon Pit so
she might greet her children, then adjourn to The Red Keep.

She notices that as they ride, Tyrion receives far less jeering than he used to. She mentions this to her
Hand, who reddens and says he has reduced some of the city taxes in her absence.

Daenerys groans. “I’ll want all the numbers on that, Lannister.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”
She doubts it’s anything too severe. Nothing that wouldn’t be a fair price to pay to make the governance of King’s Landing a bit more stable. But it’s the principle of the thing.

Daenerys languishes somewhat in the pit, reveling in embracing Drogon and Rhaegal, tossing them meat, telling them where she’s been. But she can’t indulge herself for too long, she has to face the world.

At one point, Varys informs her that King Jon and Lord Commander Tollett requested women-at-arms to serve as commanders for a women’s division.

“Upon receiving the request, I sent word to Dorne, urging Princess Ellaria to send her very best to the Wall at once,” the Eunuch says in his high voice, his steed close beside hers. “She agreed. The Sand Snakes, including her daughter Tyene, are among them.”

This upsets Daenerys more than the taxes. “The Sand Snakes are on their way to Castle Black?!”

That is not good. The Starks had made it all too clear what they think of the Sands. She doubts her nephew will be pleased to put kinslayers and “lunatics” as he calls them, among his ranks, let alone in command.

“Yes, we’re very fortunate that those particular ladies possess such a thirst for danger. It may not be fortunate for them, however.”

Daenerys looks to Grey Worm. “Did you approve this?”

He shocks her by nodding. “Desert Kinslayers less trouble in frozen battle. Less of a threat. They less of a threat, their mother is less of a threat.”

She looks back and forth between them. “You mean to-”

“-See how the ladies of Dorne fare in the frozen North, yes.”

Daenerys takes a deep breath. It’s dirty, but then, so is murdering innocents, including children and one’s own kin, for “revenge”. “They’re not well-regarded in the North, and I doubt this decision shall be.”

“We are willing to take full responsibility for it. I’ll personally send word to the Lord Commander and King, if it pleases you.” Varys says, “And as for the Snakes themselves, well, they’ll just have to handle themselves. They do consider themselves strong, as opposed to ‘weak men’, like Prince Doran and Prince Trystane, after all. Surely they can handle some social frostiness as well.”

“You will send word,” Daenerys insists. She’s tired already.

A pile of reports and letters wait for her in her chambers.

After she reads the one from the other queen, she summons her Hand and Varys to her chambers.

Both shuffle in quietly, immediately noting the look on her face and wisely waiting for her to speak. She marches up to Tyrion.


He hesitates, but answers. He tells her about Bran Stark, his suspicions, his confession to the other queen and plea for forgiveness. Daenerys wanted to throttle the man.

“You chose then to plead for forgiveness?!” She demanded. “The moment she’d seen her husband
“I wasn’t sure I’d ever see her again,” Tyrion replies.

“You certainly won’t now!” She reaches toward him, but stops short of actually strangling him. She paces a bit, then finally stops short. Tyrion unpins his Hand badge.

“I am willing to resign, Your Grace, if you wish it.”

Daenerys grits her teeth. “No, not quite, Lannister. Though you are demoted, in a fashion. You’re still Hand, but I no longer authorize you to rule in my stead, alone. Lord Varys, you are officially my Lord Regent and co-Hand. You will serve as Hand of the Queen with Tyrion, and be his superior when I am absent.”

She can tell he’s stifling a smile. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Tyrion, you will have a pin made. And you are going to follow Queen Sansa’s advice. All Lannister troops are to do away with your banners and march under mine while they are in the Three Realms. Do you understand?”

“I gave that order the moment I arrived in King’s Landing, Your Grace.”

She lifts up the missives from the North. “In order to court the proper allies, the queen has requested we contribute funds to show diplomats effective hospitality. She’s sent us cost reports. You’re going to send her all that she asks for and more. You’ll draw up a budget that will leave her campaign to court the assistance we need wanting for nothing.”

“Could we not court some of these allies here, Your Grace?”

“No. Not unless she asks us to. Do as I tell you.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Tyrion says glumly.

“Good. Now leave.”

~ ~ ~ ~

She feels the lack of human companionship when she journeys North with Rhaegal and Drogon. Her children give her some company, but no conversation. She sleeps with them, huddled up against their sides when they stop to rest. The world gets colder and colder.

Her messages from The Wall, from everywhere, really, are sporadic. It’s maddening. She’s reminded of the time Drogon rescued her from the pit, then left her in that field for the Dothraki to find her. Even then, she was panicking about the cities and people she’d left behind. And what she found when she returned brought no relief.

She’s not used to being so cold, though. And aside from that one period with Drogon, she’s rarely been truly alone in many years. At least, not physically. Mentally, though… She’s been alone in the cold before.

There is news, every so often, when she stops down in a well-connected area. Those skilled with a needle are encouraged to make blankets, clothes, and tents for the armies. More and more people are gravitating toward larger population centers: castles, large towns, holdfasts. Many of these areas are already rationing themselves. Attacks from the White Walkers are happening at multiple points at the Wall, and the armies are spreading themselves thin. A popular sentiment is spreading throughout the
three realms that the soldiers are not the only ones fighting the war. That everyone is, as long as they help clear roads, hunt for food, manufacture and deliver vital supplies, defend their homesteads, distribute goods, rebuild shelters, and tend to the ill. Keeping the local roads clear is becoming a community vocation everywhere. Even the little children are encouraged to move snow around. Everyone, from the scullery maids to the fishermen to the shepherds to the carpenters, are counted as vital and useful to the efforts. Even beggars are enlisted to clear snow away, gather firewood, declare news to the villages, and assist craftsmen.

As Daenerys travels further North, she starts spotting another odd quirk: in many villages, and castles, nailed to prominent walls, are artistic renderings of vile-looking crowned White Walker, clearly meant to be The Night’s King. They’re not everywhere, but she spots at least four during her travels. And though they are without any words, the message is clear: this is what is coming for us.

She’s both desperate to get to Castle Black, and afraid. She and Jon did not part on the best of terms. And the worst part is that he has every right to be angry with her.

Daenerys goes over their interactions so many times. When should she have told him? The best she can think of is when she had tea with Sansa, and Jon had come in. She should have told them then. She can’t think of why she didn’t other than… She didn’t want them to hate her. She’d already antagonized them. She just…

It’s not fair, certainly. Not fair to anyone. And she feels so ashamed.

If she hadn’t trusted Mirri Maz Duur, what then? Would Drogo and Rhaego be alive? Would there be other children? Or was she always doomed to produce one dead beast and nothing else? Would she have her dragons?

Would she trade them for children of her own?

She’s not sure.

Daenerys hid Sansa’s letter under her pillow when she was back at the Red Keep, and keeps it inside her doublet throughout the journey. She’s read it repeatedly, not sure how to take all the nuances.

She’s wept over it more than once. There’s not a false word there. And yet, the same, undeniably true words read so different from time to time. There’s always frustration there, and resentment. Always. But sometimes she sees full-blown hatred, sometimes not. Sometimes the sympathy seems to prevail, sometimes it seems more like an indicator of just how overwhelming and predominant the other queen’s rage is. Sometimes, she reads it merely as a build up of a sense of betrayal from Sansa. So much about how women are conditioned to be broodmares and the horrors of that, then later emphasises that she will not be that to Dany. There is still the harsh defense of Jon. And the Queen of Winter makes it all too clear what sort of consequences Daenerys has forced upon them. She lays out neatly how stupid, selfish, and foolhardy the secret-keeping was.

Parts of the letter came off as downright patronizing and condescending. But other times, she read them as nurturing, yet firm.

Then there is all the talk of them being woven together now, of her no longer having her life, legacy, and future to herself. Of not doing anything alone. The chance of family. The opportunity to learn what that means. Of it not being what she knew with Viserys.

Was this a welcome, or a threat? Both? Sometimes, she’s furious with the authoritative, insistent tone. Other times, she feel ashamed, embarrassed. Mostly, she feels scared.
Especially since the only letters she received from Jon were just a few sentences asking about her progress in bringing the dragons to Castle Black and demanding numbers. Even the actual reports from the Wall were issued by Lord Commander Tollett.

She wishes Missandei were traveling with her, as she requested that Missandei head for Winterfell.

Her herald hesitated at first, but relented, setting off via ship for the North.

Daenerys wants to contribute, accommodate. She has to swallow whatever anger she feels right now. Too much is at stake.

And she can’t even know how alone she is. Is she to have a family? Will they find it in their hearts to truly welcome her? Or will she always be, in their eyes, a burden? Someone they’re forced to bring into the fold?

After so many conquests, Daenerys truly feels like an invader.

She has no way of knowing what has passed between the King and Queen in her absence. Perhaps Sansa is truly sympathetic, and if so, has she convinced her husband to adopt the same outlook? Has the opposite happened, with Jon convincing Sansa to loathe her? Are they plotting against her, now? Does her nephew hate her? Is the progress they made during their journey all undone? Will they ever trust her?

How is she going to face anyone, eventually? Her sterility would come out, eventually. It had to. She knows that. But before, she always assumed that it would be far off. That she’d rule for decades, childless, but by that point work something out with her subjects. Maybe find some dragonseeds and train them to control the beasts when she died. Maybe discover some magical means for them to be controlled, or to even restore her ability to have children. Produce a successor by some other means, perhaps selecting one. Or finding a Targaryen bastard and grooming their family to carry on the name. Perhaps even leaving it to Oberyn Martell’s bloodline. They had Targaryen ancestors, after all.

When Jon told her the truth, she wasn’t sure what to think. She held out hope that by the end of the war, the Starks might be more accommodating about unifying. They suggested it was a possibility. If so, after a few decades, when she passed her childbearing years with no children, they might agree to reveal the truth, and they might declare Jon’s line the heirs of House Targaryen. One of his children could be designated as the Targaryen heir. It’s why she took Tyrion’s suggestion of Sansa waiting out the war in King’s Landing seriously.

She didn’t truly believe that the enemy they faced would or could kill them. She thought her dragons would be enough to end the struggle.

Then she saw the enemy. All of them. And she knew the truth.

She could die in this. So could Jon. This wasn’t just some problem they had to nip in the bud before it became a true threat, this already was a true threat.

Telling Jon was unavoidable. There’s no time. None.

Daenerys has feared for a while now that a lack of objective advisors would cause her to lose her grip on reality. It’s clear the damage was already done. She underestimated this threat.

She’s as afraid as she is cold, and she feels more alone than ever.

She clings to her dragons in her sleep. Despite the vastness of her accomplishments and lands, it seems as if they are all she has.
When she finally reaches near the Wall, she greets Viserion by embracing his massive neck. It’s dusk, and all three of her children frolic a bit to celebrate their reunion under a violet sunset.

Eventually, her nephew and a retinue do appear. Jon dismounts from his horse, his expression unreadable, and her offers her a courteous, but stiff greeting.

Their eyes meet, but not for long. He quickly moves to greet the other dragons, approaches them cautiously. At first, the other two, especially Drogon, withdraw from the hand that Jon offers them. There are several fraught minutes as he tries to coax them. When he succeeds, men cheer and express amazement. Jon manages to mount Rhaegal’s back.

At least this part is secure, she thinks, observing him. He’s almost as much of a natural as she is. She clutches Drogon’s snout as Jon interacts with Rhaegal.

Eventually, her nephew dismounts and approaches her. “I hope your journey was untroubled, Your Grace. Your chambers await you. I have had supper ordered, and we’re due to meet for our war council at dawn.”

She nods. “Will you take supper with me, King Jon?”

He hesitates. “If it pleases you.”

They ride back to the castle in silence, only speaking when they arrive and Jon promises to visit her in an hour.

Everything she must say to him, she can’t say publicly.

It’s why she dismisses the spearwives when the food and the king arrive. He seems unperturbed by this, serving himself without comment. Daenerys watches him eat for a while. At Harrenhal, he ate perfectly, with small bites and neat manners. But there is more to the common, hungry soldier to him now. Large chunks, elbows on the table, scooping food into his spoon with his knife.

“Your wife wrote to me and told me of your wonderful news,” she finally says, “She told me you’re having twins.”

“I know,” he says after wiping his mouth.

It’s an odd response. “You… know?”

“Sansa told me. We write to each other daily, and give reports of relevant correspondence. Given the decisions facing us, it’s important for me to know that you know about the twins.”

“Does she divulge all the details of our correspondence?”

“No. That would be a waste of time. Just the relevant things. Like Tyrion, the babes, her statements to you about making allowances for us. How this changes things, why you should have told us about your predicament at Harrenhal.”

Daenerys looks at her plate. “I’m sorry. I truly am.”

“It doesn’t change anything. What matters is what we do now. Sorry isn’t going to help us. Decisions will.” He refills his cup.

Dany swallows. “Well, given the news of your double-blessing, I think it may make things easier, don’t you?”
“Not for the woman who has to birth them.”

“I mean in the long term. It seems simple to me. One twin takes the Three Realms, the other becomes my heir.”

Jon frowns. “And what if your heir decides he’s jealous of his brother or sister and decides to become a new Targaryen Conqueror and flies the dragons you leave him North? Two children, born at the same time, to the same parents, given vastly different inheritances. It doesn’t sound like a balance of power to me.”

“They could each get a dragon.”

“You have three. Who gets the third?”

She groans. “I’m sure we could figure something out.”

“Even if we do, how do we manage their upbringing? How would my son or daughter manage ruling your empire when you’re gone?”

“They’d foster with me, when they’re old enough.”

Jon’s expression is hardly enthusiastic. “Your idea is that one of our children leave us to serve your uses?”

“It would be in everyone’s best interests.”

“Would it? They’re twins. It seems to me this would just be a recipe for setting these two against one another. How do we decide who gets what? What’s to stop the lords from encouraging conflict between them when we’re gone? Their rights will be in exact competition with each other. I’m not interested in fully raising only one of my children just so the two could eventually end up at war with one another. Then there is the matter of Dragon’s Bay? How much time do you think it will take my child to learn to rule that area as well? How much of his or her life will he actually get to spend with his family? How am I supposed to explain that to my child without making them feel less wanted than their sibling? And what if one of them doesn’t survive? What happens to the balance of power then?”

Daenerys closes her eyes. “I don’t know,” she admits, “But I would do whatever I could to avoid disaster.”

“One child would ultimately be raised away from his or her family. One will ultimately get two dragons and two empires, while the other gets one.”

She groans. “What would you suggest, then?”

“I’m not sure. It’s difficult to come up with a perfect solution, alone, while fighting White Walkers. There’s an idea, but it would depend on Sansa and I having three children, not two. And it wouldn’t solve half the problems I laid out to you.”

He stabs at a piece of mutton harshly, glaring into his plate. His frustration burns through him.

“Jon, we’ll think of something.”

“Will we? Or will we be dead before that happens?” He snaps. She leans back, startled by his stare.

“You know, Daenerys, everything I’ve been fighting for, it’s been about the future I could have with
those I love after the war. About being able to go home and live life. We were going to win this war, I was going to go home to my wife and family, safe at last, have my children, govern my people, live, love, and give to the people I care for. I was fighting for a future. Not just for me, but for my family, my men, my subjects. I didn’t want anything but that. But now, defeating the Others isn’t going to be enough. There’s further conflict, further danger, further burdens waiting for us even after this war is won. After it was agreed we’d be alone and safe once this is over. You promised as much. All the while knowing…” He shakes his head. “Now there’s this burden on my children I have to protect them from before they’re born. That’s what they’ll inherit from me, now. Not Winterfell, not peace, not the North. They’re getting strife, burdens, conflict, obligation, estrangement. It’s not as if I planned to live a selfish life. I have intended to fulfill great obligations to others for the rest of my days. But I was promised freedom for myself and my family from this. Now, there might be a whole new war waiting for us after we’re done with the Others. Over my own children. I work so hard to secure at least a few things, to build something to work with, only for it to be blown apart without warning. So much of what we’ve done was based on the arrangement you agreed to, Daenerys. Now, it’s all impossible. How am I supposed to keep this place safe and peaceful, how am I supposed to lead, in these circumstances?”

“There will be no more secrets, I promise,” Daenerys insists, reaching out to take his hand, “We can start there, can’t we?”

“I don’t know, Daenerys, can we?” He looks her in the eyes. “Seven Hells, Woman, what were you even planning to do before? You’ve been hatching dragons and building an empire all this time, knowing there was no one to succeed you. What was supposed to even happen?”

“I was in denial for a long time. And when I wasn’t, I figured I’d find a solution. Maybe find a way to heal my womb, or determine an heir in another way. Maybe find a dragonseed. So much happened so quickly, and I couldn’t look back. If I look back, I am lost. And I had to do it all alone.” Her eyes well up. She tries to hold back her tears, but they fall. “All alone. And no matter what, I couldn’t build a family. Not in the regular way, not through my subjects. Viserys and Drogo were the closest I had, and I lost them. Everyone else, even those I love, I had to lead them. I don’t know what to do, who to trust… I don’t know how to be anything but a Mother of Dragons. All I knew was to keep going, keep going. Pursuing that one goal that kept my brother and I alive when we grew up on the streets. That made me walk into those flames with those three eggs. That spurred me to free the three cities and topple Cersei Lannister. Ultimately, it was only me who could do it, and it was all I could do.”

She finds herself sobbing in her seat. She promised herself that she wouldn’t.

There’s silence for a while. Then she feels a warm hand on her shoulder. She looks up. He stands over her.

“I died alone,” he tells her. “I was lured out to the courtyard, to a sign that said ‘Traitor’, believing there was word that my uncle had survived. That I was surrounded by brothers, and would see a member of my family again. I’d been trying so hard to build my men into brothers. Sam was gone, so was Maester Aemon. Robb. Father. I had no idea where Bran and Rickon were, figured Arya was dead. Sansa was with the Boltons, I believed she would be killed the moment she gave Ramsay Bolton a son. Pip and Grenn were dead. Ygritte was dead. Mance was dead. Lord Commander Mormont. The Free Folk and the Watch were at odds, and I had to keep the peace between them. I tried to mentor one lad, tried to unify all these men so we might have a chance to fight this enemy. No one seemed to understand. And I hear Benjen might not be dead after all, and I rush out. Benjen, who always advised me. Benjen, who would understand. Who loved me. Instead, it was a sign that said ‘traitor’, the brother’s I’d fought with, I’d led, who had named me their Lord Commander, driving blades into me. The lad I took in and mentored among them. And I fell, and I stared at the
sky, bleeding in the snow, alone. They all turned away once I fell. I died alone.”

He swallows. “And when I first came back, it was to find that people were declaring me a god and a savior. More alone than ever, with my cause gone as well, until…”

Daenerys nods. “You understand now? Why you’re so bloody lucky? Imagine that for five years. No sister or true love showing up the moment you’re the most lost to build you up, give you a purpose, and share your crown. Just you, a god for five years, with no option to run away somewhere warm. I never had a Winterfell. I don’t have a Sansa, or Arya, or Bran. I had a name, a cause, and three dragons.”

Jon takes a deep breath and her hand. “Come on.

“What?”

He sighs. “Come with me to my chambers. I want to show you something.”

She rises and lets him lead her out the door and down the hall to the other grand apartments. A curious, white direwolf greets them. Ghost sniffs her, recognizes her, and his tail wags. It gives her some joy.

Jon bids her to go sit by the fire while he retrieves something from the bedchamber. Ghost joins her atop the fur carpet, resting his enormous head her lap. She scratches his ears and waits.

Jon returns with rolls of parchment, takes a seat a few yards from her, and opens the rolls. “Take a look. I get these every week or so.”

Drawn on the large sheets of pink parchment are sketches made up of sweeping, curved contours. She stares at them for a while. She can’t quite figure out what they are, though the answer is in the back of her mind.

After a few seconds, it finally clicks into place. She loses her breath.

“Oh!” She gasps, marveling, tears of a different sort forming in the corner of her eyes, “By Valyria! Is that…?!”

“The family,” he says proudly, “Growing bigger and stronger every day. Your good-niece and grand-nieces and/or nephews. One of the Septas draws these for me, so I can see how they’re growing while I’m away.”

He pauses for a moment to cock his head and gaze at the round, swelling image. “You’re right, I am bloody lucky.”

Daenerys reaches out and runs her fingers around the curve of the drawn belly. “This is really Sansa? She looked so slim when we saw her last.”

“She started swelling a bit near the end,” Jon says, “Not by very much, certainly little enough for her gowns to hide it. You’d have to be paying very close attention, be looking for it, and know her body very well to see it. Once she told me, I was watching very closely. She had a little roundness the night before we left. Of course, once they get to a certain point, they begin to really grow.”

“I know,” she reminds him, “It happened to me, remember? Though not on this scale, obviously.”

“She’s fretting about her waistline already, of course. She’s commanded the whole castle to put her on special food rations after they’re born.” He rolls his eyes. “She says she hates being fat, fears I
won’t want her anymore. I’d do anything to see this in person.”

“It’s ridiculous. When I--” She stops and blushes.

“What?”

She reddens further. “Nothing. I think it’s something that I should be sharing with your wife instead. Talk not fit for menfolk, you see.” She says with a grin.

“Ah.” He reddens a bit himself, and looks back at the paper. “I’d do anything to witness this, to be with her. With them.”

There are a few moments of silence. Finally, she manages to smile. “Well, I suppose we’d better win this war quickly, then.”

They both laugh. It’s bittersweet. Daenerys takes a deep breath. “Thank you for showing me this, Jon.”

He looks into her eyes. “You have a family now, Daenerys, I promise. No one but your family could ever get as mad at you as we have.”

She truly laughs now. “I suppose that’s true.”

“You’re not alone anymore, alright? And you won’t be when this is over. We’re tied together. In fact… I want you to make me a promise.”

“What?”

“If I don’t survive this, you have to watch over them.”

Her breath catches. She doesn’t need to ask who he means.

Jon swallows. “Sansa’s more than strong enough to take care of everyone without me, I know. But I don’t want her to do it alone. Sure, Bran and Arya will help, but she’ll always ultimately feel responsible for them. I don’t think I need to explain that to you. If I’m lost, there’s only one person I know of who can possibly watch out for her along with everyone else. And she deserves that. So promise me, if I can’t, you’ll do it for me. You’ll watch over and protect our family with her.”

“I swear it,” Daenerys says, heart pounding as she grabs his hand “Your family will never be alone. I swear it by the old gods, the new, the Great Stallion and the Mother of the Mountains. I swear it on the lives of my dragons.”

He is about to respond, when there’s a pounding on the door. Her blood runs cold. Both of them know what that means.

Satin, Jon’s squire, comes bursting in. “Your Grace-es!” He cries when he sees both of them. “Another attack! A real one this time! Twice the size of the last two forces combined!”

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Sansa:

Ever since she was a girl, she loved the smell of Winterfell’s Great Hall during a feast. The spices, the meats, the sauces, the baked goods, all wafting through the air. Nutmeg, cloves, garlic, cinnamon, paprika, thyme, and all manner of ingredients would waft through the chamber, and even to the halls around it. It smelled like home.
But those were feasts for Northmen, and a few Southroners. Not so many pampered, perfumed, foreign lords. The oils and scents they douse themselves in overpower the cozy odors of the food.

Many of these men, in their silken robes and face-paint, are reportedly reluctant to bathe regularly in cold weather, even if the castle is heated. Thus, trying to cover their bodily odors with more scents.

It is highly unpleasant. And they banquet so many nights to show the arrivals a proper welcome. Tonight, by Sansa’s side is the latest arrival: Lord Devtar, a green-haired aristocrat and brother to the Archon of Tyrosh, bedecked in a silk robe of canary yellow, kelly green, and violet. He has not quite bathed in cologne yet, though he wears it. But the effect is as bad, since citrusy perfume he chose clashes with the spiciness of whatever he’s used to dye his hair that color.

It’s agony, really. Sansa can smell everything in her condition. Everything keenly. And if it’s not causing her to retch, it’s making her temples throb with pain or her eyes water.

That’s not even the worst part. Apparently, in some areas of the Essos, it’s considered not only appropriate, but proper etiquette for people to walk up to pregnant women and, without even a word, rub their protruding bellies. Indeed, as she discovered in her preparatory work to receive her guests, it’s considered an insult to some who refuse.

The Archon’s brother is one of two emissaries so far to offer her the performance of some sort of ritual, sacred, fertility blessing for her unborn children.

Just this morning, when receiving this man, she was forced to let a priestess dance up to the royal dais, rub her belly rhythmically, chant some sort of prayer, and sprinkle incense on her stomach and thighs.

Even better: the salt, bread, and water. The necessary and customary exchange of bread and salt declaring the rights of guests, hosts, and hospitality. She’s gained a nasty sensitivity to salt, and much ingest rocks of it the size of her small toe to establish the safety of her home and guests.

Accommodating the many envoys is difficult for many reasons, given the amount of people being sheltered within Winterfell. When replying to her various solicitations, Sansa engineered “retinue restrictions” for all visiting envoys. Rule one was that any slaves they tried to bring would become free persons the moment they arrived to the Three Realms. There was also a cap on the size of retinues that she calculated with Arya, Bran, and Lord Wyfred Manderly, the brother of Lord Wyman. Offers were made to provide servants as well, and indeed, this was recommended, as it employed the Northmen and women sheltered within her walls.

Thankfully, Daenerys did provide more than the requested financial input for this. And without question, either. A very good thing, because Sansa had prepared a rather strongly-worded response to any rejection. Detailing the methods of exploitation past monarchs had employed in regards to hospitality in order to render their subjects and/or rivals bankrupt. She’s just glad no accusations were required in order to get the court of the Iron Throne to contribute to their diplomatic expenses.

Wars are expensive, so are guests, and Sansa has many of them.

And they’re difficult to accommodate for other reasons. Some of the more haughty and elitist lords from areas like Qarth and Volantis made noises about having to “fraternize” with the peasants. As in, have any non-perfumed laborers come within ten yards of them. Many of them turned up their noses at the livery of the court staff, with some going so far as to wonder why all the chief servants were uniformed in such “drabbery” as grey and white.

Not that Sansa has put them with the pigs. The Iron Throne’s funding is highly generous, enough for
her to keep guest quarters warm and comfortable, to feed her arrivals sumptuously, and to present each honored guest with iron-wood hilted, decorated knives custom-engraved with the symbols of their respective realms and families interlaced with the Stark Direwolf.

Gifts have been presented as well, for her, Jon, their unborn children, Arya, and Bran. Not just odd, foreign fertility rituals, either.

The best, thus far, has been an offering for Bran from a visiting Merchant Prince of Braavos. A wheeled chair, like one ordered by Prince Doran Martell of Dorne.

It doesn’t allow him to climb stairs, but it does let him move around flat surfaces on his own, and even comes with special wheels for him to use when moving about the grounds.

For this reason and many others, Prince Tynos and the rest of the Braavosi delegation have easily been her favorite guests. The middle-aged prince is not so demanding, but charming and intelligent.

A close second has been the Crown Prince of Walano and his sister, Princess D’Inah, who were the first to present a fertility ritual. Only theirs was less intrusive, and it was an optional offer. The prince and his retinue merely presented her with a beautiful brocade blanket/sling, embroidered with the Stark direwolves and, words written in both the common tongue and the language of Walano to say “of Queen Sansa Stark” and “of King Jon Stark”, with instructions that “son” or “daughter” was to be added before the words when the child was born, and they recited a lovely prayer in their tongue. Prince N’Zingo, tall and strong, in his thirtieth year, is humorous and kind, joking about how in the cold he must wear enough furs to look like a “giant ball of fluff.”

Princess D’Inah is a beautiful, tall mother of three who offers to show Sansa the various ways that the “Pod-ba”, as they call it, is worn, so that she might bind her babe to her back, midsection, or at her hip. Sansa marveled at the gift, exclaiming, quite sincerely, how unfortunate it was that the Three Realms had not invented something so brilliant and practical.

The princess then looked at her and inquired as to how far along she was. When Sansa answered, the princess put her hand to her mouth.

“If only there was a way we could have known you’re having twins!”

It turned out to be an awkward moment, as Sansa hadn’t actually announced this to the court yet. She’d been wearing heavy gowns and such, so it wasn’t as if people noticed that she was that much larger than expected. And she’d not yet finalized the announcement. It caused a stir throughout the throne room, when D’Inah said this.

Later, the princess apologized. No offense was given. But the princess and crown prince had a second Pod-ba made during their visit, one specially designed to accommodate twins.

N’Zingo, D’Inah, and Tynos proved wonderful in other ways: all of them well-traveled and worldly, and offer excellent advice and notes to the Starks about receiving other various envoys.

But for every N’Zingo or D’Inah, there’s three Spice Prince Hotar Mand Zeffers of Qarth, whimpering about gamekeepers ushering pigs in the yard where he can see them, of maidservants daring to look him in the eye, and complaining when the Queen of Winter and Princess of Winterfell do not don the breast-exposing Qartheen gowns he gifts them “properly” during his welcome banquet.

When Sansa asked Prince Hotar if Daenerys had exposed herself thusly when she visited Qarth, he responded that it wasn’t the fashion at the time, “she observed what was.”
Apparently, all women in Qarth, and all women wishing to honor Qarth, are expected to dress themselves in the latest fashions, regardless of what they are, their own customs, age, whether or not the woman is pregnant, or the weather conditions.

Sansa steadfastly had to negotiate her and Arya’s refusal to expose their right breasts to the court.

So many of these people expected to be worshipped.

Still, nothing prepares her for what comes midway through the banquet.

The front doors of the Great Hall spring open, loudly, with one of Sansa’s heralds leading three other people engulfed in expensive, heavy, brightly-colored furs.

The Hall quiets. The page, a young man of Sansa’s age.

“Your Grace, forgive me, but allow me to---”

But the three figures begin walking around him, causing his voice to die away as they approach the high table.

“No one speaks for us, but us,” announces the figure in the center, the tallest of the three, in a heavy accent.

Sansa immediately knows who they are.

All. Three.

Ellaria Sand has sent all three Sand Snakes to them. And not straight to the Wall, but to Winterfell.

Sansa was only partially expecting that. But she definitely didn’t expect how these three arrivals choose to reveal themselves.

They could have simply lowered their hoods, or unlaced their cloaks and handed them off to an attendant. But no.

The whole crowd gasps in horror as simultaneous ripping sounds occur. Brienne and Pod, standing behind Sansa’s seat, step forward, reaching for their steel.

The head of a spear bursts from the front of the center figure, while the figure to her right tears the furs upen with two knives. The only one who does remove her cloak with a blade is the one to the left, who tears hers off, then brandishes a whip. In a clear display of skill, she snaps the weapon towards the others, yanking their cloaks off of them fully, and dropping them at the center of the floor.

All three of the women, all of them in shockingly revealing clothing, much of their exposed skin now chapped gooseflesh, stride closer to the High Table. The center figure, inky black hair bound back in a double-knot, cruel dark eyes focussed on the Starks, holds her spear vertical and plants the blunt end into the floor, lifting her chin.

She is flanked by one woman with a whip, her lips almost blue from cold, her grip on the handle shaky, her black hair woven into a long braid, her yellow silk and brown-leather dress exposing her shoulders and arms (less muscular than the tallest one).

And, the palest and clearly youngest of the three, clutching her daggers as if she’s about to attack, in what looks more like a girdle and the skirt of a short shift, her brown hair cut short and her brown
Sansa instinctively rises and steps to her left. Bran is on Lord Devtar’s other side.

The Sand Snakes and their leader, Ellaria, had proclaimed the news of their coup to all of Westeros, sending ravens all the way to the Wall to declare that they had slain Doran Martell and his son Trystane and seized control of Dorne to seek vengeance and keep “weak men” from ruling their country ever again. They described Doran as a “cowardly, passive cripple”, and that his “Lannister-loving” son would likely take after him, “right down to the gout that rendered our supposed prince too pathetic to even stand on his own.”

Clearly, they thought this would impress the world. They provided exact details, including how Ellaria had cut Doran down right in his chair. How they poisoned Myrcella, and butchered Trystane while he was en route to King’s Landing.

Even the Freys hadn’t slain their own kin at the Red Wedding.

There’s only one person Sansa has met in her life who so proudly slayed their own kin in an effort to usurp them. She had married him.

Envoys and visitors like this were supposed to retire to their quarters and wait to be formally received by Sansa in the throne room if she was otherwise engaged.

Such as with a welcoming banquet for an entirely different diplomat.

The Sand Snakes would have of course, been invited to join, had they alerted Sansa of their arrival. But they hadn’t. They’d barged in unannounced, and brandished weapons in her Great Hall.

Sansa identifies them by the descriptions she’s gotten. Obara, the eldest, so proud of her spear. Nym, the second, always with a whip. Tyene, the third, only Sand Snake who is one of Ellaria’s daughters, eldest of her full sisters, never shy with her daggers.

There’s a difference, though, between being proud of one’s martial prowess and bearing weapons at a banquet, uninvited.

Not even waiting for Sansa to speak--- another outrageous breach of courtesy--- Obara Sand continues. “We are Obara, Nymeria, and Tyene Sand, natural daughters of Prince Oberyn Nymeros Martell of Dorne, High Commanders to Princess Ellaria Sand Uller of Dorne.”

Sansa resists the urge to call for her guards to have them seized at once. It’s with great reluctance that she holds up a hand to stop Brienne and Pod from brandishing their weapons. She represses her fury, and settles for a more neutral expression. Thankfully, she’s taller than Obara. And she makes sure that is seen.

“I guessed as much,” Sansa says evenly, holding her head high and looking deliberately unimpressed. There are titters. She forces herself not to smirk as the arrogant zeal in the Sand Snakes’ eyes dim ever so slightly. “What I cannot guess is why the daughters of a prince and a princess would think it a good idea to brandish weapons within my banquet hall, destroy perfectly good furs, or dress in such a way. Did you not expect the northern winter to be cold, My Ladies, or are you merely determined to return home with as few appendages as possible?”

More titters. Obara Sand glares.

“We dress as daughters of Dorne, act as daughters of Dorne,” she spits.
Interesting. I met your mother and various women in your father’s retinue in King’s Landing, you see. And while their choice of clothing was certainly distinctive, I do not recall this behavior. And it was still warm in King’s Landing. They were daughters of Dorne, I believe. Surely there’s another way to express that here without acting like brutes and exposing yourself to frostbite.” She makes a point of tapping a silver direwolf brooch at her bodice. “Something like this, perhaps, in the sigil of House Martell. Or simply wearing their colors, or some proper embroidery probably would have sufficed. I have heard your country’s craftsmen are beyond compare, I’d like to have seen Dornish work represented more than Dornish violence.”

“This is a war!” Obara insists.

“Indeed it is, were you under the impression that I hosted the Others at my banquets? Or did you mistake your furs for wights? The battles are at the Wall, My Ladies, not at my hearth. I suppose I appreciate the initiative, though I doubt that our enemy has been dealt a serious blow. The comfort and confidence of our potential allies, on the other hand…” She gestures about the room.

“My lords and ladies, I hope you will not take this display as standard Dornish behavior. And I promise you, as your host, that I shall keep my vow to protect you all while you’re in my hall. At most, I will tolerate garden snakes in my great hall, not vipers.”

Tyene steps forward furiously, her blades still out. “You dare--!”

“I dare because this is my home! Do you dare to point your steel at a pregnant queen within her own home?! The chief ally of your liege?! I am the Queen of Winter, Girl, and this is my realm. I have led armies, faced dragons, built castles, killed enemies, and commanded wolves. I have avenged my family, not wasted my time killing cripples, little boys, and girls. These are my walls, by right of blood and right of conquest. Who are you, Tyene Sand, and what have you done, aside from try to show off? What right do your sisters have? Do you think, after word gets out about this display, that I have anything to lose by having you cut down where you stand?”


“True in Dorne, perhaps. This is the North. Even now you shake,” Sansa sneers, gesturing toward Tyene’s trembling hands, “Not even before the winds of winter, but within our halls. I doubt you can even move your fingers properly, wield your weapons properly. Your fingertips are turning blue. So are your sister’s lips. I do not presume to know how to survive the deserts of Dorne. Why do you think yourself so mighty in the snows of the North? No one has asked you to bow, to bend, or to break. You’re not interesting enough for anyone here to bother. You’re so determined to play at intimidation that you’re doing it to yourself.”

Nym comes forward, pushing an outraged Tyene back. “Stupid slut,” she sneers at her sister before directing her gaze toward Sansa, “Your Grace, we apologized if you have taken offense at our introduction.”

“--Really? You have given every indication that this was your intention. Indeed, I cannot fathom any other goal you could have had, than to offend this court. What was your desire, if not that?”

Arya, at this point, adds, “Perhaps, if we knew your aims, we could teach you how to aim better.”

Sansa snickers at this, sharing a sidelong grin with her sister.

Nym hesitates briefly, clearly incensed. “We only sought to assure you of our strength, give you confidence in our abilities to fight at the Wall.”
“You’ve missed the mark, Lady Nym. I don’t see strength. You’ve reminded me of my brothers and sister when they were around five or six, brandishing wooden sticks and declaring themselves to be Aemon the Dragonknight, Garth Greenhand, and Visenya Targaryen. Arya now inspires my confidence, but she wouldn’t if she acted like this. I would feel more comfortable sending my little brother to the Wall and Beyond. He’s actually been there.”

She notices how all three Sand Snakes are shaking from cold and anger and groans.

“For pity’s sake, will someone bring these three something to cover themselves with and some hot soup?! If they shake anymore, they’ll end up rocking the entire castle!”

Obara, her lips and fingertips purple, actually drops her spear. “Our mother and Queen Daenerys sent us to the Wall, not you.”

“And yet, you’re here instead. And I assure you, Lady Obara, I have more than enough power to have you three sent back to the Water Gardens with your tails between your--- well, I suppose snakes don’t have legs, do they? You certainly won’t join our troops, let alone lead any, if you continue to behave like this.” Sansa shakes her head and calls for some attendants. “Escort the Sand Snakes to some proper quarters. Get them warm clothing, baths, and food. They can attempt a proper court debut again tomorrow. Mya?”

Her chief maid, who is always nearby, comes up to her. Sansa leans over to whisper in her ear. “Have all of their things searched and their weapons and any poisons they might have confiscated.”

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Jon:

It’s not the whole army. He’s sure of that.

Not that it needs to be, in order for the mold-like image of attacking Others to stretch beyond all horizons.

It doesn’t need to be the full army for any reason, really. It’s too much for any coy games to be played. The Night’s King wants to see their hand, and he shall.

Or, some of it, anyways. The Big Secret shall finally be revealed. But as Jon marches through the lines, he smells vomit and piss from the men, sees their petrified faces.

They are not prepared for this.

Their prior victories over the small offensive parties instilled them with confidence. Over-confidence, even. Jon had tried to communicate just how vast their enemies’ forces really were, but one can only convey so much through word.

Jon doesn’t feel hopeless, though. They can win this. In a manner of speaking. He doubts the Night’s King thinks to destroy the Wall with this attack, just damage it.

But damage it enough so they can destroy it next time.

They can stop that, he’s sure they can. But it won’t be easy. The men and their morale are already shaken. This won’t be their best battle. Their best shall be when they have three dragons and their army feels ready to take on the enemy.
Among his largest concerns is the fire trench. They’ve improved their ability to employ it. But men in this state might not be up to it. One man losing his nerve could end up killing another dozen.

And they need their numbers.

Daenerys seems to notice this as well. “We have to get out there quick,” she remarks to him as they survey the scenes below from atop the Wall, “And do as much damage as quickly as possible before they get too close.”

Jon nods. “There’s no going back now.”

The one advantage to this? If they triumph, it could be the enemy who is damaged beyond repair, not them.

He’s not going to expect that. He expects a draw. Planning for the worst has served him well in battle thus far. But he shall not ignore any opportunities.

The Night’s King wants to see their fire? Let him.

He declares as much, making a point to stand before so many men and speak to them. Daenerys helps by rising, atop Drogon’s back, flanked by Viserion and Rhaegal, behind him as he finishes. Men cheer, and Jon hurries to mount the white dragon.

He almost hears music in his head. The battle is very much a blur. Except for the end of it. That he recalls vividly.

When he sees him. When he sees the King himself.

The monster sits atop a glowing spider the size of a horse. He’s not guarded, surrounded by his spectral ranks. No, he and his steed are atop a hill, alone.

And Jon just knows. This is where it ends. This is where it could oh so easily end. Before it really began.

One king kills another. The living one vanquishing the dead.

Their eyes do meet for a split second, just as they once did at Hardholme. This time, Jon has magic of his own. And so much more to fight for.

But then, a gust of wind seems to slams into him, into Viserion, harder than any armored knight. And he’s not in control anymore. Not at all. The ground grows closer. There are shrieks, so many shrieks.

His last thought, before the world goes black, is that he’ll never meet his children.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't hate me for this cliffhanger. But let me know what you guys think, otherwise. I was originally going to end this chapter with the Sand Snakes, but I started writing 16 and I knew this had to be the end of this chapter.
Bonding

Chapter Summary

Bran and Arya have a row. Missandei of Naath arrives at Winterfell.

Chapter Notes

Yay! My first Bran POV! I'd like to thank ohdede.tumblr.com for her beta-work, and also the-winged-wolf-bran-stark.tumblr.com for the character notes!

This chapter is a bit more of exploration of some unsung characters in both the show and this fic. I noticed that I've called this "The Starks Endure" but didn't include much of the other Starks, which is an issue. Part of it was the Harrenhal setting for a while. And I also got really invested in Dany, but I loved writing Bran in this and am looking forward to exploring him and Arya more. Also, Missandei, who, as a character, has so much potential (given her background, culture, choices, and history. And I actually think her greater age adds an interesting dynamic to this as well [though her age in the books also has an interesting dynamic too, but a different one]) yet is so unexplored (and yes, I find this to be a fault in the books as well). I would LOVE some Missandei POV chapters. She's a former slave whose entire job was negotiating slave deals in a variety of languages. She's part of Dany's campaign, but came from a culture of extreme pacifism. Out of all the characters, she would have seen the most of the inter-dealings and operations of the Masters and the slave trade itself. So yeah, there are bits of this where I do a little self-inserting with Sansa in this chapter, what with the way the conversation goes. But only a little, I swear.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bran:

Maester Luwin and Robb told him that after he fell, Mother refused to leave his bedside. She would not leave to eat or bathe or rest. She only left the room after an assassin came. She became determined to discover who threw him off the tower and who wanted him dead.

Catelyn Stark was gone by the time Bran finally woke. Soon after, when word came that Father had been arrested, Robb and Theon left too.

Only Theon returned, to drive them from their home.

Bran remembers Rickon’s fears, his cries about everyone leaving. Long before anyone knew what would truly happen. Rickon cried about it when Father was alive, when Robb was still home, when Mother was just traveling. According to Robb, he cried this way when Father, Jon, Sansa, and Arya first left. When no one imagined that this would be the last many would see of each other.

Bran thought his brother a child. To be fair, he was. Rickon was just a babe.
But he was right. Bran may be the greenseer, but Rickon was the one who knew things.

Ever since he learned the horrors the Children of the Forest wrought upon this world, he’s had an uneasy relationship with the Old Gods. But every night since returning home, he prayed to them to let everyone come home. He knew better than to pray that no one would leave. Of course Jon would have to, at the very least. But he begged the gods for his last brother to return quickly.

Well, that prayer had been answered.

He’d been practicing with his wheelchair in the Great Hall, doing turns, delighting in being able to move like this himself. The chair has been a blessing beyond compare. It has made him feel stronger, less broken. No more having to be carried around like a child wherever he goes. No more being limited by the distance of a few feet.

He still needs to be carried up stairs. But upon flat ground, he can move as he pleases.

And he’s truly stronger. The chair requires him to move himself with his arms, of course. He did employ his arms to move before, such as with the system of hanging bars in his bedroom so he could pull himself up. But ultimately, to really go anywhere, he had to be carried. Now, he carries himself. As it requires more strength in his arms. Now, he goes to the practice yards with the other men, riding with the special outside wheels, and he lifts weights to build up his strength so he can move himself more-move himself faster. His arms and chest are expanding.

It makes him feel like a man. He’s willing to bet in a few moon turns, he’ll be as strong as any soldier here. He’ll be able to move as fast. He might even find a way to fight like this.

This is even better than the saddle Lord Tyrion made for him. For, one cannot ride a horse through a castle. Now he can pull himself into the chair and wheel himself over to build his own fire, fetch his own clothes, do all sorts of things for himself so many don’t even think about.

He couldn’t wait to show Jon.

The news came in the form of his sisters, entering the Great Hall. He’d smiled at them, wanting to show them some more moves he’d mastered. Usually, both of them were delighted to come see him practice. But they both appeared miserable.

Sansa couldn’t even speak. Arya had to. “Jon fell from his dragon.”

Bran felt as though everything fell apart.

It’s odd, now that he thinks of it, that he felt the need to ask if Jon was dead. Most people would take that as a given. Who survives a fall from a dragon?

But he’s glad he did, now. Because Arya shakes her head. “No. One of the other dragons managed to catch him, but… He’s very badly wounded. And he’s not woken since.”

It’s interesting, experiencing this from the other side. Bran now knows. He apologizes to his dead mother for ever doubting her devotion to him.

Jon is truly wounded. The dragon that caught him, Rhaegal, caught him in its claws, and it was a rough impact. Rough enough to break bones. As the creature’s talons pierced him.

They waited with baited breath, unsure if Jon would live or die.

Eventually, word came. Jon had a good chance, but not if he remained at Castle Black.
He was coming home.

When his brother was carried through the gates, Bran could barely recognize him. His strong, unstoppable, heroic older brother was pale, unconscious, and so frail and vulnerable looking.

Now, he’s settled into the lord’s chambers..

None of them want to leave his bedside.

Bran’s gotten what he wanted: they’re all together again.

The Gods are cruel.

These things aren’t supposed to happen to Jon. Jon came back from the dead! Jon is the valiant King, the prophesied savior, the long-lost dragonlord.

Gods, is this what it was like when he was asleep?

They all talk to Jon, hoping to reach him. Bran even practices and performs on his wheelchair for him. He’d like it if Jon woke up, and the first thing he saw was his little brother moving about as he wished. He thinks that would make his brother happy.

Arya does something similar. She practices with that skinny little sword Jon gave her all those years ago.

Sansa often places Jon’s hand on her belly, particularly when one of them kicks.

It’s so cruel. She has to take on so much. Bran is torn between helping her and tending to Jon.

He wants to tend to Jon, just as his mother tended to him. He can. He can move about as he wishes, keep the fire burning, fetch medicines, assist Maester Syrus, feed him. He’s stronger now.

Jon, powerful, warrior Jon, King Jon, does not move. They have to bathe him, moving his body about and scrubbing him down. He has to wear large nappies, like an overgrown babe. The only way to feed him is the same way they fed their wolves when they were just pups: soaking cloths in milk or broth and putting it to Jon’s mouth.

Ghost is always by his side. Bran sometimes directs what he wants to say to Jon towards the wolf. He remembers being Summer. Perhaps Jon is inside Ghost. Perhaps he’ll wake becoming a greenseer as well, stronger than ever.

If and when he wakes up, he’ll be able to walk. He’ll recover. His left arm is severely damaged, but Crowley says that with enough work, Jon will regain his ability to use it.

Bran is alone with his brother now, as his mother was once with him. He keeps hoping that if he makes enough contact with Jon he might be able to speak to him, or see him, somehow. Perhaps see when he’ll come back.

Even now, he grip’s Jon’s hand desperately, screaming inside his head at his powers. He’s so angry, so frustrated. What is the use of these visions if he can’t see this?! Bran thought he’d made progress with these things. But no. He sees nothing, no matter how hard he tries.

They call Greenseeing a gift. But for Bran, it’s a curse.

The door opens. Bran opens his eyes. Arya enters, dressed in a new set of leathers. Their eyes meet.
Since they all returned to Winterfell, the two of them have been partners in their own way. And really, it’s been a surprising arrangement.

Growing up, Bran was closer to the eldest of his sisters. While Arya shared more interests with him, if anything, that drove a gulf between him. He wanted so badly to become a knight, to be a great warrior, to be like Robb and Jon. And he got all manner of training from Ser Rodrick.

Arya was a girl, she was supposed to spend her time with Septa Mordane, learning things as becoming of a lady. But she always managed to pop up in the yards. She’d appear, much to Robb and Jon’s delight. And, without the benefit of proper training from their master-at-arms, she could outrun, outride, outshoot Bran, always. She was stronger, faster, and more coordinated than he was. There was only a year between them, and she’d had far less training, and was a girl, yet she always showed him up.

She also had that special bond with Jon that Bran resented. There was this understanding between them. Not wanting to be outmatched, Bran tried to attain the same thing with Robb, and with Jon. But he could no more do that than beat Arya in a race, or at archery. He was always being beaten by a girl. And she wasn’t even supposed to be there!

Arya, in turn, resented him, because his efforts at being a knight were always encouraged. He got to train with Ser Rodrick, he was never called away to spend hours stitching by Septa Mordane, or scolded for not being a lady. He was allowed and encouraged to run, jump, and fight, while Arya was treated like a disappointment for not being a proper lady like Sansa.

Sansa, though, she was never threatening. She and Bran adored one another. She had no interest in challenging Bran at riding, shooting, or anything, really. She was always happy to cheer on her efforts, and seemed to be the only one who didn’t cheer and smile when Arya would beat him at things. She was always happy to encourage him, to play with him and let him pretend to be her knight. She loved telling stories, and was one of the few people willing to tell him the scary ones, though she didn’t like them herself. She’d finish her stories by reminding him that nothing could hurt him when he ducked under the covers.

They’d trade fantasies, too. About how Sansa would become queen or a great lady some day, and Bran would be a knight and protect her, perhaps join the kingsguard. They’d also complain about Arya. Sansa would sew him little favors, and wouldn’t roll her eyes when he cried over scraping his knee.

Bran remembers being so jealous of Rickon, whom Sansa carried around and played with. Apparently, she’d done the same for him, when he was an infant.

Bran’s relationship with Arya wasn’t as strained as the one she had with Sansa, but they weren’t as close.

And yet, when Bran was on the run, he did miss Arya a great deal. Perhaps because Meera reminded him of her so much. And when he returned to Winterfell, the world seemed to be turned upside down.

Sansa and Jon, who had never been close, had now fought a war together, were ruling the kingdom together, had returned home together. They’d rebuilt the home Bran returned to as a pair. And thus, they were thick as thieves. Bran was a late arrival, but so was Arya.

It didn’t seem right. I had always been Arya who was Jon’s best sister, and Sansa was Bran’s. But now, Jon had gotten close to Sansa in a new way, one that turned out to be even more intimate than what he shared with Arya. Bran wasn’t aware of the exact nature of it at the time, but what came
later didn’t end up surprising him.

Indeed, he actually resented Jon a bit in those early days, for taking up so much of Sansa’s time. For seeming to always get all the closest bonds— with Robb, with Arya, and now even with Sansa. And Jon’s responsibilities as king took up his time as well. Time he spent with, well, Sansa.

Arya wasn’t exactly thrilled with that, either. She never admitted it, but Bran could tell there was some jealousy there. Jon was still the kindest, most loving brother, but he simply could not spend all his time with his younger siblings. He had a kingdom to rule. One he’d built with Sansa. One Sansa was ruling with him.

Her time was preoccupied by this as well, being the unofficial Queen Regent. She didn’t have time to spend hours telling scary stories before bed anymore. She spent her evenings with Jon, going over documents. They were both so busy.

Leaving Arya and Bran, the late arrivals, the ones who didn’t fight that war with them.

That was the beginning of their intensifying bond. Bran began appreciating the younger of his sisters more and more. He now knew the frustrations of being restricted from pursuing knightly, heroic dreams. She was the one who had more time to go riding with him, and she didn’t try to race ahead of him all the time anymore. Their experiences, as it turned out, were very similar. They’d both become fugitives and brigands more or less, acquiring, then ultimately losing, a sort of motley crew. He had the Reeds, Osha, Hodor, and Rickon. She had Gendry and Hot Pie. Both of them had been courted by a magical group, and ultimately journeyed to these sacred places to be trained in these mystical disciplines. Both ultimately rejected and struggled with these orders. They even felt guilty for being a part of these things. Jon and Sansa, as a man of the Night’s Watch and a lady of various courts respectively, were operating within institutions. But Bran and Arya were nomads with mysticism trailing them.

Bran found himself confessing more to Arya than he ever expected. About the Three-eyed Raven, about his confusion over what was happening to him, about the mysteries he encountered, about his journey, about his shame over what happened to Hodor, about watching so many die, about his feeling of betrayal after learning what the Children of the Forest had done, about his self-disgust in being part of that. And she understood.

Sansa and Jon were kind, and they pitied him, and they tried to reassure him. But only Arya truly understood.

They both also wanted to prove themselves, be the support system that their older siblings clearly needed. They both wanted to do right in serving the North. They actually worked together to learn as much as they could about governance, current affairs, and all manner of vital matters while Jon and Sansa were working.

Jon and Sansa had more or less finished their education. Jon was ten and eight when he left. Sansa had continued to take full lessons when she was in King’s Landing, and she’d always been particularly academic, so by the time she returned to Winterfell, she’d gotten all of her lessons. But both Bran and Arya were on the run as children, their educations cut off prematurely. So they decided to rectify this together.

As a result, they ended up running Winterfell while the king and queen were away as well.

Learning together and relating to one another was one thing, but actually accomplishing something as significant as “protecting and managing a country” together was another. It brought their bond, their partnership to a new level. And though Bran’s relationship with Arya would never be like Jon
and Sansa’s, he did gain a new understanding of how much a bond, even a platonic one, could grow after something like that.

He’ll never be a knight, perhaps, but working with Arya as they had made him feel like a comrade-in-arms, fighting his own war alongside her.

In a way, he almost feels like the Sansa to her Jon, in a sibling-like way.

Bran gives her a sad smile, and reaches out a hand, gesturing for her to sit beside him. She does, pulling up a chair. Ghost rests his head in her lap. They both smile and stroke his ears.

They sit in silence for a while. They don’t really need to speak at first. But eventually, she asks in a quiet voice, “Were you trying again?”

He nods. “I feel so useless. What is the point, if I can’t even see what’s happening to my brother?”

“To see other things, I suppose. Not the things you’d prefer, though.” She sighs. “Magic, eh? It never actually lets you use it the way you wish.”

She’d know. She entered the House of Black and White to learn their arts so she could kill as she wished. She ended up only being penalized for it, and commanded by the order to kill people she’d rather save. She almost died as a result.

Bran nods. “Maybe I could, if I’d had more time with the three-eyed raven, but…”

“I doubt it. That bastard was in league with the children. Besides, I doubt he would have wanted to be where he ended up. He was molded to a tree, for the Stranger’s sake. You’re not, though, so thank the Seven for that.”

“That’s more from a product of accident, though. If the White Walkers hadn’t arrived, I’d probably have ended up like him, regardless of what I wanted.”

“So? The point is that you didn’t.”

“True.” He leans back in his chair and sighs. “I seem to gain more and more freedom as time goes on. And yet, I still can’t do the things I truly want.”

“Yes, I suppose Sansa was right, damn her. Even with choices, we’re still ultimately at the mercy of the world around us. We can’t dwell on what we want, but what we can do and what is around us.”

He nods. “All the power and skills in the world,” he says, looking at Jon, “All the talent, all the freedom, and it can still all come apart. Even the Children of the Forest had no way of knowing or understanding what would happen when they created the White Walkers. But I’m still going to try. I still have to act. We all do.”

His expectation is for Arya to nod and agree at once. But there’s a short pause. And she sighs.

“Yes,” she replies, “And… In fact, that’s what I need to speak to you about. I have something to tell you.”

His stomach sinks. It doesn’t take a greenseer to know that whatever this is, he’s not going to like it.

He looks at Arya. “What?”

She clears her throat. “I’ve spoken to Sansa and finally convinced her. I’m going to the Wall.”
Bran grips the hand-rests of his wheelchair. “What? Now?”

“In a couple of days,” she answers, “I’m headed to Queenscrown, to help command the women’s forces. There needs to be a Stark at the Wall, and I must fight. Especially now that Jon is ill.”

“That’s not necessary!” Bran protests. Despite Jon’s injury, that battle turned out to end very advantageously. The enemy forces ultimately took major losses, diminishing their forces to a significant degree. Since, Daenerys, Lord Commander Tollett, Davos, and Grey Worm had done wonders. The Greyjoys officially joined the conflict as well, greatly enhancing the rate of transport and their forces access to other areas of the continent. More people were getting to the Wall faster thanks to the Iron Fleet, more supplies and weapons were being delivered, and faster. Sansa was securing more allies, and thus, more men and more resources, almost daily. Their side was actually thriving, in spite of Jon’s incapacitation. Arya didn’t need to go. Arya didn’t need to leave.

She’s wanted to leave, though. She’s wanted to fight. And Bran has, quietly, been trying to keep that from happening all this time, dropping little comments to Jon and Sansa, maneuvering various situations to keep her here.

He’s been distracted since Jon returned home, though. He hasn’t been paying close enough attention.

“It is, though, Bran. They need more commanders. Especially female ones. Since word got out that women warriors can fight openly, there have been more and more arriving. And now that Jon is back here, there’s no Stark presence to keep the Iron Throne from overtaking everything. Our country needs to be properly represented on the battle lines. The Starks can’t all be within Winterfell’s walls as the war continues at The Wall. One of us has to be there, if only to assure everyone that we’re fighting as well.”

Bran’s eyes narrow. This doesn’t sound like an argument Arya would make. Not at all. Since when has she cared about appearances or maneuvering? “You sound like Sansa.”

“I meant to. Now, and when I said this to her earlier and got her to agree,” Arya answers, “I wanted to present an argument she’d understand.”

He’s known for a while that Arya wanted to go, but only now does he realize how much. Tears prick at the corners of his eyes. “You can’t leave Winterfell, Arya. Not now. Please. We need you here. I need you here.”

“No, Bran, you don’t. We all need to do our duty. With Jon out of action, I’m the warrior of House Stark. I need to be where the war is. I can do more for us there than here.”

“What good will you do us by getting yourself killed?” He demands. “Jon’s already half-dead. Do you honestly think we could stand to lose you? What do you think will happen if you died? Did you think of what it would do to us?”

“I’ve suffered all the same losses you have, Bran. I know how it hurts,” she says, “But if we could stand to send Jon, then we can all stand to send me. I’m no less expendable than our big brother. Quite the opposite.

Bran shakes his head. “Don’t ever say that. None of us are expendable.”

Arya looks at her lap. “That’s a nice thought, Bran. But it doesn’t change the fact that we must do what we can. I’m now the only one who can fight on the front lines. I have to.”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe Jon is here for a reason? That things at the Wall are being managed without him for a reason? We’re meant to stay together, Arya.”
“Or maybe the reason for all this is that it’s time for me to rise. Maybe that’s why the female forces have risen like this.” She frowns. “Bran, you don’t know that I’m not coming back. The war is going very, very well. I won’t be falling from any dragons. I’m better trained than I’ve ever been. I’ll be one of so many, and a commander. And do you honestly think that there won’t be any special care taken by our forces to protect the Princess of Winterfell? I’ll probably be surrounded by guards the entire time, insulated from the worst of it. Seven Hells, I bet that as we speak, Sansa is writing a letter to Daenerys, the Lord Commander, and everyone else there threatening to destroy them all if they let me so much as break a nail. I’m not some random common foot soldier in rusted mail. I’m a high-status, highly-trained, fully-equipped officer and princess.”

“Jon was a king.”

“A king who was one of only two people who could fly a dragon. That doesn’t apply to me.” She puts a hand on his shoulder. “Bran, I’ll be fine. But I need to do this.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you haven’t seen the enemy. I have.” Just the thought of Arya anywhere near those creatures makes him sick.

“Maybe, but I will. I have to. And I promise you, I’ll do whatever it takes to come home. But I’m not a child anymore. I’m a fighter. I spent my whole life refusing to be locked up in a tower while men fought and died for me. It’s time that I make good on that.”

“You fought your way through Westeros, to Braavos and back. You don’t need to prove anything!” He takes her hand, tears falling.

“I fought for myself, and took vengeance. It’s time I protect others, Bran. I’m doing this.”

“I’ll never forgive you, if you leave,” Bran snaps. He’s done. He can’t do this. Rickon’s cries echo in his ears. We have to stay together! Everyone is leaving, and they’ll never come back!

“You don’t mean that.”

“Oh really? Jon is in a deep sleep, his chest ripped apart. Sansa is weeks away from delivering twins. What happens if they die? Did you think of that? Are you content to leave me all alone? Possibly to rule these realms and raise those children on my own? Because that’s what’ll happen. You leave and get yourself killed in the war. Sansa dies in childbirth. Jon doesn’t survive this. The twins will be not only the heirs to the North, but the only scions of House Targaryen, and the only one that will stand between them and Daenerys Targaryen, the Others, and a thousand ambitious lords, will be me. And I can’t even stand. Why should I forgive you for that? We were supposed to do this together, remember?”

Arya’s face falls. “Bran, we’ve all been in danger this whole time. We’re not safe until this enemy is defeated and the realm is secure. I have to do whatever I can to see that happen.”

“You’ll accomplish nothing if you end up torn apart by wights!”

“Something that could easily still happen no matter where I go!”

“Don’t pretend it’s the same thing!” He feels condescended to. “You’re just abandoning us to serve your own self-pride!”

“What?!?”

“You’re not going off to fight to protect us or to represent the family or whatever you told Sansa. You’re doing this because you’ve never been able to get over being a girl,” Bran snaps, “Because
you will never forget being told you couldn’t be a warrior. Because you had to be a lady. You’re not doing this for us, you’re doing this for yourself, to prove everyone who ever denied you wrong. You just want everyone to see what a great warrior you are, how everyone was wrong about you. You’d rather die with a blade in your hand like a valiant knight than stay home and support your family like a lady would! You’re probably happy that Jon ended up like this, so you could try to be the ‘Stark Warrior’!

Arya gets to her feet, tears leaking from her eyes now. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“I do, Princess. Lady. You could never be that, and you know it. You want to be something, prove something. You want to be a warrior the way you could never be a lady. And you don’t care who you have to leave behind to do it! But guess what, Arya? You’ll always be a lady. Never the lady that Sansa was. And you’ll never be the warrior that Jon is, either. You’ll never protect anyone. Because it’s only ever going to be about you and what you want. What you have to prove. It won’t matter how many enemies you kill. You don’t care about protecting us. You care about proving everyone wrong. You still will always be that spoiled little girl, jealous of her sister, trying to be a boy, showing off and embarrassing her little brother, all to make people think she’s more than just the ugly sister who can’t sew.”

“Shut up!” She yells, openly weeping now.

“Why should I? You never did. You never shut up about how much better you were with a bow, how much faster you could run and ride, how much stronger you were than me. You never shut up when Sansa or Mother or Septa Mordane would ask you not to say things that would offend people and embarrass everyone. You never shut up about how stupid and useless other girls are, and how you could do boy things better than any other boy. Or about how terrible things were because you’d never be as pretty as Sansa and how much you hated her and how mean Septa Mordane was. Now you won’t even stay home to support your family and help them run this country and support your sister as she’s about to give birth, your brother as he recovers from a terrible wound. You just want everyone to think you’re strong, that being strong is all about swinging a sword and that it will prove it. Well, abandoning us isn’t strong, Arya. It’s selfish. You just want to show us up, do all the things we can’t. Hit the bull’s eye. Fight in the war. Well, go, then. If you don’t care enough about us to stay here, if you want to leave Winterfell so badly, go ahead. Leave. We won’t care about you anymore, either.”

Tears run down Arya’s face in rivers. “Don’t blame me for the fact that you can’t control your visions or walk, Bran. It’s not my fault.”

He gapes at her. “That’s not—”

“—Isn’t it? You’re the one who wishes he could fight. I have fought. I don’t need to prove to myself that I can after I fed Walder Frey his own sons. All the things you said about Sansa and I? No, that’s how you view me. You’ve never been able to handle that a girl could outfight you. You can’t stand the fact that you never got to become a knight. That you can’t join the ranks yourself. And you’re angry that you can’t even control your visions, the very thing that was supposed to make up for your legs. You want me to see myself as the ugly sister who can’t sew, because you feel like the crippled brother with the weird dreams, and you want me to be in the same place you are. It’s not about being together. If that was really so important to you, you’d have shown Jon the same cruelty you’re showing me. But it’s not. It’s about wanting to keep me in the same spot. It’s about how you haven’t forgiven yourself for sending Rickon to the Umbers. It’s about being afraid of being the only Stark who hasn’t done anything. It’s about being beaten by a girl. Well, it’s not my fault that I can stand and you can’t, Bran. It’s not my fault your visions can’t be controlled. And I’m not going to restrict myself just for your sake. You’re not the only person I’ll be fighting for! You’re the one who won’t
move on from our childhood, not me!"

He wants to scream. He does. “SHUT UP! YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU’RE TALKING ABOUT!”

“I DO!”

Bran cannot stand this anymore. “Just... Just go. You don’t care about your life, fine. You don’t care about me or any of us. All you care about is glory. About everyone being wrong about you. Well, I was wrong about you, Arya. You got your wish. I was wrong to think you really cared about any of us.”

The room is silent, but for their heavy breathing. Their eyes are locked on each other. They’re both furious. He waits for her comeback. As more time stretches, he wonders just how right he is, given his sister’s apparent lack of reply.

Finally, she bites her lip. “I love you, Bran. I always will.”

She then approaches the bed, moving around the chairs, and presses a kiss to Jon’s forehead. “And you, Jon.”

Bran begins wheeling himself towards the door, furious. He has nothing to say to Arya anymore. He wheels down the hall.

“Where is the queen?!” He barks at the first guard he comes across. The man looks startled.

“I--- I’m not sure, my prince. I think court is taking place.”

Bran groans. “Then get me and my chair to the main floor.”

He’s too angry to even care about having to be carried. He just wheels himself as fast as he can to the throne room.

Court is indeed in session, and Sansa is on her throne, listening to a woman’s petition. But their eyes meet across the room when he enters.

She finishes a couple more petitions, then declares court to be at an end. Her face is crestfallen as she issues a few directions, then hurries over to Bran. “Let’s talk.”

Bran nods. "The crypts."

She has Brienne and Pod carry him and his chair down before dismissing them both. The two siblings begin walking down the dark halls, past the various graves. Bran hasn't been down here in weeks, he can barely stand it anymore. He feels the cold stares of his ancestors. He doesn't come down here often. After all, how can he face the memories of the Great Men of Winterfell when he's so broken? Not for being a cripple (he never had trouble entering the crypts before he met the Three-Eyed Raven), but for failing the Old Gods so much as a Greenseer.

Even worse, Rickon's bones are down here. And that's his fault.

And that's exactly why he's brought them down here, despite the discomfort. Sansa is about to let Arya run into danger, just as he had with Rickon. That can't happen.

His sister speaks first. “I know you’re upset, Bran, but---

“-But nothing. How could you do this? How could you let her go?”
Sansa closes her eyes. “With Arya, Bran, it’s ultimately not a matter of ‘let’. She was always going to go, eventually. I’d rather have her do it with our well-wishes and proper good-byes than a resentful escape. Arya will always eventually do what Arya wants. There was no way this war would end without her entering the trenches.”

“You could stop her,” Bran says, “Jon is back here because of a wound.”

“Are you suggesting that I somehow engineered that? Are you suggesting that I engineer an assault on my sister to keep her home?”

“The latter, not the former,” Bran replies grimly. He looks up at the stone eyes of his brother's statue. “I just mean that she can’t run off to war if she were—”

“-No, Bran. Absolutely not.”

He cringes. “Wouldn’t you rather have her here, where she’s safest?” He gestures towards Rickon's tomb, “Is this what you want? To have a statue of Arya right next to him? Knowing she might be alive if not for decisions you’ve made?! Are you not at all afraid for her?!”

"It wasn't your fault. You sent Rickon to people who should have been loyal to keep him safe. You never could have guessed they were traitors." Sansa reaches out, her expression sympathetic. “And of course! I’m terrified for her. But I spent our entire childhood trying to make Arya into something she isn’t, trying to force her to live her life according to what I wanted. It never accomplished anything. It certainly didn’t keep her safe. I can protect her more easily by knowing exactly where she is, where she’s going, and who she’s with. I’m not going to let her run out in the open, weapon drawn. I’m going to know what she’s doing and who is watching over her the whole time she’s there.”

Bran is startled by this. “Arya said something like that.”

“Arya isn’t stupid.” Sansa stands straight and smooths out her blue wool gown. "And the two of us have reached an understanding. She realizes that I’d ever simply let her go unprotected again. I’m not Father.”

“What do you mean?”

Sansa looks at him. “You know how Lady died.”

Bran's stomach sinks. He saw it. Perhaps his very first vision, though he can't be sure. The dreams he had while in his sleep were so muddled. “The fight Arya got into with Joffrey.”

“Yes. Something that never would have happened if she’d been supervised while she ran off to play with Mycah. Even after that, after she almost died, and Lady had been killed, Father kept letting her run amok through King’s Landing, despite it being a dangerous city that was run by the Lannisters. I’m not going to make Arya be someone she isn’t, Bran. I accept her for who she is. But I’m not going to let her go unprotected. She can raise as many blades as she wants, but not without a shield.”

“Shields can shatter, Sansa.” He remembers Jory.

Sansa nods. “Indeed. And walls can fall. And armies can fail. And none of us are safe until this enemy is gone. But I’m going to be the big sister she always deserved.”

Bran, still frustrated, changes tack. “How do you think Jon will react? When he wakes up, expecting to see his whole family, only to learn that you sent Arya off to fight the Others?"
“Oh, he will be very upset, I’m sure. But he’ll understand. He knows as well as I do that Arya would inevitably end up at the Wall. He’s the one who gave her her first sword, for pity’s sake. And, for the sake of getting to his beloved little sister, he may feel extra motivation to recover as quickly as possible.”

Bran’s mouth goes dry. “You can’t be serious.”

His sister shakes her head. “Bran, I’m trying to find whatever upside I can. You think it was easy for me, permitting her to go? You think I like making these choices? But I’m already fighting a war against the Others. I cannot have one with her as well. I’d rather have us on good terms than poor ones.”

She turns to him, with a look of concern in her eyes. “Do you understand?”

“What I don’t understand is how she’d leave us for the Others after everything that’s happened. Why fighting is more important to her than staying with us. It’s selfish, Sansa. We barely found each other again, and she’s leaving.” Bran says ……

“If she didn’t care about us, she’d never have returned. But she wants to fight for us. It’s what she’s always wanted to do.” Sansa bites her lip briefly. “It’s what she’s been doing for years. It’s who she is, Bran. She wants to make sure she’s done all she can to defend us. She isn’t abandoning us, she’s doing what she knows to help us.”

Bran stops wheeling himself. “I’d rather have her do anything else.”

“Me too.” Sansa stops short and closes her eyes. “Can I tell you an awful secret?”

Bran cocks his head. “What?”

“Part of me… Part of me felt almost hopeful when Jon came back. I just feel sick when I think of him out there. But… I could never actually keep him away from fighting. And we can’t do that for Arya, either. It’s not about what we want, it’s about what we can manage. Arya is who she is. She can’t be anyone else.” She places a hand on his shoulder. “We have to love her for it.”

He hangs his head, his anger now redirected at himself. “I was so nasty to her.”

“Then go apologize.”

Bran purses his lips. “But, Sansa…”

“What?”

“Ask her to wait to leave until the twins are born. Please. Don’t let her go so soon.”

His eldest sister swallows. “I can talk about it with her. But I make no promises. But if I’m to do that, you have to make up with her first.”

“What if she doesn’t forgive me?”

“Oh, she will. She’s not going to leave us with anger in her heart. Just be sincere. I doubt she thought you’d take this well. I didn’t expect you to.”

His heart sinks. “I’m such a child.”

Sansa snorts. “Oh Gods, I wish. Things would be so much less tragic if that were true.”
“I just… I feel alone so often. And Arya… We got so much closer. She was like me, on the outside looking in. And now she’s leaving.”

Sansa’s face falls. “Jon and I never intended to exclude you, we-”

“-You don’t have to explain. I know. But she’s been my best friend. And now she’s going. And she doesn’t seem half as bothered by this as I am. It doesn’t bother her. I guess I thought what we’ve been through meant more to her.”

“This is something you need to discuss with her, but… Bran, her need to fight doesn’t mean she cares about you any less. She just could not live without knowing she’d fought to protect you. But this… This is bigger than all of us, Bran. And it’s our duty to put that first.”

He nods. Sansa reaches down and takes his hand. “Go talk to Arya again, alright? Then we can talk some more.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready. You should have heard what I said to her. I wanted to hurt her, and I did. I even used you against her.” Bran swallows. “What did you do, when you and Arya had your fights, and you said things you regretted?”

If there’s anyone who is an expert in being in a fight with Arya, it’s Sansa.

Her expression clouds a bit. “I rarely did anything, and that’s one of my greatest regrets. I was just lucky enough to be able to speak to her about it years later. But you might not get that chance. So don’t follow that example. Go speak to her.”

Bran nods and turns his wheelchair around. “Would you go fetch Pod and Brienne to help me with the stairs again?”

“Of course.”

~_~_~_~_~_~_~_~

Sansa:

It’s wrong for a queen to show favoritism. She knows this. It creates tensions with potential allies, unhealthy power dynamics within a court, and invites presumptions on the part of the favored.

At the same time: Fuck it.

She’s pregnant and exhausted. Her husband is comatose. Her nation is at war. She devotes every waking moment to this realm, holding in her true feelings in favor of expressing the right sentiments, taking care of everyone around her. She has to deal with no end of unsavory people.

So, when Missandei of Naath finally arrives, Sansa does, in fact, give permission to the herald to come and visit her in her private quarters. She doesn’t hesitate to allow the woman to enter her chambers as she sits by Jon’s bedside, dabbing his face with a wet rag.

For a woman whose occupation revolves around speaking, Missandei is quiet. She’s shy. She keeps her distance before finally speaking softly.

“I thought his fever broke.”

Sansa looks up and gives a small smile. “It has,” she assures her, “I’m just washing his face. Come and sit, won’t you? Pull up a chair.”
Sansa liked Lady Missandei almost from the beginning. She carried herself like a princess: girlish, graceful, careful. There is no pretension in her. Her eyes were thoughtful, her voice sweet. Sansa could not look at this woman and think anything but, “Gentle.”

They’d not gotten much chance to speak that often, but their interactions were always enjoyable, and Sansa was always eager to hear more of what this thoughtful, quiet woman had to say, if time would allow. In the North, so many people were all bluster and impulsive. Good-natured, but a bit overbearing. This is especially true of most of her chief lords and vassals. As much as Sansa loves her people, they can exhaust her. And they can be predictable. Missandei appeared to her as the exact opposite. This is a woman who chooses to take her time, who chooses to be gentle, who chooses to listen and thus, hears more. Sansa often envied Daenerys’ companion.

“Thank you, Your Grace. It is kind of you to receive me at this hour,” the herald says.

“We didn’t have much opportunity to really talk at the welcome banquet, and I’ve been anticipating your arrival.”

“It’s kind of you to say.”

“It’s honest. Out of all my guests, you were the one I was anxious to receive.” Sansa states with earnestness

Missandei looks surprised at this. But her eyes narrow. “I will not betray my mistress, Your Grace.”

Sansa smiles sadly. It takes a lot of cruelty for a person to imagine the only reason someone would desire their presence is to take advantage of them. Sansa knows this well.

“That’s part of the reason I was so looking forward to hosting you,” she says, “You’re a good person, Missandei. Truly good. And, quite frankly, you’re calm. I don’t get much of that, you know. A calm person. You seem unshakeable. Tell me, if I asked you to keep my confidence, would you? Even when it comes to Daenerys?”

“You would trust me?”

“I think you’re more trustworthy than most. Why else would Daenerys keep you around?”

“She’s my queen, my liberator. I’d never betray her. But you can’t know I’d do the same for you.”

“No, I can’t.” Sansa sighs and turns back to her husband. “Well, let’s see if you come to like me enough to keep my confidence, then. I don’t mind. I’m still glad you’re here, though. There’s many people here from all sorts of places, and I need more people who are well-traveled and cultured to advise me.”

“I have dealt with people from many different places while working for Queen Daenerys and my old masters,” Missandei admits, “And I am happy to assist.”

“Would you help me with my Valyrian?”

“Which one, Your Grace? There are many dialects.”

“Well, the standard High Valyrian, of course. But Braavosi would be helpful. And whatever versions they speak in the more powerful Free Cities. I know some High Valyrian, of course. But I am far better at reading and writing it than conversing in it, you see. Interpreting it as spoken is
difficult for me.”

“Funny, usually it’s the other way around for most people.”

“High Valyrian was taught to me as an accomplishment, not as something I’d really use. I was taught to be seen more than heard. It was taught to me by a Westerosi maester. My parents weren’t wild about me possibly fraternizing with foreigners. So I didn’t converse in it with any native speakers, hear it outside of the most formalized fashion, just memorized words and grammar.”

“I see. And you want to know how it’s spoken.” Missandei looks slightly impressed.

Sansa smiles. “Yes.”

“I can help you with that.”

“Thank you.” Sansa continues to wipe Jon’s cheeks. “Then there are some other languages. You are from Naath, correct?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Is that near Walano?”

“No, Your Grace. Naath is in the South, near Jhala. Walano is the North.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Do you know the Walano language, though?”

“I do, actually. My mother was a scholar. We grew up learning many languages.”

“Oh, good. I have gotten on well with the delegation from Walano, you see,” Sansa tells her, “But I’d be more comfortable if I could know what they say when they’re not speaking the Common Tongue. Or, at the very least, surprise them when they depart by wishing them farewell in their own tongue.”

Missandei nods with a small smile. “I understand, Your Grace.”

There’s a pause as Sansa finishes washing Jon’s face and wrings out the wet cloth, squeezing the water into a bowl on the bedside table. “Your queen is doing very well at the Wall. She’s truly defending us.”

“I think she considers this place worth defending.”

“You know my sister is going to join her, soon? After I give birth.”

“I had not heard.”

“Arya’s always been a warrior at heart. And I don’t want House Targaryen to fight this alone. If my husband can’t, then Arya must. Do you have any siblings?”

“Yes. I mean, I did. And I may still. I was taken from Naath with my brother when I was a girl. He was trained to become an Unsullied, but he died years ago,” she shudders, “I had another brother, and two sisters, back in Naath. I don’t know where they are now.”

Sansa looks at Missandei sadly. “I’m so sorry.”

“So am I.”
Sansa considers her companion for a moment. “Would you mind if I asked a personal question?”

“No,” Missandei replies with a shrug, “But I may not answer.”

“Of course.” Sansa takes a deep breath. “When Daenerys freed you, why didn’t you go back to Naath? Why haven’t you? Don’t you want to?”

Missandei swallows. There’s a look of guilt in her eyes, and Sansa almost takes back her question, but the woman speaks. “I may, someday. I’d love to see my family again, but…”

There’s a pause as the herald seems to collect herself. “Do you know how I was taken?”

Sansa hesitates. “I suppose I don’t. I assumed you were a victim of a slave raid.”

“Correct. Not a large one, or an impressive one. My brother and I were playing in the town square with some of the other children when this band of men attacked our community. I didn’t come from some squalid little village. We had three temples, a library, a school, a lovely marketplace. With all due respect, my home was far finer than your Wintertown. It only took a few dozen men to take us.”

Sansa’s brows furrow. A few dozen? The only time she’d ever heard of so few men taking such a settlement was Theon’s sacking of Winterfell. And the only reason he’d managed was that Winterfell’s militia was drawn away from the castle, and Theon had intimate knowledge of the grounds. But a bunch of foreigners, unfamiliar with the area, raiding a wealthy city like that and succeeding in taking children? Missandei describes her captors as “unimpressive”, but that makes no sense.

“How—?”

“We Naathi are known as the Peaceful People. We do not fight. We do not take up arms. We are devoted to learning, to nurturing, to art, to nature, to beauty.”

Sansa sighs. “It sounds perfect.”

“It’s not, not in a world like ours. We weren’t known for being peaceful simply because we didn’t start wars. When I say Naathi do not fight or take up arms, I mean it. The reason these few, unremarkable men were able to do this is because our town was defenseless. We have strong people, but they are not trained to organize themselves and fight. To mount defenses, to kill. The abhor killing there. These men came with weapons, trained to work together, with a ruthlessness and cruelty unthinkable to us.”

Sansa’s stomach sinks. “They didn’t protect you. Is that why you won’t go back?”

“I’m not angry with them, if that is what you mean. I was. For a very long time. But it soiled the only good memories I had. I needed to forgive them, so memories of my home, of being loved, could comfort me at the worst times instead or make me feel worse. It’s what got me through so many years of the Masters.” Missandei looks at her hands.

“When Daenerys came and freed us, I knew I had to march with her. There were millions of people just like me under the boots of the Masters of Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen. I had to do my part in liberating them.”

“And now?”

“Well, that’s just it. I did my part. War was waged, blood was shed. I did not even blink. I felt no shame then, I do not feel it now. But my people, they are against war.”
“But to liberate slaves--”

“All war, whatever the cause,” Missandei says, “And I think about going back there, to my family, telling them what became of me, how I became free. The things I did… I mean it when I say I feel no shame. But how do I explain that to them? I fear them rejecting me. Or convincing me to feel shame for what I’ve done. I can’t apologize, I won’t, for freeing myself or others. But I do not want to break my mother’s heart.”

Missandei sighs. “Then there’s the queen. She’s as much my family as anyone. So is Grey Worm. I want to make sure she’s safe before I leave her. Once things are secure, then, perhaps, I will return to Naath. Leave my past behind. Simply not tell them of my own part in Daenerys’s wars. When my work is truly finished. But not until then. Still… I see Naath every night. I see the faces of my parents, and the butterflies. I wake up and I am part of something extraordinary. I will not turn my back on it. I was taken from my family to be a slave. I want to return to them as more, fully in control and at peace.” Missandei sits back and smiles. “You know, no one has asked me that before.”

“Really?” This surprises her.

“It’s hard for people to take such an interest in someone like me when the Mother of Dragons is around. I don’t exactly mind it, though.”

Sansa looks at Missandei curiously. There is something about how she says this…

“Yes, well, when you’re not as noticed, you’re less likely to become a target.”

She remembers days in the Red Keep when Joffrey would fly into his rages. On days when he paid attention to her, she ended up becoming the victim of his fury. She was luckier on days when he ignored her, when he’d sometimes direct his wrath at another. Not always, but sometimes. She became even more deliberate with her appearance when she was due in court. She didn’t dare make herself look ugly or unkempt: that would enrage him. But she purposely dressed in dull color colors that didn’t do much to flatter her, would have the maids style her hair to best mimic the styles of the court so she’d blend more, and purposely would try to stand in more shaded areas so her hair would have less luster. She mastered the art of keeping her face vacant and expressionless, and she spoke softer, when she spoke at all. She made herself as dull as possible.

It was a very underrated, under-appreciated art, really. One that served her well in so many ways. It allowed her to not only avoid unwanted attention, but make those around her underestimate her, which had its advantages, more easily hide her true feelings, kept others from truly understanding her, and even observe things without anyone realizing it. She never would have excelled so much in the Harrenhal negotiations if Tyrion Lannister didn’t think of her as a stupid, naive girl.

Missandei knows all about this. And her preference for going unnoticed was clearly born out of a similar terror that birthed Sansa’s.

The herald’s slave past would be enough to tell a person she’s known horror and mistreatment. But even if Sansa hadn’t known about Missandei’s bondage, she’d have figured out that the woman was tormented after merely observing her at Harrenhal. It’s just something Sansa saw in her movements, the way she spoke, her expressions.

She’d seen it in others, too. More than once, she’s observed people around her and just knew. She’d send Brienne or Pod to investigate (often prompting questions from Jon), and her guards would return with tales of cruelty from a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a guardian.

She saw it in Daenerys, too. And Grey Worm and Tyrion.
The Queen of Winter reaches out and takes Missandei’s hand gently. The two women exchange looks, and their mutual understanding is established without words.

There’s just silence for a while. Missandei seems to relax. Sansa clears her throat.

“I am afraid that at the moment, we are entertaining some delegates from cities like Volantis, that practice slavery. There are no slaves here, but we need to explore every option. I hope that you can understand.”

“I do.”

Sansa clears her throat again. “For the record, though, I’ve been deliberately trying to court the free states more, so I do not feel the need to actually enter into business with them. I am going to do my very best to exclude slavers from this, if possible.”

“I hear you have shown particular favor to Braavos, Walano, and Pentos,” Missandei replies, nodding. “Your Grace, I know what the situation is. I understand how desperation works. My own Queen courted the aid of Qarth before coming to Astapor. She was desperate, her people were starving, they were all going to die. Your people are freezing and starving, under the threat of a monstrous army. Millions of lives rely on this war. What good will it do any slave in the world if we all end up dead?”

“I am trying, though…”

“Your Grace, as you yourself brought up, my queen is in Westeros, not the so-called ‘Free Cities’. She has not liberated Volantis, or Lys, or Myr. Nor has she sacked Qarth, or a million other places that practice slavery. Do you know what Tyrion did to try and achieve peace with Yunkai and Astapor while we were in Meereen?”

“What?” She assumes it’s arrogant and insensitive.

“He brought the Good and Wise Masters to the Great Pyramid, put a bunch of whores in their laps, and allowed them to keep slaves for another seven years.”

Sansa cups her temple. “Seven Hells. How did you not lock him in a pit?”

“That’s just it, I didn’t. We tried to make peace with those people. It did not work. So trust me when I say I understand. This situation is even more desperate. And I know about your rules in regards to retinues.”

“I was afraid that if I let them come to Westeros with their slaves, and declared them free, that it would only-”

“No, it would have made things worse. You’d have made enemies of them all, and, I assure you, the slaves would end up paying the most for it.”

“It’s why I’m hoping you can help. You have dealt with people from so many lands. Slavers and non-Slavers. You know these things. You see…” Sansa sighs. “Daenerys recommended I seek out a Pentos nobleman named Illyrio Mopatis, and court him. At first, I took no issue with that. Pentos banned slavery, but-”

“It has loopholes,” Missandei nods, “They definitely have slaves, they just don’t call it that. There are many places like that.”

“I want to be able to distinguish them properly. And I want to know how to best attract the most
ethical allies so I might avoid getting in bed with masters. Also, I need someone who knows as many languages as you, and someone to represent Daenerys. When Daenerys suggested I work with Tyrion on this, I was stunned. You seemed the obvious candidate, the only one, really.” She smiles. She means this, too. Even if Tyrion hadn’t exposed himself, she’d have preferred Missandei. The woman was simply suited to the task.

“I still don’t know much of Westeros, though, Your Grace.”

“I don’t need someone who knows Westeros. I already do.”

Missandei actually blushes. “Of course, Your Grace. I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. You proved that at Harrenhal.”

“And I need to know some of the nuances of how these people speak. Even with the Slavers. You were the interpreter for a slave trader. I want to make sure that when I speak to them, I don’t fall into any little traps. And who would know a Slaver’s traps better than you?”

“I can help you with that as well.” Missandei smiles back at her.

“And, well, I was wondering, can you read and write in all the languages you know as well as you can speak them?”

She shakes her head. “The Qartheen have their own alphabet, as does the Jade Sea and Yi-Ti, if you were thinking of courting them, and the Dothraki have no written language to speak of. But the rest, yes.”

Sansa gives a sigh of relief. They’d yet to go further east than Qarth. “Very well. And you, Missandei, what would you like from this?”

“I merely wish to serve and save my queen and her realm.”

Sansa finds this almost dizzying. This woman would be a paragon among vassals. Any king or queen would be lucky to have her as one of their lords. “Yes, but surely you should be rewarded for your service. Has Her Grace not offered you a title and lands of your own?”

Missandei stands up suddenly, looking nervous. She draws back. “I want for nothing, Queen Sansa. I don’t seek your rewards.”

Blood rushes to Sansa’s face. Oh gods, how could she be so stupid to say that?

“Forgive me, Missandei, I wasn’t trying to bribe you, I swear it!” She pleads anxiously, “I realize how that sounded. I’m sorry, I’m so tired, and I didn’t think it through. But it wasn’t my intent whatsoever.”

“What was your intent with such a question, then?”

Sansa licks her lips. “Curiosity, mostly. But I, well…” She’s not exactly sure how to explain. “My Lady, how much do you know about my children?”

Missandei’s eyes go to Sansa’s belly. Wheels seem to turn inside her head.

She sits again, looking amazed, staring off at the wall. “Gods…” She looks at Jon, then at Sansa, then at Jon again, then at Sansa once more. “I knew it.”

“Daenerys told you.”
“Only after I figured it out, in a fashion. I knew there had to be a reason she wanted to teach him to fly. I confronted her about it. She told me about him. But I hadn’t thought it through. I didn’t even consider until now that it means.”

Sansa places a hand on her belly. “We didn’t know until after we were wed. And I wish, very, very much that it wasn’t true.”


*Does she know? Seven Hells, why didn’t Dany send her here not knowing that we do?*

“The queen is childless, and I have reason to believe she always shall be.” Sansa tries to phrase this carefully.

Missandei meets her eyes. “So she’s told you.”

Sansa sighs. She’d hoped Missandei would be the one to say it plainly. “Yes, of course. She told us after the first battle at the Wall.”

Missandei hangs her head. “Which means…”

“Which means that my children will eventually inherit her empire.”

The herald looks up. “But I don’t understand. What does that have to do with me?”

Sansa takes a deep breath. “Maybe there are those who would be thrilled at the prospect, but not me. I have known the Iron Throne and those who hover around it. I have seen it firsthand. I have lived there. And the thought of any of my family going near that thing, much less inheriting it, turns my stomach. Those grasping courtiers and lords… Those snakes. The greed, the ambition, the ruthlessness.” She practically trembles. “Missandei, when you were a slave, I’m sure you witnessed many vulnerable people--- women and children--- being brutalized by your masters. That is, when you weren’t the one being brutalized.”

The herald stiffens. Her face shakes. She whispers, “Yes.”

“And until Daenerys came along, there was nothing you could do, really, to stop it.”

Her guest swallows. “They’d cry and bleed. The best I could ever do is help them wash up, offer my sympathies. Those times were the ones when I felt the most helpless. Even when I was the one hurt, I didn’t feel so impotent. Hells, sometimes I even got myself hurt deliberately to spare the others. But it didn’t always work. And I still see their faces…”

“You did amazing things, trying to spare your friends. Drawing attention away. And it’s terrifying, isn’t it. I remember one time, with Joffrey. He was cross that a knight arrived to a tourney drunk, and so he ordered his guards to drown the man in wine. I don’t know what possessed me, but I told him he couldn’t. I tried to think of some way to spin it. And I managed, but… I wish I’d done things like that more. You did more, and you were a slave.”

“It’s petrifying. I only managed to do it a couple of times.”

“Still. I know for a fact that it’s more than many people, in far safer positions, would do. Joffrey would have me beaten often. One day, after my brother defeated his armies in a battle, Joffrey had me dragged before the court, and ordered me beaten and stripped naked before the court. There were all these fine, ‘noble’ lords and ladies who did nothing. Some even laughed. The only one who ultimately stopped it was, of all people, Tyrion.”
Missandei looks shocked. “Really?”

“I know.” Sansa shakes her head. She’s been giving this so much thought as of late. "Of course, he didn’t bother stopping all the beatings that happened behind closed doors. He just worried about what would be done to his brother if mine found out. Joffrey went too far making such a presentation of it.” She snorts. “But my point is, you were a slave, and you did what you could. Rich and powerful lords and ladies, ones who had true influence and means in that court, did nothing as I was beaten and humiliated. So I can’t help but think, what if you were one of those lords or ladies that day? You risked your own safety to help another as a slave. If my son or daughter does end up in King’s Landing, I don’t want them to be surrounded purely by those types of courtiers. I want them to have vassals like you. A few decent, courageous people among that lot. So that is why I asked. I’d feel more comfortable with you as a true lady in Westeros, with lands and people to govern, armies to command, than one of the people I encountered in the Lannister court.”

Missandei’s expression is guarded. “Truly?”

Sansa nods. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot, My Lady. I have to. I would rather not think about Westeros again, to be honest. But this-” she gestures to her belly, “Requires me to think about it quite a lot.”

She hopes Missandei believes this. It’s true

If she has to give her children to the Iron Throne, she wants to at least weed out some of the Tyrion Lannisters, Janos Slynts, and Petyr Baelishes and replace them with the good and dutiful before they have to rule. She’ll be damned if she lets one of her babes end up like she did.

But why should this woman trust her?

Missandei surveys her for a while. “I’m sure it has. I-” But she stops short, her eyes fixating on something just beyond Sansa. Her mouth opens, and she gasps.

Sansa turns around, and promptly gasps herself. All thoughts of Missandei forgotten, tears start welling up and she cries out upon seeing those dark brown eyes, open at last.

“Jon!” She says, clutching his face. She starts pressing kisses to him. “Oh, My Love! My Darling! You’re awake!”

Jon utters a groan, then coughs. He clears his throat. “S-Sansa?”

“Yes, Darling,” she says, leaning back and looking into his eyes. It’s so good to see them again, “I’m here. You’re home.”

He moves as if to sit up, but she pushes him down gently. “Don’t try to move yet, your chest and ribs are badly wounded. You’re still recovering. But I’m so glad you’re awake!”


Sansa tries not to lose her composure. “They’re fine. Viserion is healing at Castle Black. Daenerys is there too. Everyone is fine.” She clears her throat. “You fell from Viserion, and Rhaegal caught you, but it was a hard catch. His claws broke a lot of bones. Your spine didn’t break, thank the gods. But your ribs and chest were less lucky.”

She hesitates to tell him why he fell. The Night’s King, it seemed, in addition to being able to raise the dead, could affect the winds. From all reports, Jon was flying right towards the monster, who only responded by waving his arm. All at once, an unstoppable blast from out of nowhere hit the
white dragon so hard it knocked both the dragon and its rider off. Viserion broke his wing.

In the weeks since the battle, they’ve been trying to learn as much as they can about this apparent ability to control the winds. The strange thing was, though the Night’s King has stormed the Wall two more times, he’s not used it again.

From Daenerys’s description, everything about the incident with Jon was off. The Night’s King had been isolated, placing himself unguarded, atop a hill where all could see him, just out in the open. But every time they’ve seen him since, he’s kept close to his men, and avoided obviously vulnerable areas. And he’d retreated if the dragons got too close.

Now is not the time to divulge this to her husband. He’d just woken up, he needed to rest and recover. She couldn’t upset him with this phenomenon. It would have to wait until he was stronger.

There’s already so much to process.

She hears the door, and turns around. Missandei is gone. She takes a deep breath and focusses her attention on her husband again.

“Did we… Did we win?”

“We won the battle, yes.”

“And the war?”

“No, not yet.”

He looks perturbed. “I have to-”

“-You have to rest. It’s alright, Jon. The Wall is secure. We’re winning. Everything is fine.”

“But-” He shakes his head slowly. “How long have I been out?”

“Not too long,” she assures him. She’d been advised not to over-excite him when he woke. Hearing ‘seven weeks’ would over-excite him. “Just… You don’t have to talk or worry right now. Just relax.”

“Are… Are the babes born yet? Can I see them?”

She smiles. “No, not yet. They’re not ready yet,” she places his hand on her belly. “See? But… But Jon, Maester Syrus says that you’re going to need many more weeks to be back in fighting shape. So guess what?”

“What?”

“You’re going to be here for their arrival.” It is the one bright spot in all of this.

His face slowly splits into a smile. It takes her breath away.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone who is paraplegic has any notes, please let me know!
Bran and Arya discuss public service. Jon begins to recover his body, but not necessarily his marriage. Tyene plays an unwitting role. Unexpected arrivals are made.

Arya:

A greenseer she may not be, but Arya is able to discern more than her brother in various situations. When Sansa comes to her so soon after herrow with Bran, the younger Stark sister is not surprised. Both of the sisters were expecting this talk.

Bran likely thought he’d won some victory over both of his sisters, that he’d convinced Sansa to intercede on his behalf. But Arya suspects that this was Sansa’s plan all along.

Her older sister often walks on eggshells around her, as if trying to make up for the fraught years of their childhood. They play a game with each other, one that can be genuinely enjoyable, especially as they both know they’re playing.

Sansa will never spar with her in the yard, and Arya will never embroider a tapestry with Sansa in the solar. But now, without all the expectations, the pressure from their Septa Mordanes of the world, their respective growth as people, they don’t really need that. Not at all. They share drinks at the end of the day--- wine for Sansa, ale for Arya. Sansa allows Arya to have the time and resources she needs to pursue her martial skills, Arya makes sure she’s decently groomed when meeting guests and doesn’t blurt out every thought that comes into her head. She even lets her sister plait her hair every night into tight, functional arrangements that keeps her brown locks out of her eyes and out of the way.

And they play their game together.

Arya never intended to leave WInderfell in the next two days. For one thing, she’d miss the birth of the twins. For another, she didn’t feel quite prepared. She’d been cut off from formal education at eleven, and even before that, she’d been restricted from “male” studies. While her parents were better than most, as it turned out (Arya was still amazed at how many women of similar birth could barely read, weren’t taught history extensively, or even rudimentary High Valyrian). Most lessons, all the Stark children took together. But there were exceptions. The boys were taught nothing of textile matters, and the girls were given no training in tactile ones, aside from riding and the use of bows for hunting.

Father had arranged for Arya’s dancing lessons in King’s Landing, true, but never was Arya given training in strategy, military history and tactics to the extent that her brothers were. Even Bran, cut off
from his own education at ten, knew more of that than Arya. So she had much to brush up on, if she is to take command of anything. Hells, even Sansa has more battle command experience, though she insisted otherwise. Even Jon had said she showed good instincts, and had been a quick, if modest, study when they were on assult against the Boltons.

Arya’s training was in basic melee combat, stealth, and assassinations. Not full-scale warfare.

Being Princess of Winterfell means she cannot expect to be treated like everyone else. She’s accepted that. But that doesn’t mean she can’t earn her authority. And she intends to.

So no, she was not truly intending to rush off to Castle Black at once.

She’d only pretended to-so that she could haggle, more or less, over when she did go. If she’d petitioned at once to go when she really wanted to--- after the twins’ birth, Sansa would be coming to her now to convince her to wait six moons. Instead, Sansa is coming to her to ask that she wait until the twins’ birth.

Sansa had no intention of letting her go so soon, either, but she also has this guilt when it comes to Arya. They’re both aware of it. And she doesn’t want to be the villain in this.

Hence why Arya went to Bran and swallowed all of his fury and didn’t mince words with him. So he would go to Sansa, and Sansa would come to her, on ‘Bran’s’ behalf. Hell, getting Bran riled up so he’d give her an excuse to delay departure is why Sansa pretended to agree to the “two days” thing in the first place.

Arya isn’t sure if she should be comfortable with operating like this. It’s certainly not an ideal. But it works. Her older sister comes to her from Bran, begs for his sake that Arya delay her departure, Arya graciously agrees.

Not that her brother’s words didn’t hurt.

They did. A lot.

Arya spent much of her childhood feeling like a victim, but now she looks back at specific incidents and cringes at her own behavior. She did go out of her way to show her little brother up, or embarrass and frustrate her sister. She did it out of resentment, she would do it unprovoked, and she would often act unfairly.

She recalls interrupting her brothers when Robb and Jon were trying to teach Bran to shoot. Her brother was trying so hard. He was already embarrassed by his poor aim. And she’d sneak up from behind, shoot, and hit the very bull’s eye that Bran was trying to focus on. Why? To show off, to remind everyone that she was just as capable as any boy. But her brother was trying to learn.

Not to mention the genuine danger she could have put her brothers in when she did that. Arya had perfect aim by eight, and often shot without the benefits of proper attire or position, having to adjust her aim and her hold because she was gloveless, in a gown, shooting from behind a barrier. Yes, her aim was perfect, but if one day she faltered for whatever reason, she could have seriously hurt someone.

Or when she did things like throw food at Sansa during banquets and ruin her gowns. Arya can’t think of a good reason for doing such a thing. At the time, she remembers, she thought it funny to make her proud, fussy sister shriek, whine, and hastily try to get the stain or mark out of the fabric. Sometimes her brothers would laugh too. But now, Arya can’t think of what was so funny about that.
She’d lived in a home where Sansa seemed to have everything because she was beautiful, well-mannered, ladylike, and fashionable. All the things Arya wasn’t, and Arya wanted to take that away from her sister when she could. She’d also grown up in a world where her prissy sister with the stupid things she liked could always make a new gown. Those were the days of the long summer, when they were carefree.

But even then, her sister had worked so hard to make those things herself. And these days, they had to save and be careful about all resources, including cloth. Wasting clothing by, say, ruining a perfectly good gown that took hours and money to make, seems as wrong as wasting food.

She was a child, she knows this. And there was much about her childhood that was unfair. But she had long since abandoned the illusion that her own behavior was perfect and unprovoked. She had the capacity to hurt people, including her siblings, back then, and she did that. Sometimes unwittingly, sometimes not.

So now, both she and Sansa sometimes walk on eggshells with one another. Arya feels bad for destroying and denigrating things her sister would work so hard at. Sansa harbors guilt for contributing to Arya’s feelings of inadequacy and for bullying her.

Arya hadn’t considered such things when it came to Bran all that much, though. She and Sansa were constantly pitted together as children, so it was foremost in her mind. But Bran did have some points. She had hurt him, she had been obstructive and insensitive to him for no reason. She had, in many ways, done to Bran what Sansa did to her when they were children. And she had not confronted that.

His words stung for those reasons. Stung like the lashes of a whip. And Arya had responded in anger, even if she ultimately conceded.

Both of them have regrets. And it takes a couple of days for them to sit down by Jon’s bedside again, apologize, and speak.

“I always envied you,” she confesses, “Even though you weren’t the heir, you were a boy, you were a source of pride, you were chosen, meant for something more than smiling, pleasing, and having children. I was a girl, arranged for, breeding stock, not meant for all the things I wanted to do. And I wasn’t even good at being that. I wasn’t a boy, and I failed at what a girl was supposed to be. And I desperately wanted to have all the things that were handed to you because you were born male. I mean, you were even ahead of us in the succession. You were second in line. Sansa and I never even thought about inheriting. I just had failed sewing projects and a marriage to dread. I wanted to be better than you, better than anyone. And I wanted to be the successful one, for once. I didn’t set out to hurt you, but I doubt I cared. But going to the Wall, it’s not about proving anything now. It’s about earning something. I can fight, Bran. I’m in better condition to fight than most foot soldiers. And I can’t justify expecting others to fight for us and not do it myself.”

“How do you think I feel?” Her brother groans.

“You’re a greenseer though, and a cripple. You do use your abilities in service to our cause. I don’t feel like I am.”

“You’re more than just a weapon, though!” Bran protests.

“I know that. If I didn’t, I’d still be in Braavos. I’d be No One. Instead, I’m Princess Arya Stark of Winterfell. And that means something. For me, for the family, for the North. I have to live up to that, as more than just a woman from the right family. Not just for myself, either, but for those who will come later.”
Bran gives her a confused look. “I’m not sure I understand that.”

The Princess of Winterfell takes a deep breath. She’s thought about this a lot. About legacies, about service, about class.

She’s been in the unique position of truly living as a peasant. Jon liked to boast of how all men were equal at the Wall, and how he was treated like everyone else and every man “got what he earned.” But Arya knows better. Even at the Wall, everyone knew he was the son of Ned Stark. He’d been trained by a master-at-arms. He could read. He was schooled in tactics and leadership. There were important people who would care about his well-being. And everyone knew who he was. If he’d been Arry the Orphan Boy or Lumpyhead or Nan, he’d have been made a random builder, not steward to Jeor Mormont, groomed for leadership.

But Arya had truly lived as a servant and orphan. Yes, there was someone around who knew who she was. But that was very privileged information, and those privy to it often only cared enough as far as the ransom they could get off of her. And she’d seen firsthand what that gave her in contrast to Hot Pie and Gendry. She’d been a servant at Harrenhal. She’d been a part of the Faceless Men. Or tried to be.

She’d worked and suffered herself to exhaustion for privileged shits who didn’t care if she lived or died. With the expectation that it was okay to expect nothing from the rulers but to exploit them for their own interests without being truly useful. That it’s acceptable for the people you’re fighting for to sit in a tower and not do whatever they can to help.

And she was a girl. Her own Father, the man who brought her to her dancing master, told her that her future would be not ruling holdfasts, commanding men, defending land, becoming a scholar or serving the gods. But to marry and produce men to do all of those things. That the very arts people bled through to defend their people were just meant to be a diversion for her, and that’s fine. That ultimately, her only relevance was obeying and producing men, being traded off.

She knows there’s more to being a lady than that. She knows that now. But the non-reproductive contributions a woman can make are rarely emphasized, and there are almost always obstacles and conditions put in their way. Arya was taught that she was a womb and an ornament. Even being raised by her mother, who did so much for Winterfell and the North, those things weren’t mentioned. Catelyn Stark’s accomplishments were supposed to be her five children, especially her sons, her manners, and her beauty.

Even Sansa, who had, by every account, technically been the one to win the North back from the Boltons, was passed over for Jon. She’d been dismissed as marriage fodder, even blamed for ending up in that position. It was only by Jon’s good nature that she attained the power and respect she was due. And she’s certainly earned it. But she also has so much defined by her womb.

There’s fuss now about the children’s future. Sansa might only have girls. The twins could be girls, and be her only children. Or only have sisters and no brothers. And though the Iron Throne belongs to the Mother of Dragons now, there’s been so much strife, so much resistance, and so much difficulty even now to ascertain the rights of female heirs in the South. The Dance of the Dragons was all about keeping a woman from ruling. The laws against female heirs for the Iron Throne are even stricter than the usual standards, with brothers being favored over daughters for the throne, with women only allowed to inherit if they had no legitimate male relatives. It’s why Jon, even as a bastard, could be a threat to Daenerys, dragons or no dragons.

There’s already so much panic and fear over it all, and they’re not even at war over it.

A princess is supposed to be a marriage fodder, according to Westerosi law. Not even a confirmed,
instated, declared Princess of Dragonstone was allowed to assume her father’s throne for herself. Even Sansa had to get married to wear the crown she’d technically won for their family.

How is that supposed to affect the princesses to come?

They’re immersed in hardship and strife now, but also opportunity. Opportunity to redefine so much. Not just Westeros’s borders, but the roles and expectations for men, women, noble, and common. To establish new expectations and obligations for royalty and nobility.

Westeros is ruled by two sovereign queens and a king combined. Half of it is a joint regency between husband and wife. Both queens exercise true power, contingent upon the approval of no man anymore. Slaves have been freed. Vassals have chosen monarchs. Borders have been redefined, based on popular interests and will.

Arya wants the future generations to have no time or patience for princesses to be married off, to be seen as any different or less valuable or capable than their brothers. She’ll never be a queen like Sansa, she’ll never be a mother. She may never be a wife. And she’ll certainly never be a lady. But she has duties to protect her people, serve them. And she wants the future generations to know that. To feel the same way.

She wants her nieces to feel that way. She wants her nephews to feel that way. For none of them to see a woman taking arms as any different from a man doing it. For none of them to expect that preparing to marry according to family wishes and sitting safe and sound in a tower while the common-folk fight their wars is an acceptable way to live. For none of them to expect the Aryr Orphan Boys or Hot Pies of the world to accept this sort of behavior, either.

Major contributions, whether commanding from the front lines, pursuing mystical arts for defense, running supply lines, negotiating alliances and trade, sheltering people, building, representing one’s land, or whatever, should be expected and encouraged from every prince, princess, king, and queen from here on out. For that to happen, Arya needs to be part of that precedent.

She tries to explain this to Bran as best she can. He listens quietly, his face growing ever more somber. When she finishes, he takes her hand.

“People like you are the reason I still have hope for my visions.”

Jon:

He goes in and out. The maesters and septas are often hovering. He sees Sansa, Bran, Arya, Brienne, Pod. They tell him how happy they are that he is awake, that everything is fine. He hears Arya’s discussion with Bran about the future, about obligation, about princesses. Tears of pride for his little sister leak from the corners of his eyes, and he longs to pull her into a great, big embrace.

His chest feels like it’s been crushed. Not since getting shot by Ygritte has he endured pain like this, and he actually died. But when he was stabbed, there was a point where he couldn’t even feel anything but the cold, then he was gone, and he woke up in perfect health. Just cold and confused.

This, though… The Maesters don’t even let him try sitting up for a week. He feels as weak and useless as a newborn. He even has to wear nappies, for pity’s sake. He has to be bathed in bed with a wet cloth. He even needs help eating, given his flat position.

The humiliation is worse than the physical pain. He pleads for news about the war. Sansa actually brings him the reports after a few days and reads them to him. Things are fine. Daenerys is doing
incredible work with Edd and Davos and Tormund and the rest. The Others have gotten nowhere in breaching the Wall.

He’s been out for seven weeks. They’ve done fine without him.

It really is the very worst, sometimes, when Sansa’s with him. When she sees him like this: weak, incapable, dependent. Meanwhile, she’s running things, entertaining emissaries, all while heavy with child. She’s huge and round and glorious.

And tired. He sees it in her face. She’s exhausted. Of course she is. But she keeps going.

When he looks at her belly, all he can think of is what kind of father can he be to these babes when he has to be treated like one himself? He’s disgusted with himself, incapable of even using the chamberpot, of taking a bath.

And she sees him like this. And Arya, and Bran, and Brienne and Pod and the maester and septas.

He refuses any other visitors. He will not let anyone else see their king like this.

What happened to him is something he plays over and over in his mind, because he can’t work it out. They were flying fine! And all of a sudden he’s more or less ripped off of Viserion’s back.

It doesn’t make sense. He’d flown a hundred times by that point.

He asks to be alone, but even when people honor this request, Ghost does not. The wolf does not leave him. Jon at one point wonders where he’s been shitting all this time. Arya tells him the wolf goes outside when Jon’s asleep, but only then, and only if there is someone else watching him.

Jon tries to fake sleeping to see his wolf leave, but somehow, Ghost always knows.

The only company he really enjoys is Bran’s. For one thing, it’s an utter delight to watch his brother zip around the room in his new chair.

But also, his little brother has been in this exact situation, only worse. Jon will be able to walk around in a fortnight. Bran, meanwhile, has been wearing nappies since he was ten.

Bran has developed a surprising, if morbid sense of humor about it.

“How do you stand it?” Jon asks him one day.

“I don’t stand it, or anything. That’s sort of the point.”

Sansa’s the worst, though. It’s not anything she does. She’s, as ever, perfect. She’s self-sacrificing, gentle, kind, doting. She can’t be around all the time, having to reserve their time together for the evenings, early mornings, and sometimes mid-day. She doesn’t hesitate to dress his wounds, rub his shoulders, or tend to him in any way. She doesn’t wrinkle her nose or flinch.

And that’s the problem. She’s doing all this, all while he’s confined to bed, useless. After he wakes, she volunteers to sleep in the bed with him again (it was too dangerous, given their respective conditions, to do so before he woke). But Jon shouted, “No!”

He was wearing a bloody nappy. He couldn’t bear to lay next to her, wearing it. In a bed where he’s likely soiled himself dozens of times while asleep.

He refuses to let her bathe him. It’s too shameful. When she scoffs and informs him that she’s been doing it since he came home, it just makes it worse.
Jon looks at Sansa and feels despair. After seeing him like this, how could she ever be able to see him as a man again? As a king? As a husband?

She’s probably touched his shit. She’s probably wiped it off his arse. Or seen it get wiped off his arse. At the very least, she’s been around him, aware of him soiling himself like an infant, for almost two moons.

She adores him, she does. He has no cause to doubt her love.

But he can’t see how it will ever be the same. Sansa also loves and adores babes, children, and pups. He’s certain that after this, she’ll want to bed him just as much as she would a pup.

When he sees her, in all of her skill, her perfection, her strength, he wants to weep. He’s her husband, and she’ll probably never see him that way again. At least, not like she did before, when she’d gaze at him with heated eyes, smile at him with a nervous, anxious excitement.

It doesn’t matter that he’ll get better. That he’ll be back in shape soon. After seeing him like this, she’ll never be able to forget. She’ll see it every time she looks at him.

He’s useless. They don’t even need him at the Wall, apparently. And why should they? Daenerys is the Mother of Dragons, not him.

The war will probably have been won by the time he’s fighting-fit again.

He’s allowed to try walking and moving a bit after about ten days. No more nappies, at the very least. No more being fed and bathed. But he’s weak as a kitten. His chest still aches. He can’t lift anything heavier than a pitcher of water.

Jon follows every instruction from the maester to the letter. He will not delay his recovery by a second. He wants to feel like a man again.

Three weeks, and he’s judged fit to go out in public. His wife is ecstatic, personally taking in his best doublet and trousers (he’s lost half a stone) and arranging a “proper banquet” for her “heroic king.”

She looks beautiful, glowing and smiling, draped in some foreign periwinkle silk that makes her eyes look almost violet, her immense belly proudly displayed, and pearls in her hair.

Sansa beams as they move down the corridors to the Great Hall. They encounter Arya and Bran, who congratulate him on how wonderful he looks. The doors open.

He’s never seen the Hall so packed, or so colorful. Sansa’s various delegations are on full display in an array of silks in every hue. The din of their applause seems to shake the castle itself.

The food is perfect. Sansa had his favorite smoked salmon, thyme and garlic potatoes, and honey cakes prepared, along with a dozen other delicacies she’d picked up from her visitors, all of which proved delicious. She leans over at one point and tells him that she’s tried many dishes since she began to host all these foreigners, and the entire time made notes of the ones she thought he’d enjoy. This was the result.

People constantly come up to him and offer congratulations and praise. Jon enjoys it at first, except…

He doesn’t know these people. Tormund, Davos, Glover, Manderly, and Reed were all at the Wall. Lady Mormont was ill, apparently. Most of these people are strangers, foreigners they had to entertain. Many of them speak to his wife and siblings with warmth and familiarity, but he’s never spoken to them before. At the high table, Sansa has Missandei of Naath, Prince Tryon of Braavos,
Crown Prince N’zingo and his sister, Princess D’Inah of the Summer Island of Walano. Charming people, but strangers all the same.

After an hour or so, he feels immensely awkward and out of place. He shrinks back, not sure who to speak to and what to say.

Arya departs from the table at one point, and when she returns, she leans over Sansa’s shoulder and whispers something to her. His wife’s eyes go wide, and she starts making delighted gestures to the staff. Arya smirks and returns to her seat beside him. “I hope you’re enjoying yourself, Dear Brother.”

“I am, this is wonderful,” he lies.

She gives him a look. “Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll pick up. In fact, if I had to guess…” she scans the room, “It will probably get much better right… about….”

There’s a pounding on the main doors of the hall. Sansa pushes herself to her feet. The doors open. Jon expects some sort of performance by mummers or jugglers or minstrels. But no, instead, it’s a page, leading a fat man and a woman carrying a young boy.

For a moment, he can’t breathe. But he grins. So do the new arrivals.

“SAM?!”

The hall goes silence.

His friend strides up to the high table with Gilly, beaming. With a glimmer of humor in his eyes, he offers a deep bow. In fact, Gilly herself does a slow, nervous curtsy.

Jon gapes. “What are--- Why--- How--?!”

“It’s good to see you too, Your Grace,” Sam says.

Jon gets to his feet. “Explain yourself, Tarly.”

Sam blushes and glances at Sansa. Jon looks at his wife. She smiles.

“I invited him,” she tells him, simply, “Shortly after your accident.”

She turns to the guests, and extends her hand to him. “Lord Samwell, it is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Jon’s best friend goes even more red and places a kiss to her knuckles. “The pleasure, and the honor, is all mine, Your Grace.” He steps back and ushers Gilly forward. She bobs another curtsy. “May I present my, ah, well, may I present Gilly, and our son, Little Sam.”

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Grace,” Gilly says, her accent different than how Jon remembers it. She wears what looks to be a lady’s gown, one of fine material, but a bit faded and worn.

There’s a voice coming from one of the side tables. Jon looks over, and sees a couple of the delegates grumbling to one another behind their hands. He ignores them.

“Thank you, Gilly. You and your family are very welcome in Winterfell,” Sansa says kindly. She glances over at some footmen and gestures to them. Jon watches in surprise as chairs and place settings are brought over for them. “Won’t you join us? We are celebrating my husband’s recovery.”
Gilly’s eyes are the size of saucers. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

Sansa’s gracious smile does become a bit more fixed once Gilly has sat down and begun piling her plate and eating. The girl is as sweet as ever, but her table manners leave very, very much to be desired. Sam looks embarrassed, but Jon doesn’t give him a second to correct her. The king demands Sam tell him everything.

Gods, how he’s missed him.

Sansa fields most of the conversation with the other guests while Jon and Sam catch up, but she nudges him at one point.

Reluctantly, he turns his eyes on three dark-eyed women in ocher and sandstone colored wool who have approached the high table. It takes half a second for him to realize who they are.


One of them, with short hair and full lips, smiles at him. “I see our reputation precedes us.”

“It does,” he agrees. That’s not something they should be proud of.

One of the others is about to speak when the short-haired one extends her hand towards him. “I am Tyene Sand, Your Grace, daughter of Prince Oberyn Martell and Princess Ellaria. These are my half-sisters, Obara and Nymeria.” She clearly means for him to kiss her hand. He shakes it instead.

Sansa clears her throat. “I hope you’re enjoying the feast, my ladies.”

Tyene glances at her. “Not half as much as you, I hope, Your Grace. I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to see how enormous you’ve gotten!”

Sansa, quick as a whip, replies, “I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to see less of you, Tyene, I take it you’ve recovered from the frostbite?”

“We wanted to extend our congratulations to you on your recovery, Your Grace,” the one with the braid cuts in impatiently.

“Yes!” Tyene exclaims, giving Jon a look that makes him feel like a bone before a dog. “How wonderful to finally see the heroic King of Winter back, looking so strong, well, and hearty. You’re the picture of virility, Sire.”

“Thank you,” he says dully, rather irritated. *Who compliments a man on his virility in front of his wife?* “That is kind of you to say.”

The third one, her hair in a bun, clears her throat. “We are indeed eager to speak to you, Your Grace. We cannot tell you how eager we are to join the women’s forces.”

“I can’t tell you how happy I am to hear that,” Arya cuts in, practically sneering.

“Of course, we couldn’t bear to leave without you, Princess Arya,” Obara snaps back.

Jon instantly wants to be anywhere else but here.

But that’s at least one advantage to a health crisis. He yawns in an exaggerated fashion. “Forgive me, ladies and gentlemen, but I find myself quite exhausted. I think it’s time for me to retire.”
Everyone rises. The guests bow and curtsy. Jon offers his arm to Sansa. “Shall we?”

She nods, a bit vacantly, and they depart together.

Once they are a fair ways down the corridor, Jon brings her hand to his lips. His heart feels like it’s about to burst. “How did you do it?” He asks, “How did you get Sam here?”

“Actually, he’d written to you. It seems… Well, the citadel tried to make him cast Gilly and Little Sam out onto the street, and he had to leave. By some miracle, apparently, his father suddenly decided to grow a heart, and began sending him money for Gilly and the babe, but he was afraid of taking it. He couldn’t bring Gilly and Little Sam back to the Wall, so he wanted us to find a place for them. We’d just gotten word of your accident, and so I said of course, but asked him to come to Winterfell as well, for a few weeks at least while you got well. All your other friends would be at the Wall, and I just… I wanted you to have your best friend with you while you got better.” She hesitates. “Should I not have? I know he’s supposed to become the Watch’s maester, but-”

He puts a finger to her lips. “-You’re the best of women, and I love you.”

She clutches his hand, looking into his eyes. “I know how hard this has been for you, Jon. How unhappy you’ve been. I just want you to be happy.”

“You know what would make me happy?” He asks as they get to the door of the lord’s chambers, “You, sharing my bed tonight.”

Her face goes scarlet. “Are you sure about that?”

The king laughs. “Of course I’m sure.”

His queen gives a sad smile. “Well, I’m glad I am finally capable of doing that. But…”

“...What?” He asks, as he leads her to the bedchamber.

“Blow out the candles, won’t you?”

A good idea. He’d rather she not look at his bruises and bandages more than she already has. Or get a closer look at all the muscle he’s lost. They slip into bed in the dark, and Jon finds himself curling up around her, clutching her belly. Their bed soon feels like a cozy little burrow for the two of them.

“You know,” he murmurs, “We haven’t really discussed names yet.”

“You always said that you wanted to have a son you could name Robb. I figured Robb and Eddard for boys.”

He likes this. “And the girls?”

“I used to think of naming a girl ‘Arya’, but that was when I thought she was dead. I read somewhere that it’s bad luck to name a baby after a still-living relative.”

He’s heard that too. “The wildlings say that.”

“Well, we don’t want to offend the Free Folk. I’d like to name one Lyanna, but I think that’s a bit dangerous. There’s also Lyarra, after our grandmother. I also like Serena. And Alysanne. What do you think?”

He nuzzles her neck. “If the older one is a girl, we should go with Alysanne. So we can have our own Good Queen Alysanne. And I like Serena.”
“Alright, then. And if we have a boy and a girl, and the girl is younger?”

“Whatever you wish. But if we only have one boy, he should be Robb. I think my memories of Father are a little too fresh for me to be calling an infant ‘Eddard’ yet.”

“So you wouldn’t like Eddard if we have two boys? Would ‘Rickon’ be better?”

Jon flinches. “No. Those memories are even more raw. Robb and Eddard.”

Sansa nods. “Robb and Eddard, Alysanne and Serena, or Robb and Alysanne, then.”

He thinks it’s decided. But then she suddenly speaks. “If Daenerys chooses to reveal you before they are born, do you think we should maybe consider Targaryen names. It might be useful.”

Jon groans. He truly is sleepy. “Tomorrow, alright?”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” she pouts. Jon just smiles and kisses her neck.

They keep sleeping together after that. He goes for walks for a few weeks, begins taking on duties. He heals and puts on weight. When the bandages come off, he finds that his chest is permanently marked: large, angry red scrapes on the left side of his chest. Nearly half his left nipple is gone.

Sansa strokes his chest the evening after the bandage comes off. “I think it’s rather… attractive.”

Jon looks up, eyebrows reaching his hairline. He’s surprised to hear this. “Really?”

“Indeed.” She gives him a look he thought he’d never see again.

Then she asks that they blow out the candles again. So much for finding his body attractive. It immediately kills his heat.

“Actually,” he says, laying back a bit, “I think I’m a little too tired for it.”

“...Oh,” says his wife, her tone laced with disappointment.

Agreements with Braavos, Walana, and Pentos are finalized. So are ones with Elanu. Their odds multiply within a week. Guests begin to finally depart. Jon starts practicing in the yard again, though he still has to spend several hours in bed. Sansa’s belly grows.

He begins aching for her, but he’s nervous. She’s so far along, what if he hurts her? And she still wants the candles out whenever they get into bed.

Word eventually comes from the Wall. Daenerys has decided the Wall is secure enough for her to take a trip to Winterfell, just until the twins finally arrive. Sansa is at her wits’ end, utterly exhausted from all of her work accommodating their foreign guests. She grows irritable and melancholic. She loses her temper with everyone, including him.

Sam is a comfort throughout this, but it just upsets Jon. Daenerys didn’t really ask to stay so much as announced that she would.

At a certain point, he begins sparring with the Sand Snakes, who still reside in Winterfell. They’d been stalling their departure, though nobody is entirely sure why.

Jon isn’t fond of them, but they’re some of the few skilled and challenging sparring partners left in the castle. Everyone else is afraid to strike him too hard since his injury.
Actually, Obara and Nym are challenging. Tyene is just challenged.

She strikes as hard as she can, with every movement. And she moves with a surprising lack of grace or technique. But she’s enthusiastic, always pleading with Jon to take her on. He’s too much of a gentleman to refuse her every time.

But it’s embarrassing. She looks less like a warrior and more like an angry toddler brandishing a stick. It gets to the point where Jon feels so bad for her that he decides to just let her win, pretending to slip and let her knock him down.

He regrets this immediately. A second after his back is in the mud, she descends, knives crossed to form an X. For a moment, Jon is sure she is going to slit his throat.

Instead, she straddles him, her brown eyes gleaming, and her blades stop short of touching his neck.

“Do you yield, King of Winter?”

“Yes!” He snaps impatiently, just wanting this woman off of him. He doesn’t like how she moves her hips against his. She’s grinding against him. And, despite himself, he can’t help but feel his loins stir from the friction. It makes him wonder just how long it’s been since he last made love. Seven Hells… it was the last night at Harrenhal.

She doesn’t get up at once. She savors her victory, and shimmies her hips a bit.

“I win,” she purrs, raising her daggers from his neck.

“We’ve established that!” Jon snaps, thoroughly embarrassed. What is wrong with this woman? He pushes her off of him and gets to his feet. “Enough for today,” he says, “I need to retire for a while.”

He just hopes Tyene didn’t detect his cock hardening. But when he steals a glance at her, she catches him and licks her lips, and he knows she did. He couldn’t feel anymore humiliated if he were still wearing his coma-nappies.

Jon wishes the babes would just arrive already, so he wouldn’t have to worry so much about hurting his wife in her condition anymore. Most of all, he wants the Sand Snakes gone. Enough was enough.

He’d take a nap, then go to Sansa about it. No more stalling.

Jon undresses, gives himself a scrub down, and slips into bed. And he glances around the room. He’s still a bit excited from having that woman grind against him. Maybe it was a sign that he should offer himself some relief.

So he does. He erases all thoughts of Tyene Sand from his mind, and instead pictures Sansa, naked and cradling that big belly of hers, hair tumbling down about her shoulders, lips swollen, panting wantonly. Her teats have swollen, too. And one of the greatest injustices he’s suffered thus far is the fact that he hasn’t even gotten to see them in full. Seven Hells, they’re the size of honey-melons at this point and he hasn’t seen them, kissed them, nuzzled them, sucked on them, squeezed them. They’re probably too big to fit in his hand now.

He wonders if her cunny looks any different. Or tastes any different.

“Caught you.”

Jon’s eyes pop open, and he hurries to cover himself.
To his horror, he sees Tyene Sand, dresses in some ridiculous peach-silk…. Thing that looks like someone cut holes in one of his wife’s shifts. What in Seven Hells was she thinking, wearing such a thing in this weather?

What in Seven Hells is she doing here?

A stupid question, really. Jon knows what she’s doing here. He’s been in denial for weeks, but he knows.

The Sand Snake smirks, leaning against the doorframe, hip jutting out.

“Get out!” He shouts, furious. Tyene pouts.

“Oh, come now, Your Grace, we both know you don’t mean that.” She glances at his groin. Jon’s cock is softening at an alarming rate. It’s like someone has dumped him naked into a snow drift. “Don’t play coy when I have caught you frigging yourself to me.”

She begins sauntering over to the bed. “What were you imagining?”

“I mean it, Sand, get out. For pity’s sake, I’m a married man!”

“Married to a fat ginger shrew with an icicle shoved so far up her arse it’s sticking out her nose.”

On one hand, that is an amazing insult that he’s certain she couldn’t have come up with on her own. And he’s definitely going to use it someday, on someone who deserves it. On the other, he’d like to put her in the stocks for saying it.

Jon actually stands, disgusted. “You dare speak of my queen that way?”

“I’m a daring woman.”

“You’re a stupid girl.”

She snorts. “Oh, please, Your Grace. Your cock was poking me in the yards. Don’t pretend like I’m not the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen.”

“I’m n--” But words fail him when she suddenly opens her… half… bodice.

They’re breasts, he can’t help but look for a moment. And they are pretty ones. Perky, with dark brown nipples. But he does tear his eyes away. He cannot believe this is happening. Roz the brothel girl wasn’t this… whatever this is.

He’s almost embarrassed for her. He certainly can’t stand to look at her.

“Seven Hells, Woman!”

“Come now, King Jon, name one woman more beautiful than me.”

“My wife!” He shouts. He truly feels pity for her now.

That is, until she rips off her skirt and moves up so she’s two inches from him. She grabs his chin and makes him look at her. “Oh, such a good boy, trying so hard to be faithful to that fat, snobby queen of his. But you have to be honest with yourself. You think you want the good girl… But you need the bad pussy.”

Jon isn’t quite sure what “bad pussy” is supposed to mean, but what springs into his head are tales
some of the brothers told of contracting the ‘Lover’s Rot’ from whores. A rot that gave them ulcers on their cocks... and eventually, everywhere else.

He doesn’t want to touch her, at all. But he has to. He shoves her away, unable to take this anymore.

For a moment, he thinks that this is done. That she’ll gather up that washcloth of hers and run out.

Then the door opens again.

Sansa walks in, eyebrows raised. She looks back and forth between the naked woman on the floor and Jon, backed up against the window in only his tunic, no trousers.

“Sansa, I swear to you, I-”

“-Not a word, Jon,” she says primly. She looks at Tyene. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Fucking your husband!”

Sansa cocks her head. “I’m sorry, did your mother never explain how that’s done? Because you’re doing it wrong. You see, My Lady, when a mummy and daddy-”

“I know how to do it, you priggish bitch!” Tyene snaps, “I know how to do it far better than you! I got his cock hard throwing him in the dirt and pressing a blade to his neck!”

Jon clutches his brow. How could this possibly get worse?

“Were you rutting against him like a puppy in its first heat? You see, boys’ parts tend to react when you press against them a lot. And that’s the first step to making a baby.”

He looks up now, a bit amazed. He gazes at his wife, so grand, so fine, so witty.

“I found him tugging himself off!”

“Ah, I see where you got confused. Yes, making a boy stiff is the first step, Tyene. But a boy playing with it is decidedly not the next one. That’s what boys do when they don’t intend to ‘fuck’ someone. It wasn’t an invitation. My husband was fucking himself, not you.”

“Oh, and you don’t think he was imagining me while he was doing it?”

“I think he’s more likely to find pleasure in picturing a wight than you, My Lady. That’s why he kept yelling at you to get out and threw you halfway across the room when you got to close. See, when a boy tells a naked girl ‘no’, he means it.”

“Not always. He’s not a boy, he’s a man. And I know men.”

“I’m sure you know many men. I’m guessing that’s how you ended up with that ‘Bad Pussy’ of yours. But clearly, you don’t know this man. And you never will. Now grab those obnoxious sisters of yours and get out of my castle.”

It’s wholly inappropriate, but Jon cannot help but feel his arousal returning as he watches this.

_Damn, Sansa._

Tyene glares. “How do you think _our_ queen will react when she learns of how you’ve treated us?! We’re her subjects!”

...And the door opens again. This time, for a smirking Daenerys Targaryen.
It’s at this point that Jon wonders if he’s just having a very confusing dream. He pinches himself. 

Nope.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” He demands. Dany glances at him.

“You knew I was coming,” she says, annoyed, “I just arrived. Sansa said you were in bed, so we came up to greet you when we, well, came upon this. And yes, we saw everything. You know, I’ve witnessed a lot of incredible things in my lifetime. And this is now one of them. Now I can say I’ve seen dragons spring to life, the Night’s King, the lair of wizards, and the most pathetic attempt at seduction in the history of the human race.”

“Like a cat in heat trying to entice a very disinterested tree,” Sansa remarks.

Jon laughs out loud at this. “Oh, thank the gods.”

Daenerys marches over to Tyene and grabs her by her hair. The girls yelps. Dany ignores her and looks at Sansa.

“Shall you write to her mother, or shall I?”

Jon interrupts. “You will, Daenerys. My wife is going to be much too busy to write any letters today.”

Even if she’s too delicate a condition to couple traditionally, he’s going to at least get to taste her until she’s forcing him away.

He’s done it before, he does it now. And he counts her seizing up four times before hissing and pushing his head away instead of pulling it towards her.

She doesn’t taste that different, perhaps a little more savory. But the experience is different, fitting his head beneath that big belly of hers.

And how he loves that big belly of hers. He maps it with his fingers, lips, and tongue. It’s like her body has become a world onto its own. He pressed his right ear against it a few times.

Their coupling options, in terms of position, are a bit more limited. He can’t lay atop her, face-to-face anymore. So he takes her standing against the bed, her hips dangling over the edge. When he does get up onto the furs, she rides his lap, their bodies touching as much as possible. Every thrust of his hips makes him feel stronger.

Her pregnancy, if he has to guess, makes her more sensitive. She peeks more easily. In fact, she urges him to lay off trying to touch her nub for a while. “Just move,” she tells him, pulling his hands to her hair instead.

When they finally finish with simultaneous moans, she curls up aside him. “I don’t know how I’ve managed to go so long without you, or how I’ll cope once you’re gone again.”

“Likewise,” he says with all earnestness, “Though your letters helped, you gloriously filthy woman, you.”

She grins. “That was the idea. Though I wouldn’t mind you returning the favor every so often. You might find writing can be as soothing as receiving.”

He blushes. Jon honestly can’t imagine putting something like that to paper. “I’ve found that’s the
case in most matters, but—"

"-Oh, don’t you dare say it’s embarrassing!" She swats at his chest with mock indignation.

"I suppose I shouldn’t. But speaking of letters, I seem to recall a certain promise you made about ribbons?"

Sansa lies back and puts hers her fingertips to her temple. “Oh, Gods, I completely forgot! You came home so early and…”

“It’s fine,” he says, “The ribbons can wait.”

“I’m not sure I have enough to tie up all of this,” she says, clutching her belly.

Jon chuckles. “How about I buy you more?”

“We have to order them from White Harbor.”

“I will then.” He shrugs. “You ordered Sam for me all the way from Oldtown.”

“I did send more maesters to the Watch, you know,” she tells him, “And septas. When Sam wrote to us of the situation.”

“I doubt I’d be alive right now if you hadn’t,” Jon replies, pausing to kiss her fingertips, “Let’s not talk about that, though. I want to make up for lost time.”

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“I thought you found me disgusting. I’m so fat now.”

He gapes at her. “Are you bloody mad? You’re more beautiful than ever. I wanted you terribly. I was afraid I’d hurt you. And also, you kept demanding to blow out the candles. I thought you couldn’t bear to look at me.”

Sansa looks at him with the most horrified expression, “WHAT?! WHY?!”

“I don’t know, maybe because I spent weeks in a bed, pissing and shitting all over myself?”

“You were comatose!”

“I was still wearing an adult nappy,” he says, “How could any wife ever unsee that? Ever look at her husband as a man again? Oh, not to mention, I’ve lost half a nipple.”

Sansa lays back, staring at the canopy and clutching her temple. “Jon, that’s absurd. For so many reasons, I am not even sure where to start!”

He frowns. “I don’t think it’s ridiculous.”

Her face falls. “I didn’t want to make you feel that way. But why should I care about that? To me, you’ll always be my hero, my king, my lover. I’ve been afraid for you, yes. And when I married you, I knew that you’d be going off to war, and I knew I might have to welcome you home wounded, in all manner of states. I anticipated that, and I accepted that. I prepared myself as much as I could for things like your accident. And you know why? Because you’re a hero. And that’s how I see you. How I’ll always see you. And I am always honored and happy to take care of you, no matter what state you’re in.”
“I doubt you were prepared to see me soiling myself.” He says with disbelief.

“...Actually..”

He looks at her in shock. “What?”

Sansa takes a deep breath. “I’d been through this sort of thing before, remember? We all have. Bran. He’d been asleep for a fortnight by the time we left Winterfell. I knew what that meant. I saw it. And I knew something similar could easily happen to you. True, I didn’t really focus on that aspect of it, but I was aware. But it’s not what matters to me.

“I know it might seem easy for me to say, since you were the one in the nappy, not me. I felt awful for you, of course. But I was terrified for your safety, Jon.” A smile creeps to her lips. “And no amount of nappies will ever be more striking than your bare ass at dawn, or all those times you’ve entered the bedchamber in a sweat-soaked tunic clinging to your skin.”

He blushes. He never expected Sansa to ever admit to that. “Really?

She rolls her eyes. “By the gods, Jon. I knew you shit when I married you. I’ve watched you piss. I’d spend the rest of our lives changing your nappies for you myself to get you to open your eyes! Gods, I haven’t even thought about that! Not since you got strong enough to move by yourself! This is the first time I’ve even considered it since then! I’m about to birth two children, for pity’s sake! Those are the nappies I care about!”

Jon sits up, hugging his knees to his chest. “It made me feel like less of a man.”

Sansa leans over and begins rubbing his shoulders. “Jon… You were literally comatose after riding a dragon in a battle against Ice Monsters at a giant wall, trying to take down the King of the monsters and wielding a Valyrian Steel broadsword. Throughout your coma, you, the King of Winter, were watched over by a giant wolf you’d trained yourself and your pregnant wife, who is carrying twins because one child at a time just wasn’t enough for your seed. You couldn’t be more masculine if you suddenly sprouted a second phallus. The only reason you were in bed is because you fell off your dragon while fighting the Night’s King!”

“Yes, but there’s this war going on, and I’m not there! I was lying in bed instead!” He says in frustration.

“That isn’t your fault! You’re a hero!” Sansa exclaims, “Everyone from the Summer Isles to Thenn, from Pyke to Yi-Ti, knows it!”

“I don’t want to be a hero, I want to fight for my people.” Jon insists.

“I know. That’s what makes you a hero. But you need to accept the results of that. It doesn’t make you less of a man.” She sighs. “This was my fault. I should have--”

“No!” He says, raising his voice slightly and grabbing her hand. “You were perfect. You are perfect. My failings are my own. Such as how I made you feel unwanted.”

He still can’t believe that happened. How could Sansa, of all people feel that way? He’d not even imagined she’d think such a thing. Sansa’s problem for most of her life was being wanted too much.

“You didn’t seem to want me around. You always looked resentful when I was with you, and you wouldn’t let me back into your bed.”

He lowers his knees, turns slightly, and pulls her into his lap. “I was embarrassed about you seeing
me like that, because I felt so insecure. And I didn’t want you sleeping with me because of—"

“-The nappies.” She scoffs.

“Yes. You’re far too fine a lady to sleep in my piss.”

She glances at him, “You really are a master of words.”

“Thank you.”

Sansa glances down and presses her mouth to his chest. She runs her mouth over his scars, right down to his half-nipple. She kisses it. She only moves away to gaze up at him. “You’re beautiful. You’re the only man I’ve wanted—”

“- That’s not true,” he says, laughing. She doesn’t have to pretend that it is. But as a girl, she became infatuated with scores of handsome knights and men. She’d been besotted with Joffrey. And there was that line on her wedding night, promising not to call him ‘Sandor’ or ‘Loras.’

“-Since I truly learned what it was that I wanted,” she continues, firmly. “I don’t mean silly crushes where I was ignorant of what desire truly was or how it worked. I knew nothing of what those desires for those pretty knights truly meant. But after I learned, the only man who has caught my eye, who I’ve desired truly understanding what those feelings are for, is you. I was afraid of men at a certain point, especially after I truly knew what they would want from me. I didn’t think I could look at men again after what happened to me. But I looked at you. And I thought of you. I wanted from you, the things so many men wanted from me. And I knew it. I knew what it all meant. You’re the only one that’s made me feel this way, knowing what it meant. That is still true.”

His heart swells. He wishes he could tell her the same thing. Jon licks his lips.

“I’m a eunuch to any woman but you, Darling,” he tells her, cupping her cheek, “You’re the pinnacle of everything I ever wanted or could want. In my bed or out of it.”

“Thin, shapely me, perhaps,” she says, looking down at her belly, “I was so beautiful. But why should you want or need me now? I’m not beautiful, I’m already with child, I’ll be giving you your heir and spare in a single go, and after, my body will never quite be the same.”

“No, it won’t,” he agrees, “But it is and it will be beautiful in new ways. And, Seven Hells, Sansa… Whenever I look at you now, do you know what I feel? See? Think?”

Sansa looks up with the most vulnerable look he’s seen, “What?”

“I… I feel inflamed,” he says, blushing a bit, “I see you filled with me, I see all the things you can do with me, with us. I swell with pride over doing this to you, with you, that you’re mine. And I just want to fill you more and more. I want to be inside you even more, watch that belly move while I repeat the act that got it that way. I want to curl up around you, nuzzle your bosom, and make you mine over, and over, and over. That’s partly why I felt so embarrassed about everything, because you reminded me of the man I was, the man I felt like I couldn’t be anymore. And I was frustrated because seeing you like that filled me with lust I couldn’t act on. And I feared I’d never get to fill you up, put you in this state again.”

Her jaw drops. “...Truly?”

“Truly. I’m sorry you heard what that Sand fool said. But she’s an idiot. She doesn’t understand anything.”
“...And… when I’ve had the babes, and my belly shrinks, you won’t mind the marks?”

“It’ll be a reminder of what I did to you, and what I can do again.” His voice gets rougher. He pulls Sansa close to him, so she can feel his hardness.

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He wakes with a jolt to the sound of his wife’s cry. It takes him a moment to notice that the mattress is wet. His first thought is that one of them has pissed the bed.

But then Sansa cries out again. Jon sits up and puts his arms around her. “Sweetling, are you alright?”

“Jon, it’s happening. They’re coming.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Sansa:

He’s on his feet in a second. “What do you need? What do we do?”

Another pain hits her, and she clutches her belly. She pants. “Help me… Help me wash myself, and get me my shift and dressing gown, and...” She moans in pain again. They’re like violent waves crashing within her. “And… I need… my midwives and septas… And I have to get to the lady’s chambers.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s where we’ve planned!” She’d been having those rooms set up for weeks now. Another wave of pain hits her. Seven Hells, how are none of her bones broken?

“Sansa, I don’t think you can walk like this,” Jon says as he rushes around the room to do as she asks. He deposits a bowl of water at her bedside, then removes the furs himself. She watches in surprise as he, naked as his Name Day, soaks a rag and begins washing her himself.

“Jon, I need to get there, I have to do this as planned. All of us are safer, healthier, in a place that’s been prepared. Just get some guards to carry me.”

Her husband hesitates. “I don’t trust the guards to be gentle enough. But… Bran’s wheelchair!”

Good idea. Why hadn’t she thought of that? She nods. Jon finishes wiping her up, and hurries to get her clothing. He waits until she’s covered to shout for assistance.

“Don’t leave me!” She pleads.

“Of course not,” he says at once, pouring her a cup of water and getting dressed himself.

She’s already weeping, and not just from the pain. People soon come. One of her midwives, a guard with Bran’s chair, and she can hear people gathering by the door. It makes her furious.

“Tell whoever it is outside to PISS OFF!” She screams. She will not be gawked at.

“It’s your sister, Your Grace,” the midwife says, “And Queen Daenerys, Lady Missandei, and Lord Wyfred and-”

“I DON’T CARE! Arya can come, the rest LEAVE!” This is not a court function.
She’s helped into the chair and Jon begins pushing her. But she stops him, and instead shouts for Ghost. “Get them! Chase them away!” She cries, furious.

The wolf does as bid, bursting open the door and bearing his fangs at the gathered onlookers, of which there are clearly more than was reported. They do step back, but they don’t quite flee, instead peering at the royal couple.

“Your Grace,” one lordling she recognizes as Roose Ryswell, their Master of Coin, says, “Would you---”

Jon rips Longclaw from the rack on the wall and charges toward them, steel brandished.

“GET OUT, NOW, BEFORE I HAVE YOU ALL FLOGGED!”

This time, they do flee, save for Arya and Daenerys, who seem to tremble. Jon glares at Daenerys, then belts the Valyrian blade to his waist before returning to wheel his wife down the halls. As they move down the corridor, Arya takes Sansa’s hand.

“Please,” Daenrys begs, “Let me be here.”

Jon says nothing. Finally, Sansa snaps, “Fine!”

Sansa feels like she can barely breathe. The midwife comments that the twins shall come quickly.

The Lady’s chambers are now the birthing chambers, with the bed stripped and re-dressed, a variety of instruments and equipment assembled, a birthing chair. Leather cords hang over both, the bed and the chair for her to pull on in her agony. Stirrups were fixed to the bed. And her staff of six to handle this are assembled.

She’s helped out of the chair and onto the bed. Yet, she cries out more.

“You’re doing well!” One of her Septas tells her, “Keep breathing!”

“What can we do?” Jon asks.

The midwives look at him warily. “Your Grace, you need not be here, you’d be more comfortable-”

“I DON’T CARE ABOUT BEING COMFORTABLE! AS YOUR KING, I ORDER YOU TO TELL ME WHAT TO DO!”

One of them offers a bowl of cold water and a compress. “Keep her forehead cool?”

Jon nods and sits on the edge of the bed beside her, clutching her hand and dabbing her brow. “I’m so sorry, My Love.”

“Shut up!” She snaps. “Where is Bran?!”

“He’s on his way,” Arya assures her.

“Get him his chair, and tell him to take Ghost and all the court to the Great Hall. I’ll have no more gawkers!” Sansa cries. “He’s Lord of Winterfell at the moment!”

Many people in the room exchange odd looks. Sansa wants to strangle them all. How do they not understand this? Arya and Jon are with her, she’s giving birth. Who else is going to do it? This is her castle, no one else’s. Have they forgotten that?
“DO IT, OR I WILL NOT PUSH! YOU’LL HAVE TO CUT THEM OUT OF ME!”

Daenerys, sitting at the corner of the bed, speaks up, “I could—”

Sansa had forgotten all about her.

“NO!” This time, it’s Jon who yells. “If you’re going to be here, sit quietly!” He glances at Arya. “You too. Everyone is to let my wife concentrate! And do what she says, NOW!”

Sansa no longer wants to strangle Jon. Indeed, she’s overcome with affection for him. “Thank you,” she moans, “You’re the only one I can rely on.”

He kisses her fingers.

“But Jon…”

“What?”

“Please don’t look between my legs, I beg of you. I don’t want you to see… that…”

A Septa takes a seat at the end of the bed. “We should put you in the stirrups, Your Grace. And I must shave and measure you.”

Sansa nods. She squeezes Arya and Jon’s hands, looking back and forth between them. “It hurts so much…” she whimpers.

She is thankful for the stirrups when she ends up yelping and nearly jumping at the feeling of the cold, steel razor between her legs. The midwife shushes her. “Don’t move, My Lady!”

“Please don’t cut me!” She pleads. She doesn’t just mean the shaving. She’s read some things about this. About maesters and midwives cutting the entrance to make it wider, and sometimes even sewing it up again after. “Don’t cut me open! Please!”

Jon leans over and kisses her forehead.

“If anyone cuts my wife, they’ll lose their heads!” He declares.

“My King, there’s a chance that her entrance might not be wide enough to do this quickly!”

“No one cuts my wife without her permission!” He declares, amending his order.

It takes hours. At one point, Jon asks if someone can get her some wine, to help with the pain. The midwives inform him that it would be a great and dangerous risk to her and the twins.

Jon and Arya try to distract her throughout, recounting funny stories of their youth, or ones Old Nan used to tell. At one point, Sansa looks over at Daenerys, and asks her to tell some stories of her greatest triumphs.

The Dragon Queen moves her chair closer and speaks of the House of the Undying, of gaining her army of Unsullied, of the sacking of Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen, of the people of King’s Landing welcoming her, of flying for the first time, of burning the Dothraki Khals alive and getting all the khalasaars to follow her. There’s a gruesome story about how she once ate an entire raw horse’s heart in a Dothraki fertility ritual.

All of this is a comfort, but the agony still makes her shriek. She’s sometimes blinded by the pain. There’s a point where it hurts some much she can’t speak or even think straight.
At one point, Jon orders lemoncakes and apple cider to be brought. He helps her eat and drink.

“The final phases are coming, Your Grace!” A septa eventually announces. “The first one is coming!”

She can feel it, too. There’s a definite shift. And gods, is it agony. Still, she’s a little grateful.

“PLEASE!” She begs. “MAKE IT STOP! LET IT BE OVER!”

“Soon, Your Grace, I promise! Just push!”

She does. She does with all of her might.

Pushing the first out takes less time than she expects. She does hear the cries, but it’s almost like she’s hearing them from across a vast field. She’s still consumed with pain. The other one is coming.

That takes even less time. And once both are out, Sansa expects cries of joy, congratulations, and for the pain to stop. But people are oddly silent, and the pain continues.

“OH GODS, WHY DOES IT STILL HURT??!”

“You have to expel the rest of their old home, Your Grace! All that cushioned them within your womb!” The head septa cries, placing a basin between her legs.

It doesn’t hurt quite as much as the babes, but it isn’t pleasant. Eventually, though, the shocks finally, finally recede. At long last, it is over.

Sansa weeps from relief and glances around the room. She still hears their crying, but it’s so much closer now, and it’s music.

“What are they?!” She asks, “Let me see them!”

“Two beautiful, healthy girls, Your Grace!” One of the midwives say. But the women huddled over the bassinets exchange odd looks that strike terror into Sansa’s heart.

“LET ME SEE THEM! LET ME SEE MY DAUGHTERS!”

“Of course!”

The babes, wrapped in blankets, are carried over. One is handed to Arya, the other to Jon. Her sister grins and gives her to Sansa. “Look at that hair!”

Look at that hair indeed. A dusting of pinkish fuzz covers her scalp. Big, blue eyes meet hers, and like magic, the girl stops howling. Her mouth makes an O and a tiny, pink tongue pops out.

Sansa melts. This is beyond anything she’s ever known. The world seems to have disappeared, and a whole new one has appeared in its place.

“She’s the elder,” Arya whispers.

“Alysanne,” Sansa says dreamily. She looks up at everyone else. “And Serena?”

It’s exquisite, seeing Jon hold their child. The love in his eyes. He feels as she does, clearly. But it’s marred, because there’s concern there, too. Deep concern.

And everyone, including Daenerys, who gapes, is huddled over him. No one really speaks.
“What’s wrong?!” Sansa demands, petrified, “Why do you all look like that?! Is she okay?!”

“She’s fine, Sansa!” Jon says, looking up, “She’s....”

“...She’s perfect!” Daenerys interrupts, her voice and face utterly enchanted.

“Then why are you all...?” Sansa is so confused. “Let me see her!”

Jon leans over and turns the little bundle in his arms, and...

Jon is right, she’s fine. Her crying has relaxed into a hearty gurgle, saliva running from her kissable little mouth, which blows spit bubbles. Her head is oddly shaped, but that was to be expected. So is Alysanne’s.

Serena is an utterly gorgeous newborn. But the moment Sansa sees her second daughter, she goes speechless, and completely understands everyone else’s reaction.

The big eyes that look up at her are like firey amethysts. And on close inspection, one can make out the near-translucent strands of hair clinging to her skull.

Sansa looks back and forth between her two children. Alysanne: Tully red with bonny blue eyes.

Serena, the purple and silver-gold of the line of dragonlords.

“I don’t understand,” one of the midwives says, “How-?”

Sansa exchanges looks with her husband. There are going to be a lot of people asking that question, and they will have no choice but to answer.
Departures

Chapter Summary

With new life having arrived, it's time for everyone to face real life as well.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, to Ohdede for her beta-work. Also, I'm currently at Ice and Fire Con, so if anyone is there, let me know!

Jon:

Alysanne won’t stop making faces. She likes playing with her tongue and lips especially. Serena, contrary to what her name suggests, struggles against her swaddling and howls like a demon.

They've been in the world for half an hour when the bells of Winterfell are ringing.

Mere hours after their birth, word comes that the whole court is gathered in the Great Hall, calling out for news.

Jon waits until Sansa's fallen asleep, then reluctantly drags himself to the Hall with Arya and Daenerys in tow. He’s exhausted.

“What are you going to do?” Arya whispers to him as they make their way down. She looks back and forth between them. “Serena has the Targaryen looks she might as well have been born with scales!”

It’s a good question. Jon and Daenerys exchange looks.

She sighs. “Jon, this is a sign. It’s time.”

She’s right. But he’s not in any state right now.

“Just… Not right now, please, wait until we present the babes and everyone sees,” he says, “Let her have a few hours out of the dragonfire.”

Dany nods. The doors open, and the Hall falls silent as Jon slowly makes his way to the high table and takes his seat. He looks to Bran, hugs his brother, and whispers his thanks. A servant hurries over with a cup, and fills it with Arbor Gold. Jon drinks it gratefully.

Finally, Wyfred Manderly calls out. “Your Grace, we heard your children are born! Well?! Are they well?”

All at once, people begin calling out questions all at once.

“Do you have a son?”
“Do you have two sons?”
“Which one is the heir?”
“Where are they?”
“How do they look?”
“How is the queen?”

Jon wearily holds up a hand for silence. He can not take this right now.

“My lords, my ladies,” he calls out, “We have had an exhausting day, and we require some time, rest, and privacy. We shall be releasing information at our own pace. My children are both healthy and happy, and the queen is well, though utterly drained. The three realms have been blessed with two princesses this day, strong and bonny. Three hours ago, Princess Alysanne, now proclaimed as Crown Princess and Heiress Apparent of the throne of the Three Realms, was born. Her sister, Princess Serena, was born four minutes later.”

“Where are they?” Someone calls out.

Jon takes a deep breath. “With her Grace the Queen. After such a trying and exhausting birth, and a rather stressful pregnancy, we wish to have the princesses to ourselves. We will be overjoyed to present our daughters to all of you tomorrow evening. I thank you all for your well-wishes.”

At this, Daenerys stands, raising her own cup. “I’d like all of you to join me in a toast,” she calls out, “To the new princesses, Alysanne and Serena, to the labors of the mother, Queen Sansa the First, and their father, King Jon the Fourth! To the royal family and the new princesses!”

“The royal family and the new princesses!” The whole hall thunders and drinks. Jon empties his cup and departs, ready to collapse.

He wakes the next morning beside his wife to find her nursing Serena. He watches for a while, which she clearly doesn’t mind. Indeed, when the child finishes, she hands her over to Jon. “Burp her while I get the other one?”

His daughter burps, then promptly sighs against his neck. That act alone, makes his heart quicken.

Sansa is the one who broaches the topic first. “So, today we all become Targaryens. Are you ready for that?”

“Well, we have a signed testimony by Howland Reed, his daughter’s word, Rhaegar’s harp, and enough people have seen me with the dragons-”

“I mean mentally,” she says, “This will change how people look at you. Questions will be raised.”

“Of course there will,” he replies, “But I’ve been preparing for this since Bran told us.”

“And the practical issues? People will wonder if the North is now to be ruled by branch Targaryens.”

“I have no right to the name,” Jon replies, “I may not be Eddard Stark’s son, but I’m still a bastard.”

“You’re still known as Jon Stark.”
“Yes, but I was named one. By you. By our subjects. And I married you.”

“Last time I checked, you’re not my wife.”

He chuckles, stroking Serena’s scalp. “No, but I cloaked you in Stark colors. It’s the name I was given, and the one I used when I wed you. And it’s not as if the arrangements of our union were traditional anyways.”

Sansa sighs. “Daenerys will want you to take the name, you realize that. She’s going to want it preserved.”

“Then I’ll have both. I’ll go primarily by Stark, our girls can have both names, and their senior names can be determined later. If House Nymeros Martell could do it, why not us?”

“I’ll have to adopt it as well, I suppose.” She sighs. “But I’d prefer it if we didn’t change our family sigil. The girls can change it later if they wish, but I don’t want to change our banner. It won’t play well with the people anyways. We don’t need them to think this is an annexation. We’re still the Starks, and this is still Winterfell.”

“Agreed.” He groans. “Then there’s the succession itself… Seven Hells.”

“Daenerys is going to declare you her Heir Presumptive, you realize.”

“Of course.”

“I think the best we can do is say as little as possible until we have time to actually work out a solution. Alysanne is heiress to the Three Realms. As for the South and Dragon’s Bay…” She shakes her head.

“What if Daenerys and I both go out?”

Sansa swallows. “I’ve thought about that. And there’s really only one solution I can think of, though I don’t think Daenerys will like it.”

She tells him.

“You’re right,” he tells her, “Daenerys will not like it. But she’s going to have to accept it.”

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Sansa:

Missandei accompanies her mistress to their solar for lunch, by their request. Sansa and the herald share a small smile, and Missandei coos over the twins’ cradles.

One of the advantages of having both Daenerys and Missandei here now that they know both women better, is that she gets to witness them as friends as well as queen and courtier. They both hover over the cradles, arm in arm, their energy identical.

“Isn’t Serena just the picture of a dragonlord?” The Dragon Queen remarks to her friend.

“Yes. If her father were a more obvious Targaryen, this is what he’d have looked like as an infant. But there are bits of her mother there. The cheeks and chin especially.”

Both parents smile at the herald. Sansa would want Missandei here, even if their proposal didn’t directly concern her. But it does.
“They’re so sweet-natured already, too,” Daenerys adds, “So sleepy!”

“I made sure to nurse them just before you arrived,” Sansa confesses, “I wanted them to drop off from full bellies. And Jon was sitting behind the cradles, rocking them. They drifted off just in time.”

They sit down over roasted venison in herbs, baked cinnamon apples, and boiled potatoes, assembled about the round dining table.

The King and Queen wait until bellies are at least somewhat full before broaching the topic.

“Your Grace, your empire must be split apart. It cannot outlive you. And its future can’t reside solely in the hands of House Targaryen.”

The bluntness of Jon’s declaration causes the Dragon Queen to choke, requiring her herald to bang against her back to dislodge the food. Daenerys sputters, red-faced, washing out her throat with wine. It’s so awkward.

Finally, when she regains her ability, she speaks. “You already have two children!”

“You have three,” Sansa reminds the queen.

“And we discussed back at Castle Black why it’s not that simple,” Jon says calmly, “But we do have an idea.”

Daenerys takes a deep breath. “The birth went well. I assume all the maesters agree you’re still capable of—”

“I’m fine,” Sansa assures her, “But that’s not the point, Daenerys. I could have a dozen more children, according to every septa, midwife, and maester. But it’s not just a matter of having enough heirs. It’s a matter of deciding who gets what, why, and how to raise them for their roles. It’s a matter of the needs of each part of our combined domains.”

“An enormous part of your empire is halfway across the world, and consists of a vastly different culture. And despite how wonderful your work there was, it’s seen major upheaval with the fall of the Masters.”

“And to be frank, Daenerys, when it comes to Dragon’s Bay, we know nothing,” Jon adds, “Our own country is going through radical changes. And we must prepare for the worst. Dragon’s Bay will need someone who does know the country.”

Sansa clears her throat. “And, fortunately, there is someone in this room besides yourself who does.”

All eyes fly to Missandei, who shrinks back.

“Pardon?” She says after clearing her throat.

“We think Missandei is the natural heir to Dragon’s Bay. She spent most of her life there, she spent much of her life negotiating the chief source of trade there, observing the old ways, she is a major contributor to the liberation, she knows the lives of the enslaved, she’s well traveled and familiar with Westeros,” Sansa recites.

“She’s no Dragon Rider, though.”

Jon and Sansa give simultaneous, deep breaths.

“Which is why we propose special circumstances. We think Missandei might have her own line
established, and that we arrange for it to join with ours,” Sansa says carefully, “One of our children, married to her own heir.”

“I have no children, and I am unwed.”

“That may need to change, if we’re to establish this,” Jon says.

“But,” Sansa cuts in, “There’s another option. Missandei doesn’t need to be set up as a traditional monarch, but rather a temporary one.”

“A regent?” Daenerys asks.

“Not quite. It would be an official title of her own, not simply a service. And it could and would be one she’d hold for life. One of our descendants, one with a dragon, can still be slated to succeed her, but she is acting Queen of Dragon’s Bay. It will give our child time to grow up with his or her family until adulthood to train as Missandei’s successor. But they would not take power there at the age of majority like with most regencies. It would only happen upon Missandei’s death or abdication.” Jon explains.

“Though options for her to establish that dynasty through her line might still be an option,” Jon suggests, “Your will could state that if agreed upon by all major parties involved--- Missandei and ourselves--- we could turn the territory back to a traditional monarchy, with her heir marrying one of ours and the line continuing through them.”

“A triumvirate,” Missandei says, “You want to form a triumvirate if Daenerys is lost too soon.”

“Yes,” Sansa says, “Unless of course, the gods forbid, Jon is lost as well. Then, well…” She looks to Jon.

He sighs turning towards Daenerys “My dear Aunt, Sansa must be declared Lord Protector of Westeros if we are both lost,” Jon states, “For the good of the children and the realm.”

Daenerys leans back. Even Missandei looks concerned.

“It’s the only way the borders and peace is maintained,” Jon insists, “We can’t be sure that another regent wouldn’t try to subjugate the three realms again. And if they do… No one is safe, especially not our line.”

“I trust Missandei as a potential co-regent for the Empire,” Sansa says, “But if anyone of my children are to inherit the Iron Throne and be safe, I have to be able to hold onto them. I can’t do that if you put their inheritance under the control of another.” Like Tyrion Lannister.

“You’re already Queen of the Three Realms,” Daenerys states, her eyes huge, “How can you possibly hope to take on the responsibility of the rest of Westeros while raising your children? Especially from Winterfell?”

“I’d appoint officers, of course,” Sansa answers, “I’d try to divide my time between the two places. I have two siblings to help me with the North, and as for the South… We could select a special council to aid me. The chief concern would be keeping the borders where they are and protecting the children.”

“We can do this by coordinating our wills,” Jon suggests, “If you wish, you can merely declare me heir presumptive of it all, and my will can take it from there. But it would be easier to enforce if we presented a united front on succession and regency.”
Daenerys clears her throat. “And how would you divide everything inheritance-wise, if you were to die before a third child is born?”

“The North will still be Sansa’s of course. But Alysanne is heiress to the North. Serena would then take the South. Missandei would take the East. There’d still be the matter of the dragons, though—”

“Excuse me,” Missandei interrupts, “But don’t I get a say in all of this?”

Sansa goes red. She’d been determined that they not do this, that they not get so wrapped up between the three of them that they leave her out of the discussion. And they’d failed.

“Of course! I’m sorry, Missandei, we have been inconsiderate.”

The former slave takes a deep breath. “I love Grey Worm. Whether we are always together, I can’t say for sure. But I would not have more than one man in my life. I could not be like my mistress.”

Now it’s Daenerys’s turn to blush. Her herald continues.

“I have not fought for freedom to let my fate be decided by others. I have chosen to be Queen Daenerys’s confidante, but that does not mean I choose to heir to her, or anyone. In fact,” she clears her throat and looks around at them all with determination, “If I’m to be honest, I don’t believe in this sort of system, where the authority resides with one family. I accept my monarch, and I accept you two, but that does not mean I believe in monarchs in general, would want to be one, or perpetuate such a system if I had the opportunity. The people of Slaver’s Bay cried out for Daenerys. They chose her. But they did not choose me, my children, or yours. This wasn’t their system under the Masters even. There was more balance between the families. There was not one absolute master. In Naath, we chose a council to make decisions for us. They did not have life-long terms. And on a personal note, I am not sure I want to live out the rest of my life in the place where I was a slave.”

There’s a long silence, and the herald straightens her posture.

“I understand your positions, and I am honored by the confidence you show in me, but I am not sure I could agree to this. I need time to decide if this is something I could do. You all belong to these Houses, these families. But as of four years ago, I belong to no one but myself. I’ve not asked for a dynasty, or a kingdom,” she pauses to meet Sansa’s eyes, “I’m not sure I want to live by these rules. I understand that something has to be settled as soon as possible, but I can’t give you my life. Not today, anyways. That being said, I do think that at this point, it’s best if Queen Daenerys and King Jon don’t return to Castle Black together. There is no stability if you both die. Babes cannot command dragons. Some sort of decision must be made, of course. But you must keep your choices to your lives for now, and not make plans based on mine. I am not a Stark, nor a Targaryen. I am only Missandei. I will only be Missandei until I decide otherwise.”

With this, she gets to her feet. “You’re all correct. This empire cannot be held by one person forever. There will have to be a change and balance. But I believe that it can be held onto long enough for something stable to be arranged, even if the king or queen were lost. If necessary, I’d be happy to help you iron out the finer details of the succession, but not sign myself and my descendants to it. Today, declare your House, declare Jon heir presumptive to Queen Daenerys, and decide who inherits the Targaryen domains after him. It’s all you can do now.”

Without waiting for a dismissal, she sweeps out. All three monarchs look at one another.

“Did you have any other candidates in mind?” Daenerys asks, clearly irritated.

“None that I like or trust as much as her,” Sansa responds, ashamed of herself.
“None we know of that are as uniquely qualified,” Jon adds, “I suppose we could stick with your current regent for now…”

“But who succeeds?” Daenerys asks.

“Myself, then Serena, I suppose,” Jon replies, “But I still think you need to make Sansa Lord Protector. She’ll be the only one who can protect them if we’re lost.”

“Missandei is right, though, we can’t both go back,” Daenerys says mournfully, “What of the dragons?”

“Fine,” Jon says, “King’s Landing probably needs you back anyways.”

Both women cry out in protest.

“Why should it be you?” Daenerys demands, “I’ve managed very well while you’ve been sick!”

_You’re a father!_ She wants to say. If Daenerys wants to do this alone, she should.

Jon clenches his fists and his color rises. Daenerys continues to complain.

“Your sister is going to the Wall, House Stark has its representation there! I’ve been riding dragons for years, I’ve done well! What, you think you have more right to be there because you’re a man?”

“YES!” He finally bellows. It wakes the babes, who immediately start wailing. Without hesitation, Jon gets to his feet, hurries over to the cradles, and sweeps each babe into his arms. He comes back to the table and lets Daenerys take Alysanne.

“I’m sorry,” he says, looking back and forth between them, “But there are some things I can’t change. Not overnight. It’s not about capability. It’s about-”

“-the world we live in,” Sansa says, cutting him off, her head lowered. She stares at her lap. “It’s not about how capable any of us are. It’s about how people rely on certain ideas, particularly about leadership, and especially in times like these. It’s about how the stability of any of our kingdoms relates to how Jon is seen, how he must be seen as a true king. And if he were to stay behind when he’s back to full health, he won’t be. He needs to be a man, a king, in the eyes of the masses. An heir you can boast of, Daenerys. But it’s like-”

“-With the Dothraki,” Daenerys interrupts, her voice hollow, “A khal who cannot ride is no khal. Jon must ride. He’ll be branded a coward or weak, otherwise, and people won’t allow a perceived coward or his line to succeed me. It’s all well and good for a khaleesi to leave the saddle. But because you have a cock-”

“I have to be there.”

Sansa looks up to find her husband wearing the bitterest smile she’s ever seen.

“Men have a few traps of their own too, I’m afraid,” he says, cradling Serena against his chest, “It’s not just you.”

There’s a silence. Daenerys breaks it by swearing. Loudly enough to upset Alysanne. Sansa takes her daughter as the Dragon Queen jumps to her feet and begins storming around the room in fury. Sansa nuzzles her daughter, bouncing her gently against her chest, shh-ing her.

“You’re the one who can have children, for pity’s sake! You’re the one who is needed in the
bedchamber, not me!”

“Not that anyone can know,” Jon says grimly. “You’re always going to be expected to concentrate on the domestic. Your court is waiting for you to select a lucky suitor and have as many of these as possible. It all ends if they find out you can’t. Just like it can all end if they think I won’t draw steel. If people were smarter, then this would be easy. I wouldn’t hesitate to let you go. It’s what makes sense. But this world cares more about cock than logic, and I’m the one with a—”

“-Would you please stop saying that word?” Sansa snaps, cradling Alysanne’s ears. She knows they don’t understand, but she’s too upset not to raise some sort of protest.

“I’m the male one,” he ends lamely, “I have to lead the army.”

Daenerys stops pacing and turns to face them.

“We declare tonight, promise formal acts of succession in a week. The morning after, you depart for Castle Black with Arya. And the Sand Snakes.”

Jon looks furious. “I am not—”

“As foot soldiers. Have your sister be their commander and give them the lowest of posts. Tell her not to worry too much for their safety, either. Varys and Grey Worm thinks we’re all better off if they get themselves killed, and I agree.” Daenerys looks at Sansa. “I can’t go back to King’s Landing. I need to be closer to the Wall for the sake of the dragons. I ask that you continue to host me here for the duration of the war.”

Sansa nods weakly. “We couldn’t have just a little more time? A fortnight, at least?”

“I want this thing over,” Daenerys fumes, “Sooner, rather than later. No more time.”

Sansa knew what the answer was. She’s not sure why she even asked. “Any vestiges of male-preference in both Houses must be fully expunged. I’d also like it if whatever passes for the High Septon formally declares the supposed marriage between Tyrion and I to be invalid based not only on a lack of consummation, but on grounds of coercion,” she says. That way, Tyrion would be more compelled to repress even the slightest doubt of Sansa’s maidenhead in order not to be guilty of rape, “And tell him that if he doesn’t wed some Westerland girl of proper age and decent birth and consummate the union in three moons, he’s no longer your Hand. I’d also like a formal apology and declaration of his family’s crimes. He’s never publicly admitted Cersei’s children were bastards, that his father was the mastermind of the Red Wedding, or that the Kingslayer crippled my brother. That’s gone on long enough. I also want a formal apology from the Princess of Dorne for the Sand Snakes’ conduct.”

“All that, and the regency?” Daenerys snorts.

“These are my children,” Sansa insists, “And I want assurances from your chief subjects that they’ll honor that and uphold the rights of my husband and children. Even your regent in Meereen.”

There’s a long pause, and Daenerys finally nods. “You Starks… Seven Hells… Anything else?”

“Just be glad I’m not asking for a formal apology for what happened to my grandfather, uncle, and aunt as well.”

“Sansa…” Jon protests.

She glares and clutches Alysanne. “I’ve been stripped of literally everything. I had to claw my way
back, only to have my children entangled in the affairs of the same families who tore my family apart. And if you two are lost, it will be me left fighting, seeing to everything. I will not weather anymore disrespect. There will be acknowledgment of the crimes this House has suffered, a declaration of all that has been done to us, that we deserve to be acknowledged, of our mercy, of all that we’ve survived, and our refusal to be written off. If I’m forced to return to that wretched place, I shall be greeted with bows. I can’t control them with dragons. So I will have their shame instead.”

Everyone. Every man, woman, and child will know all that the Queen of Winter has forgiven, if anything. All of her strength, her compassion, her endurance, her formidability. They will judge her, and anyone who dares to try and challenge her. She was humiliated right down to her flesh. Let them be the ones to show humility for once, if only on paper.

Not to mention, even if she never has to think about King’s Landing again, the gesture of respect on behalf of their ally will speak volumes about the respect that the North commands even from the Mother of Dragons.

“I understand, Sansa,” Daenerys insists. She sighs. “I’ll see you both at supper.”

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She had her wedding gown let out so she could wear it for this occasion. She’s been sewing the little gowns for months: ivory silk embroidered with silver direwolves, of course. Crowned ones. But that can’t be the only House represented, so she has ribbons of Targaryen black and scarlet tied about the girls’ delicate little scalps.

Jon is in black and red, but wears his Stark crown. Howland Reed is at court, as is Meera.

This ceremony isn’t among her favorite. Indeed, it almost sickens her to put her precious babes on display like this when they’re less than a week old. She and Jon lead a procession into the throne room. She carries Alysanne, he takes Serena. Ghost walks, and ultimately sits, between them.

Arya, the next in the succession after the girls, announces their names and styles in order of birth.

To confirm that the girls are both, in fact, girls, and not deformed in any way, the king and queen are required to strip their daughters of their little gowns and hold them up, naked, for the world to see. Easily the worst part. Sansa feels like she herself is being stripped and displayed before all the prying eyes. She wants to howl along with her daughters as this takes place.

People notice the Targaryen ribbons, and Jon’s Targaryen clothes. They notice the place of honor the Targaryen queen has on the dais. They squint their eyes at Serena and whisper when Arya declares her as being born “Violet-eyed and silver-gold of hair!”

They have to perform further tableaus once they’ve wrapped the girls back up in their little gowns. Jon calls up Maester Syrus.

“Maester, I witnessed the birth of these children myself. I am brown-eyed, with dark hair. My wife is blue-eyed and hair that’s been kissed by fire. While my daughter Alysanne certainly resembles her mother, Serena, does not. The second twin has white hair and purple eyes, which neither my wife nor I possess,” Jon recites, clearly trying not to roll his eyes, “How is such a thing possible? Surely, there can be no doubt of the queen’s fidelity.”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Syrus says, loud and clear, “Your own attendants swear that you and the queen shared a bed every night during the time the twins would have been conceived. And anyone who was at court at the time can witness to the fact that you two were indeed inseparable, and that on
the rare occasions you were not in the same room, the queen was surrounded by ladies. Furthermore, until the arrival of Her Grace, Queen Daenerys, there was not a single person, let alone a man, with these characteristics at court. Tell me, Your Grace, does your direwolf companion show any preference for one twin over the other?”

“None whatsoever.” To demonstrate, Jon moves Serena towards the wolf, prompting gasps from the crowd. Serena’s cries quiet, and Ghost presses his nose into one of her grasping palms. It’s utterly adorable.

“Princess Serena’s coloring is the distinctive mark of a descendent of ancient Valyria. In particular, of House Targaryen. She must have a fair amount of dragonblood.”

“But I am no Targaryen,” Sansa speaks up. Syrus bows.

“Indeed, Your Grace. Your noble lineage is carefully documented. You are a Stark through your father, who possessed ancestry of the most noble Houses of Flint, Umber, Karstark, Blackwood, Glover, and Fenn. Your Mother, Catelyn of House Tully, was a Whent through her mother, Minisa, and also had Blackwood, Piper, Smallwood, Butterwell, Mallister, Mooten, Hightower, and Marbrand. There are no ancestors from House Targaryen, or any known Valerian Houses in your lineage.”

Syrus then clears his throat. “That being said, your husband’s ancestry is far, far less clear. Your father, Lord Eddard Stark, brought King Jon back from Robert’s rebellion, claiming him as his bastard and therefore, your half-brother. Both of you, seven years ago, acquired direwolves, the sigil of House Stark, from a single litter of four male pups and two female, perfectly aligning with your own father’s reported brood. Your wolf, most unfortunately, was slain, but you did bond with one of the wolves. And most of your siblings, save for Princess Arya and the king, inherited your mother’s Tully coloring. You do, however, possess the height and jawline of a Stark, utterly unlike any of your mother’s blood relations. King Jon, of course, is the very image of your late father, with the distinctive dark brown hair and grey eyes of your House. But Lord Stark never identified the king’s mother, and indeed, there seem to be very few witnesses remaining who would have been with your father at the time of the king’s birth. Only one, in fact, Lord Howland Reed.”

“Lord Reed is with us here today,” Sansa remarks, beckoning him forward, “He is a man whose honor is without question. Lord Reed, do you have any idea who my husband’s mother could be?”

“I know exactly who she was, your Grace. Indeed, I and I alone was trusted with the truth of King Jon’s origins. And the great secret Lord Stark carried to his grave.”

“That being?” Jon asks.

Lord Reed takes a deep breath. “That Lord Stark wasn’t your father at all, that you are in fact the son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, son of King Aerys II and brother to Queen Daenerys Stormborn, by Eddard’s sister, Lady Lyanna Stark. Lord Eddard hid this to protect you from King Robert Baratheon. But he gave me this—”

Lord Reed had Rhaegar’s harp strapped to his back, and he holds it high for all to see. “The harp of your royal father. But the most powerful evidence of all, of course, is your ability to communicate with and ride Queen Daenerys’s dragons. You are a dragonlord, King Jon, through your father. That is the source of Princess Serena’s appearance.”

Really, people shouldn’t be that surprised, given that Jon was first seen controlling Viserion by thousands of witnesses months ago. But there’s still much commotion. They wait it out.
Jon stands, hands Serena to Sansa, and stands before the court. He admits to knowing this, keeping it secret to protect the rights of his Aunt, Queen Daenerys, and keep the North separate from the Iron Throne. That he and the family hated deceiving the kingdom, but required stability as the kingdoms faced war. Daenerys comes forward and acknowledges him. She formally declares him and the girls as true Targaryens, to succeed her throne if she should perish without legitimate issue. Jon formally declares himself and his daughters of House Stark and House Targaryen.

Sansa clutches her precious babes, wishing she could just run away as they withstand the torrent of questions and cries. The ceremony seems to last forever. It’s like a nightmare. But she makes herself stand and beam and let Daenerys welcome her to the family.

The oaths from the vassals and court take ages, with only brief breaks so Sansa can nurse the girls privately and for the bassinets to be brought up the dais for them. It’s long enough for Sansa to come up with at least one reason to loathe every person in attendance. When they’re finally finished, Jon looks at her with concern and practically carries her from the Hall.

“You could do with a seven-week slumber,” he remarks to her when they’re finally alone.

She remembers replying in a weak voice that she has only one week left with him, then nothing else.

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Jon:

The same Septa who made those sketches of Sansa’s belly does one of the twins, one of Sansa, and one of him to hang over their cradles. He melts every time one of those tiny hands closes around his fingers, or tries to grab his hair or beard. Alysanne sticks her little tongue out all the time, Serena struggles against her swaddling.

The week feels like just a few moments. It’s the most painful period of his life. There’s not a moment he doesn’t think of home. Of them.

*I’m going to see them again*, he promises himself.

There are other fathers at the Wall, now. Many of them illiterate, far from home, no way of knowing what’s happening with the families they left behind. Jon keeps the sketches against his heart during the day, and under his pillow at night.

Death wasn’t this cold.

Would this hurt as much, if he hadn’t been wounded and sent home long enough to meet them?

Sam and Bran were hard to say goodbye to as well, though Bran clearly took Arya’s departure harder. He’d been preparing himself to see Jon off to war for years. Arya was another story.

They ultimately decide that Obara and Nym may join the women’s forces at the Wall, but Tyene shall return south in disgrace. They make a point of mentioning in their messages to her mother that her unacceptable behavior might have been overlooked, but her obvious lack of fighting prowess could not.

The look of poisonous fury on the youngest Sand Snake’s face when she learned of this shook Jon to his core.

He tries not to think about it too much. It’s not as if there isn’t plenty to occupy his thoughts.
The Night’s King had somehow controlled the wind, after all. Strong enough to knock Viserion from the sky.

Sansa told him about it during his recovery, but she didn’t have many answers. She wasn’t there, after all. It was Daenerys who ultimately gave him a more thorough explanation of what happened. The King had drawn Jon out, waved his arm, and there was the wind. And it was clear that it was intentional.

“The strange thing is, he hasn’t done it since,” Daenerys told him one evening, “I’ve charged at him on Drogon. But he used a guard to protect him. They threw ice spears at us, guarded the king. Many walkers have died doing exactly that. But why bother when you can just conjure enough wind to blow a dragon away? Why not use it to extinguish the fire trench? Or to knock down phalanxes? Damage cavalry? There are so many things he could use that ability for, but he doesn’t.”

“Are you sure it was him who caused the wind?” He’d asked her.

She nods. “I saw what happened. Jon, how many times have we seen the king stand out in the open, unguarded, in the perfect place to be spotted and attacked?”

“Yes only the one time,” Jon admits, “Aside from, I guess, Hardhome, but we were fleeing at the time and were a paltry group of fighters among crowds of unarmed civilians. And he still raised the dead even as we were fleeing. But since… He’s always kept himself surrounded.”

“Exactly, and he hasn’t done it since. And it wasn’t anything like any of his other habits in battle, either. Every time he’s been the slightest bit vulnerable, he’s raised his arms and awakened whatever intact corpses are left to surround him. You’ve seen it. He’s clearly afraid of the dragons. It was that one time, and he didn’t even move to get some support. He just stayed there, atop that hill. It was only after you were falling did he summon any guards or reinforcements. And Jon… As mad as this sounds… When I flew to catch you… The Night’s King and I… We shared a look. And I just… I knew.” She shakes her head.

“Then, like you say, if he can do that, why doesn’t he?” Jon wonders.

“The only explanation I can come up with is that there are limits to that power. Despite the fact that he brought you and Viserion down and I was distracted by your fall, he didn’t use that opportunity to intensify his assault on the Wall. They all fled soon after. Why? Why didn’t he hit harder the second the dragons were distracted? Why flee? Unless using that ability takes a lot out of him, and can only be used so many times. For all we know, he’s got to cast some kind of elaborate spell that takes forever every time he wants to conjure the wind. I mean, after bringing down one dragon, why not move onto the other two still in the air and get rid of them at once? He’s had so many opportunities, but he doesn’t. I think it’s because he can’t. At least, not yet.”

Perhaps he’ll be able to do it again when Jon takes to the battlefield. Actually, Jon is certain he will. It makes no sense for the Night’s King to waste this ability on a more minor battle if he didn’t think he could do it again.

It’s an issue he attends to the moment he arrives at Castle Black, fetching Maesters and researchers and builders, urging them to investigate whatever the freak occurrence might be, how it works, and how to combat it.

Being back on the battlefield yields new nightmares. Nightmare of his enemy’s face.
Sansa:

It’s with genuine affection that Sansa makes her farewells to the Mother of Dragons, despite their arguments. She has Daenerys kiss the twins goodbye in the nursery before leaving, and the two queens exchange a warm embrace.

“I will return soon enough,” Daenerys promises, “I will not Jon end this alone, I swear it.”

Sansa doesn’t argue. Instead, she smiles, touched by the genuine regret the Dragon Queen seems to show over leaving. And indeed, once the woman is gone, Sansa does feel a dull ache in her chest.

It’s enough to cause her some minor distraction while completing many of her duties for the days. Not that it’s the only distracting thing. The moment court is finished, she practically races up to the nursery, her breasts in agony from the weight of the milk within them.

But she forgets all about her milk-heavy breasts when she opens the door. She usually does whenever she comes to the nursery. Those two toothless pink smiles when she walks over their cradles make her forget everything. They know their mother.

But that’s not why this time. As she gets closer to the door, she hears one if the girls wailing. Not too uncommon. Serena in particular could get like this, only finding calm when one of her parents took her.

The cries are actually coming from Alysanne's cradle this time, but none of her nurses are trying to calm her. None of her nurses are even upright. One, Nora, sits limply on the chair between the table and the two, Cissie and Claire, lay on the floor. All three with rivers of dried blood at their slack mouths. All three with wide, unseeing eyes.

Sansa shrieks, running to the cradles. Alysanne writhes and screams within her swaddling.

The other cradle is empty.
Trust

Chapter Summary

In the midst of panic, Sansa and Bran decide "fuck it", if only for one night.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to @ohdede for her beta-work!

Bran:

Without a shred of pity, Bran looks down at the main courtyard, where the guards are locked in the stocks. No one throws food-- no crop is left to rot anymore, and no one will waste a thing. And the stocks are on the gallows, above the snow, so there is no risk of frostbite. They even gave orders, after Littlefinger’s execution, that no one was to hurl dung or buckets of piss at prisoners (they made this order after Littlefinger’s execution, what was fit for Littlefinger was unfit for most others). The men were warm enough in their guard uniforms. But people gather to spit at them and hurl verbal abuse. Good.

Men took guard duties in shifts. The first shift of guards had the excuse of being addled by some mysterious spirits while they were off-duty. The second had no excuse for not noticing how out of sorts the first were when they returned, and leaving the princesses under the half-open eyes of men who could barely form a sentence.

“We just thought they were a bit drunk!” One of the men had protested, as if that somehow made it better.

Alysanne clutches the front of Bran’s doublet in her tiny fist as he holds her close. He’s the only person aside from her mother who is allowed to hold her right now.

Sansa literally fainted when she found Serena gone. Her main Septa Loreli, had to put salts beneath her nose. Bran has never seen someone wake like that before. Sansa barely even stirred before leaping to her feet and screaming orders. Ravens were sent to every castle from the Wall to the Dornish Marches. All ports were ordered to close. Their best men were sent out after the Dragon Queen’s retinue.

Many, including Bran himself, were quick to swear vengeance upon Daenerys Targaryen, but Sansa shook her head.

“Daenerys didn’t do this, that snake Tyene Sand did. I know it.”

Bran hopes for everyone’s sake that Sansa is right.

His sister also believes Serena to be alive.

“If they meant to kill her, they would have. We’d have found both of them murdered in their
cradles,” his sister said, rocking back and forth on her throne and clutching Alysanne to her chest. “But that doesn’t mean we’ll get… get her back… back… back alive. That vile creature doesn’t know these winters, and Serena is less than a fortnight old!”

Bran offered to ride out himself to bring Tyene to justice, but everyone else insisted he stay. With one daughter gone, Sansa wouldn’t let the other out of her sight. She’d only let Bran hold her, and then only in her presence.

It’s been two days, and finally Loreli and Syrus made Sansa take a sleeping draught. The queen would only do it if her brother stayed with her and held Alysanne while she was asleep.

What Bran couldn’t understand was why Tyene killed the nursemaids but only drugged the guards. But ----, his former carrier, had an idea.

“Simply drugged guards are easy to get by, and are less likely to be noticed out of sorts. You folk go in and out of rooms and only need a nod of acknowledgment from them. As long as they’re upright, they might as well be empty suits of armor.

The men vaguely recall a diminutive septa who went in and out during the period when the kidnapping would have taken place. But they were too delirious to remember much else.

Sansa had sobbed, blaming herself. “The nurses said they needed an extra hand, they probably thought she was a new helper. I should have been there. I never should have let them out of my sight! I should have sent that demon to die in the North with her sisters! I just didn’t think she’d dare with Daenerys around, and I didn’t want her near Arya!”

Nonsense, of course. All of it. Thankfully, Sansa didn’t carry on with that for too long. But she did not sleep or eat for two days. It was only when Bran reminded her that she was unlikely to be able to protect Alysanne if she fainted from exhaustion that she made the deal to sleep.

Bran was at his wits’ end. Sansa isn’t wrong about the northern winters. And even if the Dornish woman wasn’t a complete fool, she didn’t strike Bran as the maternal type. And what would the babe eat? Bran doubts Tyene has a wet nurse on hand.

They have to get to the retinue before they get to the port at Widow’s Watch. The Dragon Queen’s party was due to sail from there to King’s Landing. If they didn’t reach them before they set off, though, it would be weeks before they’d have a chance to even know if Serena is still alive.

Could there be a worse time for this to happen? As if their family hasn’t suffered enough. As if they aren’t struggling with enough. The twins are the one source of hope and light amidst all the war, suffering, made of ice, and fire. And unlike the union that produced them, the twins brought joy to Bran without the slightest discomfort. And now one may be lost.

He’ll gladly tear Tyene Sand apart with his bare hands if Serena dies. He can do it, too. He’s grown so strong, and not just mentally. People thought cripples weak, but his arms are now better-muscled than most soldiers in the yard. He’s always using them to propel himself this way and that, he’s even taught himself to walk with his hands, in a fashion--- he has to drag his legs behind him, but he does lift his torso. He’s been lifting weights constantly. He’s even been looking into ways to possibly modify his chair so it can maneuver better in the dirt, so that he might even develop a way to fight.

He’s found it---- the weight-lifting, the practice with the chair and walking with his hands-- to be oddly soothing and helpful in other areas. No one really bothers him when he’s at it, unless he seeks out an audience for his practice. When he lifts weights in the yard, people deliberately look away so they’re not tempted to laugh at their crippled prince. It used to bother Bran, but it doesn’t so much
anymore. He’s ceased to care much for what other’s think. The women had to deal with the same, and many of the men who would laugh at them have been beaten into the dirt by Arya, Brienne, Tyene Sand’s sisters, and Meera.

Meera sees him at it, and there’s not so much as a twitch. She fights properly -- they wanted her for the women’s forces, but she’s the last heir to Greywater Watch, and Sansa and Lord Reed refused.

She took this better than Bran expected.

“The next war,” she said as the two of them lifted together by the armory, “Once I’ve wed and I’ve had a couple of children to inherit in case I’m lost. It makes sense. Greywater Watch has been with House Reed since the Children of the Forest ruled these lands. Jojen went to his grave depending on me to carry out our father’s line. And it’s not as if I haven’t already proven my metal. I wish I could help, and I can, but not at the end of a blade. After a year and a half Beyond the Wall, I’m not particularly keen to go back.”

He’d laughed at this. And he’s glad Meera remains. She’d come to Winterfell with her father when the twins were born, and remained behind as one of Sansa’s Ladies-in-waiting. At least, officially. Most ladies-in-waiting follow Bran’s sister around attending her various needs and run tasks for her. Meera is almost Bran’s lady-in-waiting, really, except he doesn’t have her offer him handkerchiefs or run errands for him most of the time. She helps him up and down stairs and lifts with him and such, but her role is mostly as his companion and guard.

But she’s been invaluable the last couple of days. Especially now. Bran only wishes she and Arya might have spent more time with each other before his sister left, because the two got on famously.

Bran’s in love with Meera. He knows it now for sure. When they were traveling together, he began to suspect it, but thought that perhaps it was just a silly child’s fancy, or perhaps because he depended on her so much. He even suspected that part of the reason he was drawn to her was because her tomboy nature reminded him of Arya. But after she left Winterfell for Greywater, Bran began to realize his feelings went beyond that. Even as his every need was being met by the household, even as he grew older, even when he had the real Arya with him, he dreamt of Meera, missed her terribly. When he saw her again, it was a special kind of joy during the already thrilling occasion of becoming an uncle.

He can never tell her, though. Even if she somehow loved him back, it would only mean greater pain for both. She’s the last scion of House Reed. She must marry a man who can give her children. They can never be together.

Bran looks down at the sleeping Alysanne, and his heart aches. Being a cripple brought on a whole new host of difficulties as he grew older, such as when he started growing in the way that turned boys into men.

People don’t guess at this, but he does notice girls. He thinks about them. These days, being around any woman above the age of thirteen who isn’t related to him practically leaves him dizzy. And he yearns.

But there is nothing to work it off. He’s tried. He’s taken himself in hand so many times, desperately trying to induce something. Hell, once he even gave one of the prettier maids, Bessie, a silver stag to come to his bedchamber and take her clothes off. And while it was easily the most glorious thing he’d ever seen, it was also the most agonizing. He simply can’t feel it where it counted most. There have been a couple of times when he thought he’d at least gotten his man’s staff to swell, only to have it plop down the moment he released it.
He hopes Meera doesn’t secretly feel the same way--- not that she would. He likes to think that eventually, he’ll move on. That maybe, someday, when he’s well into middle-age, he might meet a woman of the same years, well past her childbearing years, who may want or need no more than what he can offer. If not for his condition, Bran likes to think he’d be a good husband. He’s kind and gentle and has so much love to give.

His children shall be his nieces and nephews. He’s known that for a long time now. Alyssanne has the Tully look, just like her mother, just like Bran. He can almost pretend she’s his. But that doesn’t mean he loves Serena any less.

Bran has slept twice, for brief stretches, and during his slumber, he’s reached out with his mind to become birds, deer, rabbits, wolves, trying to track down Tyene and Serena. Not that he needed to track them; everyone knew where they were headed and the path they’d take. But mostly, Bran wanted to spot his niece, see, at least, if she is still alive, where Tyene keeps her hidden. No luck on that score yet.

He wishes Summer were still alive. Or that the royal camp was letting wolves anywhere near them. He’d like to find Tyene Sand, rip her throat out, then take the ends of Serena’s swaddling and carry her back home.

The lords still suspect Daenerys. Bran doesn’t think that’s true, but it isn’t impossible. And if it is…

He’ll find a way to warg into one of the dragons and make them eat her alive.

By age eleven, he’d had enough of people coming into his home and taking people and things away, tired of people thinking they could hurt his family and get away with it. King Robert and the Lannisters took his father, his sisters, and his legs. The war took his mother and eldest brother. Theon Greyjoy returned and took Ser Rodrick, Maester Luwin, and his home. The Walkers took Hodor, Summer, and Jojen. The Boltons took Osha and Rickon. The new war has taken Jon and Arya. He may never see them again.

He will not let anyone get away with taking his nieces. Sansa may be Head of the Family and Queen of the Three Realms, but he’s the man of this castle while Jon is away. This is the last time anyone dares to go against his family.

If Serena doesn’t return safe, he’ll make whoever is responsible curse their parents for giving them life. He’ll lock them in the kennel, and he’ll do worse than what Sansa did to Ramsay. She had his dogs eat him alive, but they did it all at once. Bran won’t give this person such a short death. He’ll warg into one animal and have them tear off a piece, have the person watch as he eats it, then leave them to bleed, then come back as another animal, tear off another piece, make them watch and bleed. And so on and so forth. He’ll tear them apart piece by piece, just as pieces of himself --- his legs, his wolf, his family, his home--- were torn away.

That’s one of the things he takes issue with regarding his siblings’ reign. He’s urged them to make laws, giving out special penalties for those who harm the royal family.

Sansa gave Ramsay a brutal death, but she kept it behind closed doors. What she did to her late husband is a rumor, a rampant one, but one that people doubt. People said the queen gave Ramsay the same death that he’d subjected countless innocent girls to. Everyone knew about the Bolton Bastard’s “hunts”. Many knew that he would starve his dogs before the Battle of the Bastards, intending to feed Jon to them. Everyone knew that he had been locked away in the kennels and that the queen had visited him, then left him and padlocked the doors to the dungeons, only allowing them to be opened the next morning, and when the guards entered, the only thing left were some hounds and a blood-soaked chair.
But many had a hard time believing their queen was capable of such a thing. Many said that it had to have been one of the many, many vengeful common-folk whom Ramsay had harmed, or whose kinsmen had been harmed. So many people wanted to kill him in exactly that way, but there were ways a person could get into the kennels aside from the padlocked door. The kennelmaster himself would have cause and means: Ramsay had stolen the virtue of his eldest daughter, Myranda, made her his whore, put her in the path of the man who had killed her, and then fed her body to his hounds. He promised that when Myranda’s younger sister, Mya, a girl of only six, was “old enough to be interesting”, he’d take her as well.

Many other servants lost daughters to Ramsay Bolton, their girls raped and made the prey of his infamous hunts.

Then there was Jon, who beat Ramsay bloody, then he was the one who ordered the man locked in the kennels in the first place.

Deep down, Bran knows that the people within Winterfell’s household know the truth despite their denial. But it’s the denial that spreads beyond these walls. The common belief beyond Wintertown is that Ramsay Bolton was locked away, and that the dogs got through, either on their own or perhaps with someone’s help. And no one cared enough to know who.

Sansa didn’t even lie about it, but many seemed convinced that she was lying, either to seem more fierce or to cover for the true perpetrator.

Enough people refused to believe that their sweet, innocent, gentle, nurturing queen could do such a thing, despite all the evidence to the contrary. And most of the world thought Sansa so gentle, thought all the Starks essentially too honorable and decent. Sansa and Jon insisted they proved their strength through their survival, accomplishment, and public service. And they were right, in a way. But clearly people still believed there wasn’t too great a risk in threatening them, that the worst they could expect was a quick, relatively painless death, if that.

Sansa insists that the truest path to securing loyalty is through love, not fear. And that’s true in regards to one’s own subjects. But that doesn’t account to foreigners. And it’s clear that the outside world still doesn’t fear them enough.

Tyene Sand wouldn’t dare try this if she thought it would lead to her being eaten alive by dogs.

Bran will make sure no one dares to go against his family, ever again. If Sansa and Jon have to be gentle and righteous, fine. Bran will be the one to make the world fear House Stark.

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Daenerys:

It’s good to have Missandei back, she must admit. Someone to converse with in High Valyrian and Dothraki, someone to simply speak to at all, woman to woman. Someone who has known her longer than anyone else at court.

The two women lay in her tent, bundled up together on her pallet, beneath a mountain of furs. It’s been a long day of traveling. It’s too bloody cold, and riding through the Northern winter on horseback is utter misery.

“If we survive this war,” she murmurs to her best friend in the language of her ancestors, “I don’t care what my nephew and niece say, no more going to them. They’ll come and visit me in the capital, where it’s not frozen and no harsh winter winds!”
Missandei only nods. “Queen Sansa actually asked me if I wanted to remain at Winterfell longer. I
told her, ‘Only if you learn to control the weather!’”

Daenerys laughs, but weakly. “What, she wanted to steal you away from me?” She’d noticed how
much the other queen seemed to take to her herald.

“She said until the war was over,” Missandei replies, “I don’t think she’d dare suggest any longer
than that!”

They both laugh, and Daenerys feels like a normal girl for a moment, huddled up under the covers,
whispering secrets to her best friend.

So of course this is the moment when Karro, one of her guards, chooses to announce himself and
enter.

“Khaleesi,” he says, speaking in his native tongue, “Men from Winterfell have arrived. Say they
must speak with you at once.”

Daenerys’s heart skips a beat. What had happened? It must be something horrible, for Sansa to send
riders out in these conditions, and so soon after she’d left! Daenerys can’t help but assume the worst.
Something had happened to Jon, or one of the twins, or Sansa, or Bran, or Arya. Some sort of
cataclysm had occurred at Winterfell or The Wall. White Walkers had been spotted below the Wall.

She practically leaps out of bed, hurrying to pull on her boots and furs.

“Khaleesi,” Karro continues, “Men from Winterfell ride without banners-”

“Then how do you know they’re truly from Winterfell?” She asks, hoping that her retinue haven’t
accidentally let bandits infiltrate her camp.

“They carry Khaleesi Sansa’s signet ring with them The bronze and silver one with a direwolf
wearing a crown. But they ask to come into your tent and speak to you privately, at once. They say
the matter is urgent and secret.”

Daenerys’s heart sinks. “Let them in.”

A group of young men in furs and chain mail enter and kneel.

“Queen Daenerys,” their young, brown-haired leader says, “I am Roger Cassel, guard captain of
Winterfell, I come to you from Queen Sansa herself.”

He holds out the ring on a bare palm, and Daenerys inspects it. It’s indeed the royal Stark signet.
And she does recognize Rodger when he removes his helmet. His brother had been chief of Lord
Eddard Stark’s guards and his father had been Master-at-Arms at Winterfell. His sister, Beth, is one
Sansa’s ladies.

“Of course,” Daenerys says, handing the ring back and bidding the men to rise, “What is the
matter?”

“It’s terrible, Your Grace. But shortly after you left, the royal nursery was infiltrated. The princesses’
nursemaids and guards were all poisoned, and Princess Serena is missing!”

Daenerys feels all the air fly from her lungs and she stumbles back. Missandei actually catches her.
“Princess Alysanne, she--?”
“--She’s fine,” Rodger says quickly, “She was left untouched. But, given the nature of this crime, how it was carried out, and the twin that was stolen-”

“-Poisoned, you said?”

“Aye. The guards were merely drugged, but the nurses were less lucky. The queen suspects your vassal, Tyene Sand.”

Daenerys’s eyes flash. Yes. Yes. That makes sense. She’s purposely ignored the Sand girl since departing, but she looks to Missandei now. “Any reports on Lady Tyene acting oddly?”

“‘Sulky but subdued’, is how her behavior has been described thus far,” Missandei says, “She’s kept to herself.”

Daenerys knows why the men didn’t fly their banners now. If Tyene saw, she’d have run off with the child.

The queen looks to Karro. “Have every tent, cart, person, and box in the wagons searched at once. Have Tyene Sand and Princess Serena brought here, alive. A hundred gold dragons and a knighthood to whomever finds the princess and brings her back alive.”

“Yes, Khaleesi.” Karro bows and hurries out. Daenerys looks to the uncomfortable-looking Stark men.

“I… I assume you’ll want to search my things?” She asks, sitting back on the bed. Missandei clutches her arm tight enough to make it feel numb. “You have my permission.”

Roger nods and directs his men to spread out, though he stays with the two women and starts looking through the tent himself: opening up trunks, peering under makeshift furniture. At one point, he has the two of them rise so he might look through the bedclothes.

Daenerys doesn’t care. She feels sick, however. Little Baby Serena! Daenerys had only held the tiny lass in her arms two days prior! If Serena is lost, Dany will never forgive herself, let alone wonder what will happen with the Starks. She tries her hardest not to weep. Dragons do not weep. Her little niece…

It takes less than an hour, though, for the daughter of the Princess of Dorne to be dragged in, blood-nosed, kicking, and cursing.

And, to Daenerys’s unfathomable relief, one of her handmaidens follows, holding a tiny bundle.

“She’s yours now, My Queen,” Tyene says, “Though she never stops pissing and shitting, I’m afraid.”
The Dragon Queen spins and locks her eyes on the Sand girl, burning with fury. She hands Serena back to the handmaid, instructing her to see to the girl and walks over to the prisoner.

Tyene is kneeling on the ground, arms still clutched by the guards, who start to lift her to her feet as Daenerys walks closer, but she stops them.

Then, with all her might, she kicks the bitch right in the teeth.

She’s not prone for physically attacking people herself. She has people to do that for her, most of the time. The last time she personally assaulted someone was Viserys, and then it was in self-defense.

But now, she doesn’t hold back. She grabs Tyene Sand by the hair and drives her knee right into stupid face three times. Hard enough to bruise and even break the skin of her own knee, as Tyene’s teeth nearly become stuck in her flesh. The Sand Snake ends up spitting out five of them. Daenerys simply switches to her other knee and uses it until the woman’s smile is almost as toothless as Baby Serena’s. Then Dany holds Tyene’s head up and slaps her, back and forth, alternating each cheek under each have gotten a half-dozen. Dany’s hand stings like the Seven Hells, but it’s worth it to see this slime’s head whip side to side from the force of her palm.

Missandei comes up behind Dany and lays a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Your Grace, we need her to answer some questions.

“Right,” Dany stops and spits on her before backing away, her body vibrating with fury.

“I thii- i’ ‘vor you!” Tyene moans, her speech already altered by her drastically altered mouth, “You ‘air!”

Missandei has to hold her queen back from attacking Tyene again. Daenerys believes she may literally rip the woman’s face off before the night is over. Especially if Sand says anything like that again. Dany didn’t think anyone could ever say anything worse than ‘Bad Pussy’ (and she’d listen to her brother Viserys threaten her with being raped by forty thousand horses). But Sand managed to outdo herself.

“I can’t,” Dany babbles, looking over to a corner, where her handmaid, Nani, changes Serena out of filthy swaddling, “Missandei, Karro, take her somewhere to interrogate her. Do whatever is necessary to make her talk. Take Roger with you.”

“Your Grace,” Roger says, “I was instructed that if Princess Serena is found, I’m not to let her out of my sight.”

Daenerys glares. “Leave your men here with us if you wish, Master Cassel. I’m sure the queen will understand. She’ll want you to question Tyene on your own, certainly, and that’s hardly something to do in the presence of a babe.”

The guard captain straightens up. “Of course, Your Grace.”

“Also, be prepared to leave as soon as possible,” Daenerys tells him, “As soon as we’re sure the princess is safe to travel, you’re bringing her back to her mother.”

Roger nods. “Yes. Thank you.”

Dany nods and dismisses him before turning her attention back to her grandniece. Nani wipes her with a cloth soaked in warm water.

“I wanted to see you again soon, Little One,” Daenerys tells the infant, “But I didn’t expect it to be
this soon or like this!” She glances at Nani. “How is she?”

The Meereenese woman sighs. “That evil woman didn’t bathe her! And she changed her maybe twice in the last two days! And she’s hungry, I assure you.”

Dany’s heart quickens. “Will she be alright?”

The maid nods. “It’s a miracle, but she doesn’t seem to be ill. A bit of a cold, but nothing that looks serious. No fever, thank the gods.”

Daenerys knows nothing of caring for babes. She had not been exposed to them much. No younger siblings or children of her own. She’d held the children of subjects, and knew how to do that properly. But aside from that, it was dragons she was familiar with.

“Is there any possibility that we have a wet nurse with us?” Dany asks, eyeing Serena with no small amount of trepidation.

Nani shakes her head. “But we have goat’s milk. We can soak cloth in that and have her suck on it. It will be good.”

Daenerys issues an order for goat’s milk to be brought. Nani, having bathed and bundled the child in make-shift swaddling from some of Dany’s clothes and on of her fur hoods, shows the queen how to perform the imitation of nursing. Daenerys does so in her bed, cradling her niece in her arms and watching in wonder as those small, kissable lips latching onto the corner of the milk-soaked rag, sucking away greedily.

Serena has the sweetest little face, and she knows how to use it. She often looks up at the Dragon Queen in a manner that’s almost flirtatious. Less than two weeks old, and her eyes are such a striking violet. Her scalp practically glimmers with that silver-gold hair. The foul smell is gone. Now she smells perfect. Everything about her is perfect.

“There we go,” Nani says fondly, “I ordered the milk to be mixed with some herbs good for colds. Give her plenty to eat, let her rest for the night, give her another good meal in the morning, and she should be fine to return to her mother.

Hearing that is almost like a blow to her gut. Right. Serena has to return to her mother.

“You think she’ll be fine so soon?” Daenerys asks, almost pleads.

“Better this than staying in this camp. And she’s fine. Babes get colds all the time, and as long as she’s kept bundled up and securely strapped in, she’ll be right as rain. She’s a very strong, healthy thing.”


Serena looks so much like her. She could so easily be Daenerys’s daughter. She looks exactly as Dany imagined Rhaego would have looked like.

Missandei eventually returns with Rodger Cassel, both of them appearing extremely glum.

“What did the bitch tell you?” Dany asks, burping her satisfied niece.

Her herald hesitates. “She thought she’d gain favor with you. Taking the Valyrian child so that you’d have her. So the Starks would submit, and you’d be able to raise your heir on your own terms. She planned on revealing what she’d done once she was in King’s Landing, fearing that if you
discovered this while in the North, you’d be compelled to return her. But that for bringing your heir
to the capital, you’d reward her.”

Daenerys’s insides squirm. She looks to Rodger Cassel. “You must know, I would never—”

“I believe you,” Cassel says, “But there’s more. The Sand Snake had help from another of you
venomous southerners.”

“Her mother? Her sisters?” Daenerys guesses. Cassal shakes his head.

“The Spider. Your eunuch. Lord Varys. Tyene says he commanded her to do it.”

Sansa:

Bran woke her at sunrise with an enormous smile on his face. “I saw them, Sansa,” he tells her, “I
saw Rodger and the others riding in at sundown and you holding Serena. She’s alright. She’s safe.
I’m sure of it.”

Sansa does her best to believe this. To her utter relief, he’s proven right. Rodger rides in at sundown,
dismounting from his horse with a wailing bundle securely strapped to his chest.

The whole court cheers and Sansa nearly faints from relief when her daughter is handed to her.
Those violet eyes meet hers, and Sansa actually sinks to her knees as she showers her babe with wet
kisses.

The reunion isn’t perfect, however. Tyene Sand was indeed the one to do it, but Rodger has not
brought her back. Instead, he hands over a letter. “It’s all explained in there.”

Sansa reads it aloud to a furious Bran as she nurses Serena in her solar. “It seems the daughter of
Dorne was not working alone and may in fact have been in collusion with one of the most senior
ministers in my government. If so, this could rock the entirety of my reign. I promise you, Sansa, you
will have justice. But I must be able to investigate this further, and for that, I need Tyene. You see,
my friend, the one who may have worked with our kidnapper is in fact Lord Varys, my co-regent.”

Sansa actually feels sick as she read this. Lord Varys the Spider and his little birds. The man always
frightened her. He even frightened Baelish. Seven Hells, he even frightened her father. If Varys was
behind this, then they both had to know. She shivers. Gods. How many of Varys’s ‘Little Birds’
were part of her court right now? And if he’d engineered Serena’s kidnapping…

She stops reading and looks at her brother. “The twins sleep by my bed now. Brienne takes a cot
next to it. And… And…” But who else could she be sure of? Anyone at court could secretly have
been working for Varys this whole time. Aside from Bran and Brienne, who could she be sure of?
Her head spins. She’d worked so hard to establish the loyalty of her people, but this… Tyene is a
foreigner. She’s not one of yours.

But if Tyene had Varys behind her, she wasn’t working alone. Meaning she could have gotten help
from one of their people. It might explain how the woman managed to infiltrate the bedchamber that
day she tried to seduce Jon…

They’d looked into that as well, questioning the guards near the bedchamber that day. They’d
assumed their king had ordered a whore and left her in.

Jon had nearly exploded upon hearing that. “When have you ever known me to solicit whores?!”
He’d demanded of the men.

The idiots had looked at each other and said they’d never known anyone to walk around in the middle of winter wearing half a shift, either.

“We couldn’t help but notice, Your Grace, that when you went into your rooms, you, were, well, inflamed …”

Sansa’s since ordered all new training and procedures for the guards at Winterfell. Ones which would have seemed absolutely draconian just a few weeks ago. *What if the Spider’s gold is paying for their incompetence?*

She doesn’t want to think this way, but her child was kidnapped. The Queen of Winter weeps, longing for her king and her sister.

What world are they even fighting for, if it is one where the amount of people they can trust can be counted on one hand? Even within her own home. Some of these people helped raise her!

It’s as if the world is determined to break her of any ability to trust anyone. Her Father taught her that northern vassals were more loyal than any— but they abandoned her family at their darkest hour, only caring about her existence enough to allow the Boltons to use her as a tool to legitimize their takeover of the North— despite that meaning the eventual rule of Ramsay Bolton! She’s not stupid, she knows why some would hesitate— even for justifiable reasons. They had their families and homes and people, and winter had arrived. But even so, they knew what the Boltons were. If the Red Wedding wasn’t enough to clarify the Bolton approach to politics, the murder of the Cerwyns should have been. However did any of the lords expect to make it through winter with those sorts of people ruling them? Clearly, they thought they’d be the exceptions, that they’d simply wait it out.

But many didn’t even care about the army of the dead heading for them. Nor did they care about what could/would happen to their fellow vassals under the Boltons. The Stark restoration wasn’t just about the Starks, it was about the entire North. It was about every family in the North mobilizing against a group of sadistic kingslayers who were intent on massacring them slowly if they didn’t bleed themselves of all means to pay taxes during the winter. Did these people really think they’d survive Ramsay? Even if they didn’t care about the Starks, they might have at least cared about literally everyone else.

Over these long, terrible years, Sansa’s learned a great deal about rank and blood and the hollowness of the social system in which she lives. While she’s willing to ascribe some altruistic motivations to her vassals’ reticence to contribute when they took down the Boltons, she also isn’t naive enough to think that was all of it. Some of them were simply cowards. Others were genuinely spiteful and petty. And she’s certain many of them were simply eager to hold out and try to reap the rewards from the victor. And, of course, there were the Umbers and the Karstarks, who were traitors.

Even in the North, the so-called nobility were little to no better than the schemers of King’s Landing. Northern Lords like to pretend otherwise, tell themselves they’re somehow more honorable because they don leathers and furs instead of silks, because their religion involves less ritual and dogma, because they abstain from the knightly code. But they ultimately shut their doors to the suffering when it was convenient, passed over deserving heirs for the crime of lacking a cock, and sold terrified children to psychopaths in order to advance. They only contributed when it is safe to, and when there is no other choice.

Even the oh-so-moral-and-honorable Lord Howland Reed, who her father worshipped, who had served them well, he’d not answered the call when House Stark needed him most, either.
Seven Hells, for all the dismissal of “Soft Southerners” and their “Ambitions”, it was the knights of the Vale who ultimately came. It’s not as if they had to, either. It’s not as if her cousin Robin had any obligation to help her. When his mother was in charge, she refused to offer aid. Robin could have easily followed her example, but he didn’t, and neither did his lords. And unlike Littlefinger, there was nothing in it for them to help her.

Those “barbaric” wildlings came, though considering Ramsay’s threats, their involvement was driven by self-interest, ultimately. But at least they realized that, unlike the lords of the North.

Lords and Ladies, Sansa has learned, with just a few exceptions, care only for themselves, regardless of where they’re from.

But she’d thought and hoped that the more common folk might be different. It was common folk who had tried to engineer her escape. At first, one might think that given their more vulnerable position, the smallfolk would be easier to lead astray. But Sansa came to form a counter-philosophy: their vulnerable position is what ultimately brings out more altruism. They were more dependent on one another, didn’t have the cushion of privilege and authority the nobility possessed, nor were they in any way accustomed to overlooking or dismissing others. Sure, they’re not perfect. But they had more need to rely on others, thus more need to be reliable themselves. They didn’t have personal guards, knights, vassals, armies, wealth, and castle walls to protect them. They only had each other and whatever decent patrons they might come by.

Sansa tried so hard to be a good mistress to her people. She wanted to earn their love, their loyalty. She thought she had. She thought she’d gathered the right people around her. Good people, who needed each other and needed her.

Sansa isn’t stupid or naive anymore. She’ll never be “one of the people”, never. She can’t. This is not the world they live in. The world they live in forces things like kings and queens, lord and ladies, especially in times like these. And frankly, it does her no good to pretend otherwise. That was something she was never naive about.

Rank is something that shouldn’t matter, but it does.

Arya used to think she could be “one of the people.” Perhaps, for a time, she was, when absolutely no one around her knew her name. But even then, she was eventually found out, and was hunted by virtue of that. Mycah, the Butcher’s Boy, was a casualty of the futile, naive attempts at egalitarianism on the part of her poor sister.

“That was my lady’s sister you were hitting, do you know that?!”

“She as’d me to! She as’d me to!”

Arya was only a girl. She probably didn’t realize that Mycah was probably scared even before Joffrey showed up, scared of the possibility of… exactly what ended up happening. He didn’t dare deny a lady of House Stark, but if anyone saw his brandishing a stick at her, well… His position was impossible. If anything went wrong, he’d be blamed and suffer the consequences. But he couldn’t say no.

It makes her so angry, thinking of it. Why wasn’t anyone with her? Running about and playing with the servants within Winterfell was one thing, but they were traveling with the court, in unfamiliar areas. At Winterfell, everyone knew each other, and there were always a dozen watchful eyes around to make sure things didn’t get out of hand. Why wasn’t there a proper eye on Arya and Mycah?
Rank killed Mycah, ultimately. He died not for playing at swords, or because of The Hound. He died because he was the butcher’s boy, Arya is a lady, and Joffrey was a prince.

Sansa knows that those are not barriers easily dispensed with. She knows things are not the same for her. That she is not part of the interdependent group of smallfolk. That ultimately, she can’t be their friends, not on the level of fellow maids and guards and blacksmiths, anyways.

But she had believed that she’d earned the loyalty of the people she cared for, specifically by caring for them. By observing her role in the way that would best serve them. That maybe, even if she could never be their family, she could establish mutual trust and devotion between herself and her people.

She thought she was succeeding, too. Her Father dined almost every night with a different member of the staff, or a common person from one trade or another, to learn about their various needs and circumstances. Sansa and Jon had adopted this practice. She’d never fully grasped just how vital the maintenance of roads were until she’d begun this, and now the road systems of the Three Realms were one of her obsessions.

How many people were sheltered now? How many people were being fed? She worked so hard to help those she was responsible for. To avoid whatever conflicts that could arise. To get people through this winter. She built whatever she could. Seven Hells, she’d even married her brother to keep the North at peace! She’d risked dragonfire to prevent further revolts.

And in particular, those among her court, she thought, had more reason than anyone to prove themselves trustworthy. Even when she was getting maids to keep their mouths shut, she did not do it through threats of personal retribution, but by explaining clearly and carefully why it was in the lass’s best interests to do as she said, then rewarded her for complying. Sansa explained why word couldn’t get out of her outburst to that maid truthfully, spoke to her as a person, appealed to the girl’s judgment. And fed her.

Sansa honestly doubts that there is a better situation for any common Northman or woman than serving in her court. She’s done everything she can think of to make things easier, safer, and more comfortable for them. And they know it.

...And yet, there may be spies among them nonetheless.

It baffles her. What good could Varys’s gold do for a footman or cook up here? What good could it do that would be worth it?

It frightens her, being so alone. Who can be trusted anymore?

Serena releases her nipple from her mouth and Sansa lays a handkerchief on her shoulder, then lifts the babe to her shoulder to burp her. It takes her daughter a while to release the gas within her, and she wails a bit from the discomfort. Sansa wants to wail along with her.

The letter says nothing of Tyrion being involved, but Sansa wouldn’t put it past him. He and Varys are thick as thieves, by all reports. It was Varys who rescued Tyrion from the black cells after Joffrey’s death and sent him to Daenerys in the first place.

She looks at her brother through the privacy screen. Bran drums his fingers on the armrest of his wheelchair.

“Do you have any suggestions?” She asks him, taking some comfort when her daughter is burps and begins sighing into Sansa’s neck. It’s a heavenly sound.
Bran looks at his lap. “We can’t afford to cause a panic, obviously. But we also can’t afford spies in our midst. Even if Daenerys remove Varys from power, that won’t stop the next Master of Whispers from adopting The Spider’s lines of communication. It won’t fix our issue.”

“As long as the gold is good, the same people can be bought,” Sansa agrees, “We have to find a way to decontaminate the court without causing mass hysteria.”

“We should probably start with the guards,” suggests her brother, “and anyone who would know the shift changes and habits of the staff around them. Anyone who might have been in the kitchens when they were drinking and could have drugged them.”

“Also people in charge of the staff wardrobe,” Sansa adds, “The guards swear they only saw people dressed as nursemaids. Someone might have gotten the uniform for her.”

Bran nods. “The only issue is… Who do we trust to help us with this?”

Sansa feels herself pale. Who indeed?

Alysanne, who had been sleeping in a basinet by Sansa’s side, begins fussing just as Serena is drifting off. The queen groans and sets one daughter down to pick up the other, shifting the modesty bib and her bodice to attach the infant to her other breast.

Bran wheels around the privacy screen, looking uneasy. “Sister, forgive me, but… I’m growing concerned about you. You’re drained, both literally and figuratively. You keep going at this rate, and you’ll have less a chance of survival than our foot soldiers. At the very least, hire a wet nurse. You are one woman with two children.”

Sansa stiffens. “You’re suggesting I trust another woman to literally feed my children after what just happened?!”

His face falls. “Sansa, you really are reaching the end of your rope. This reminds me of those stories about Aerys the Mad hiring a food-taster to suckle at the nipples of his son’s wet nurse before the babe suckled. Varys is a threat, yes, but if he’d wanted either girl dead, they would be.”

Sansa flinches away from her brother. “You think you’re making things easier for me, saying things like that?!”

Bran groans and rubs his face. “I’m sorry. I suppose you’re not the only one who feels spent. But Sansa… You’re taking on too much.”

“How can you say that while Jon is out there, leading humanity against the White Walkers?!” She demands with a scoff. “I’m taking on too much? Seriously?”

“Just because he’s assumed a great burden doesn’t mean you can’t exhaust yourself as well,” Bran replies, “For pity’s sake, Sansa, you just pushed not one, but two children out of your body less than three weeks ago! In the middle of winter. While running a country. That’s at war with an army of an undead. While nursing your husband back to health. And entertaining diplomats. Not too long after traveling to and from a castle half the length of Westeros away to negotiate with the Mother of Dragons. Only two years after you fought a war to reclaim your home. Now you’re raising two children, while recovering from your birth, handling the fallout of a kidnapping, still running the country, your main diplomatic advisor has left, your husband and sister are off to war, with only your sixteen-year-old brother for support. Jon has a literal army with him, a direwolf, two dragons, and a battalion of commanders at the very least. He’s not fighting the war alone! You? I’m afraid you’re going to lose your mind.”
“Then you underestimate me,” Sansa replies icily, “I endured half a year in Ramsay Bolton’s bed and kept my wits, Bran. And unless you’ve had some very unwelcome visions you’ve neglected to mention, you have no idea the extent of the strain. This? At least this is diverting! At least I’m not cooped up in one room with nothing to do but watch myself bleed. At least I don’t have to spend every waking moment wondering if Lannister guards are going to haul me off to be executed! At least I know my family is alive. Lose my mind! I received my first flowering as a captive, only a few days after I was nearly gangraped by a mob. If anyone is going to lose his mind, it’s you with your visions!”

She regrets that last bit the moment she says it. “-Bran, I didn’t mean-”

“-Yes, you did. And you know what? You’re right.” But he turns his chair around so his back is to her and hangs his head. “Let’s be honest, all of us have been afraid of that for a long time now. And if I didn’t want to hear it, I shouldn’t have accused you of the same thing.”

“Bran…” But she doesn’t know what else to say. She waits for a short while. “We all go a little mad sometimes, I suppose.”

Her brother looks over his shoulder and smiles softly. “I suppose so. And hey, we’re not the ones stealing babies and burning people alive.”

“Right,” she answers, her lip curling and her shoulders shaking slightly, “We’re definitely burning people, but only after they’re dead. And only because we have to.”

“Precisely. And even when you thought you were bedding your brother, you weren’t actually. And when I was a wolf, I was actually transporting myself into a wolf’s head. It wasn’t as if I was drinking wildfire to try and become a dragon.” He turns his wheelchair around to face her again.

She laughs openly now, trying to keep her hold on her still-nursing daughter stable. “Yes! And even when I thought I was bedding my brother, I had very important reasons to, and it was only supposed to be once, and he was only supposed…” She can barely speak from laughing, “To be… my… half-brother!”

“And I… at least… had my… visions confirmed!” Bran responds, shoulders also shaking, “I waited until others confirmed it to me to believe it! And I was a child anyways!”

It’s all utterly tragicomic. The darkest, most hysterical sort of humor. How else to respond, but to laugh?

“Indeed! Lots of children pretend to be fierce animals! It’s not your fault your thoughts turned out to come true!” Sansa shakes her head. “Seven Hells! Bran, what even are our lives? You are a wolf who can see the future, Jon rides dragons and has come back from the dead, Arya has changed her face, and I’ve twice married relations of people who killed my loved ones. Then I married the brother-turned cousin who rides dragons and came back from the dead.”

“And is currently fighting a bunch of ice-demons who lead an army of corpses. Alongside our sister. The one who changed her face.”

“-Meanwhile, I’m nursing a babe with purple eyes that was just kidnapped by a lunatic and eunuch.”

“A lunatic who tried to seduce your dragon-riding husband by unwittingly declaring that she has the lover’s rot.”

“And decided wearing little more than a pillowcase beneath her furs in the middle of winter in the
North was a good idea.”

She has to set Alysanne down at this point so as not to shake her. Both she and Bran have tears running down their reddened cheeks.

“Oh,” Bran says the moment he catches his breath, “Have I mentioned that I’ve seen how White Walker babies are made?!”

“You have, thank the gods!”

“Gods, Sansa… Maybe we’ve already gone mad. Look at us. Look at our lives!”

“It’s the world that’s mad,” she assures him, “I’m sure if we were mad too, we’d be dead by now. But we’ve proven ourselves sane enough to know how to survive, at the very least. Indeed, considering everything, I’d say we’ve done rather well for ourselves.”

Bran grins and starts wheeling towards the drink stand. “We ought to toast to that.” He pours two cups of Arbor Gold and wheels them over.

Returning her fussing eldest to her chest with one hand, Sansa takes the cup of wine with the other. “To us. Remaining sane enough to conquer a world of madness.”

“To us! And the minds we haven’t lost! Yet!”

“Yes!”

They drink. Sansa actually empties her cup. She’s easily as thirsty as Alysanne, and she deserves it. She places the cup on an end table and wipes her mouth. “Bran, what are we going to do?”

Her brother smiles. “Figure something out. We always do. We’re Starks. That being said, if I may make a request?”

She smiles. Alysanne releases her nipple at last, and she moves to burp her. “Of course. That doesn’t mean I’ll grant it, though.”

Her brother nods. “I know the world is going to the coldest of the Seven Hells right now and we’re surrounded by enemies and we’re the only responsible, sane people left in the world but… Just tonight, Sansa, can we just… get painfully drunk? There are probably hundreds of soldiers at the Wall planning to do that exact thing tonight, why can’t we? Can’t we have one night of irresponsibility?”

Sansa sighs. “The only thing is, Dear Brother, you know the one night we do that will end up being the night that something unbelievably awful happens. That’s our luck.”

“Sansa… For pity’s sake! Your baby was just kidnapped by a Sand Snake! I’d say your bad luck quota has been exhausted for at least… at least one night.”

She snorts. “Perhaps. But there’s the matter of—” she points meaningfully at her modesty bib, “It’s hard to nurse properly if you’ve lost full control of your body.”

Bran’s shoulders fall. “Well, I mean… Can’t you just, er…”

“What?”

“I don’t know… Seven Hells, Sansa, we’ve already been through enough, don’t make us suffer through me talking about your teats!”
She actually gags a bit at that. Bran is right. There are certain things that could actually drive her to madness, and she doesn’t feel like finding out if that is one of them.

...But she can imagine where he might have been going with that. She supposes she could pump herself later and let the nurses feed them tonight… Under Brienne’s watchful eye, of course.

She looks into her brother’s eyes. And perhaps she’s the worst older sister in the world for this, but… He wants this so terribly. And she realizes she does, too.

“Fine. But we do this after supper, and we stay in here. And I’ll only get a little tipsy. I want to still be able to check on the twins every couple of hours. And you are going to stop the moment you feel like you’re about to throw up.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

In order to at least pretend she’s responsible, she does prepare for the evening in a meticulous manner. Brienne and Rodger Cassel are ordered to guard the nursery, while poor Podrick Payne is assigned to stand by the door of her solar, be sober, and make sure neither she nor her brother do anything too stupid.

“Now, remember, Pod,” she tells him from behind the privacy screen, pumping her breasts, “If either of us throw up, or act like we’re going to throw up, we’re not allowed to have another drop. If either of us start crying, we’re not allowed to have another drop. If Bran starts getting irresponsible with his wheelchair, you’re to lift him out of it and put it outside. Don’t let us destroy anything expensive. If I want to visit the nursery, you’re to escort me, and if I’m too drunk by that point, I’m not allowed to hold either of them. If an emergency arises, Lord Wylis is put in charge until I’m sufficiently sober. And we’re both to drink plenty of water.”

“... Yes, Your Grace. And there’s to be a big, greasy breakfast brought to you first thing in the morning.”
Chapter Summary

New developments at the Wall or lack thereof prompt Jon to re-evaluate how he sees himself. The fallout of the kidnapping is felt in King's Landing.

Chapter Notes

As always, thanks to @ohdede for her help!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tyrion:

“Are you not pleased, My Lord? Lord Varys was your rival in many ways.”

Tyrion Lannister looks across the dining table at his new wife. Joanna Marbrand is a different sort of match for him altogether, and yet, oddly reminiscent of his last “wife.” In that she’s not wholly unlike the Sansa Stark of today, but wholly unlike the Sansa Stark he married. The pretty, curvaceous brunette is a widow of one-and-twenty years, with two children, a son and a daughter, by her last husband, Lord Payne. Her four-year-old son is the current Lord of Payne Hall and all its surrounding lands, leaving Tyrion’s new wife the regent of the area. Despite her youth and the fact that her presence at court over the years has been limited, she’s prodigiously insightful. She kept away from the Red Keep for many years on the advice of her older brother, Ser Addam, but arrived not long after Daenerys’s triumph. It was she who proposed their marriage to Tyrion shortly after news came of the Northern princesses’ births and the public reveal of Jon Stark’s heritage.

An opportune occasion, as not long after Tyrion accepted, a letter came from his queen demanding he wed (truly wed) a well-born Westerlands lady within three moons, among other things.

It was especially fortuitous for Tyrion to be well wedded and bedded by the time his queen arrived back at King’s Landing, as it turned out. It made him look quite a bit better, in contrast to Varys.

But this does not please him, and the look he gives Joanna is meant to say as much. “Varys saved my life. My head would have been on a pike years ago if not for him. And, believe it or not, when I served as acting Hand for my repulsive nephew, he proved to be one of the only people I could really trust.”

“I don’t believe that,” Joanna replies tartly, cutting her lamb into pieces, “All that time, he was secretly working for the queen, wasn’t he? While you were still trying to support your family?”

Tyrion flinches. She has a point. “He still saved my life.”

“You were useful to him,” Joanna remarks, “He saw value in delivering you to the queen. He was astute, perhaps, but that doesn’t make him a true friend to you. You can’t pretend that he could have prevented you being framed for Joffrey’s murder in the first place if he wished to. But he allowed it
“Littlefinger and the Tyrells framed me, Varys just took advantage of the situation. I probably would have done the same thing.”

“Didn’t Varys have some dealings with the Tyrells as well?” Joanna asks.

Tyrion sighs. “Yes, briefly. But nothing came of it. He arranged for Sansa Stark to be betrothed to Loras, but Littlefinger thwarted that. He was one of the few people capable of such a thing. So there’s probably a chance Varys had no idea about the plot to frame me.”

“It certainly worked out well for him, though, didn’t it?” She argues.

Tyrion fumes. “I would rather if you didn’t undermine the few people I consider worthy of trust in this blasted place, My Lady.”

Joanna’s eyes narrow. “Am I undermining him, My Lord? I’m sorry, I was under the impression Varys already did that to himself. Your sister isn’t ruling anymore, so he isn’t in the Black Cells for nothing.”

The Hand of the Queen scowls. “I blame the Sand Woman. I do not believe The Spider would be stupid enough to instruct that woman to kidnap that child. I do, however, believe the Sand Snake mad and stupid enough to take something he said and pretend it was an order to kidnap the princess.”

“Maybe,” Joanna muses after swallowing a few mouthfuls of her dinner, “This is a woman who thought avenging her father and his family would be accomplished by killing the last of her father’s family. But that doesn’t change the fact that, at the very least, Varys was spying on our allies, that he wasn’t forthright with the queen about why he sent the Sand Snakes, and that he supplied Tyene with enough means to pull her little caper.”

“But not enough to have her accomplish it. And if Varys wanted that child stolen, then even Tyene wouldn’t have been able to botch it. As such, she wouldn’t be the agent he’d use for such an undertaking. Varys would never entrust such an unreliable incompetent woman with such a thing. And if he had to, he’d have compensated for her incompetence enough for her to succeed.” Tyrion takes a long sip of Dornish Red. “As for filling other courts with spies and giving them means to conduct espionage, that’s his job. The King in the North and his children have a claim on the Iron Throne. Of course Varys is going to have a few Little Birds up there. That’s the point.”

Joanna nods. “Fair enough. But Varys never should have sent those Sand Snakes up there in the first place. Especially if he meant for them to do anything other than get slaughtered by White Walkers. That doesn’t seem like the act of a competent Master of Whispers would do. That’s the point.”

“Fair enough,” Tyrion replies, stomach sinking, “But I wouldn’t be surprised if the only way he could get Princess Ellaria to agree to send all three to the North was to convince them that they had some sort of deeper mission beyond combat.”

“Whatsoever his actions, words, or motivations, he didn’t exactly bother to tell you or the queen, did he?” His wife asks. “You were Hand at the time, and sole acting regent. And it’s all a mess now because of it.”

Tyrion lapses into silence. Joanna isn’t wrong. To placate the Starks, Daenerys locked both Varys and Tyene away. Tyene wasn’t in the Black Cells with the eunuch, but in House Arrest. Tyrion had to convince the queen not to throw the Princess of Dorne’s daughter in a dungeon. But that only
helped so much since both mother and daughter acted as though Tyene’s heavily guarded quarters might as well be a dungeon. It doesn’t help that the notoriously vain Sand Snake’s pretty face has been damaged—she’s lost quite a few teeth, some of which, upon being knocked out or broken, lodged in her cheek, causing scars. And her nose is broken in three places. Her blackened eyes and some other damage would heal, but her nose shall be crooked and her smile gruesome forever.

Ellaria Sand is furious, threatening to withdraw Dornish forces and even rebel. The problem is, the woman is mad enough to do it.

After the Northern secession, what’s left of Westeros needs to stay unified.

Then there’s the issue of the North itself. As if the Starks needed any more leverage at this point. But this?

The worst part of this was that this wasn’t some sort of basic subterfuge. No, this was an act of incompetent cruelty. The kidnapping of a child, from its mother, by a woman known for killing innocent children.

To keep their vassals loyal, the Iron Throne needed to seem as non-tyrannical as possible. They needed to be the alternative to the cruelty of Arys the Mad, Tywin, and Cersei.

The kidnapping of a newborn hardly communicated such an image.

If they didn’t do everything possible to satisfy House Stark, it would only make every other lord in the realm wonder if their children would be next.

And damn, if those wolves aren’t willing to milk their situation for all its worth.

Tyrion has to give the Starks credit; they know how to leverage their tragedy to the point where it’s become an art form.

Their policy seemed to be “forgive a little, never forget.” Or “The North Remembers”, as they prefer.

Most Houses who had suffered half the indignities the Starks have over the years would use it to take up arms the moment they could.

But no, not House Stark. They were devoting their modest means to protecting the realm. The same realms that killed their loved ones, stole their home, ravaged their lands, and terrorized their people. There’d be no blood feuds, oh no, not for them. They forgave everyone the sins of their relatives----or, rather, they might. But they’re too righteous for petty revenge, too busy doing what really matters to subject the living to violence.

As long as no one forgets all that’s owed them, all that was done to them, all the obligations and sympathy they’re due. How they humbly represent their people and their wishes and all the harm done to them. How they ask that no one forget the cruelties they’ve endured and the righteous work they’re doing now. How forgiving and strong and selfless they are. How in need they are, not just for their sakes, but for everyone’s.

They crowned themselves, but only at the behest of their people, who could no longer stomach the authority of the historically brutal regime of the Iron Throne. They were representing those people. They revealed a contender for the Iron Throne and had him ride dragons, but only so they could defend the realms. They took every penny, every man, every spare scrap of food or steel from the very kingdom they’ve rejected----for the good of Westeros. They personally courted all the potential allies… as a favor.
Many saw Sansa Stark’s requests for formal apologies from various Houses who had acted against her House as kind, forgiving acts. And that’s the point. It’s on the public record, forever, that these powerful groups committed these crimes against these people, and that the merciful Direwolves of Winterfell asked only for acknowledgment and an expression of remorse. No one will forget what was done to them, and no one will forget that in response, the wounded party asked for nothing…. Allowing them to ask for whatever they wish over the course of the next several decades. After all, what kind of tyrannical monsters would deny a righteous, humble, forgiving House that they’ve already done such harm?

And now, on top of that, the co-regent of the Iron Throne, may have kidnapped their baby as well.

Somehow, they’ll have to placate the Starks, without provoking Dorne into open revolt.

As if all that isn’t enough, they no longer have Varys. Or, rather, control of Varys’s network of Little Birds. They’ve brought in Oskar Fossoyay, a truly competent man, to serve as Master of Whispers, but it isn’t the same. Not even close.

And how will their allies in Pentos react?

Tyrion forces himself to eat, chewing on the problems as much as the lamb.

“You’re not going to visit him, are you?” Joanna asks as their dishes are taken away.

Of course he is, he says with his eyes. “No,” he tells her with his lips, “I’m not stupid.”

“Good. Your situation still isn’t secure. The last thing you need is to be seen socializing or sympathizing with him.”

They couple later, and when he finishes, he slips away, his naked wife watching him with careful eyes. She sighs and lays back.

Tyrion’s stomach sinks. He wants to begrudge her this, but he can’t. It’s not just himself he’s putting in danger anymore. She has children.

But Varys has continued to support him, even after Daenerys demoted him. It’s Tyrion’s time to return the favor.

He has to be extremely careful. As recognizable as he is, he can’t manage a disguise. He has to make sure he isn’t seen, period. So he dons of a black cloak and takes his sweet, sweet time tiptoeing past the guards and descending down into the oubliette.

Varys’s cell is at the very end. There aren’t many imprisoned down here, but the ones who are make enough noise for an army. Tyrion identifies Varys’s cell by the silence.

Tyrion settles down by the bars and covers most of the glare from the small lantern he lights with his cloak. All that’s illuminated is a sliver of Varys’s haggard face.

“I must say, Lord Lannister,” Varys says, sitting on the ground, legs folded, back against the wall, “I’m rather touched. I wasn’t sure I’d see you, let alone so soon.”

“You’ve been in here two days,” Tyrion replies.

“I know. I have my ways of keeping track of time even down here. I thought that if you didn’t wash your hands of me, that it would take you at least a week to visit.”
“Whether I do still remains to be seen,” Tyrion warns his friend, “Varys, what were you thinking?”

The eunuch sighs, crosses his arms, and shakes his head. “In my defense, I never suspected they’d let Tyene remain at Winterfell. I thought they’d send her to her death at the first opportunity, and that if they kept anyone, it would be Nym. She’s slightly more rational than her sisters. But I assure you, My Lord, I did not order that fool to kidnap the little princess.”

Tyrion scans his friend’s face for a sign of insincerity. Not that there’s a point to it. If Varys is lying, Tyrion would not be able to tell.

“What did you tell her?” He asks.

“I asked them to find a way for one of them to extend their stay at Winterfell and send me anything useful. I gave them names of appropriate contacts. I told them to ingratiate themselves to some key family members if they could, exploit any cracks in the Stark family front, and confirm a few things for me, such as whether or not King Jon is definitely a Targaryen, and if he or his wife have seduced the queen.”

Tyrion’s eyes bulge at that last bit. “WHAT?!”

“Oh, please, my Lord, you must have realized how enamored our queen has become of the Starks. She demoted you for offending them! She trusted her dragons with the king! She went to Harrenhal determined to put them in their place and came back ready to penalize any and all slights against them. I’ve only ever witnessed two things compel a person to change so much in such a short a time, with so much at stake. One is vengeance, the other is desire. At first, when I heard of the agreement she made at Harrenhal, I thought she’d fallen in love with the king. But then she returned to the capital frothing at the mouth over you offending Queen Sansa, and I couldn’t help but wonder. So I wrote to the Sand Snakes and told them that in addition to the instructions I gave them, they were to find out if the queen was sharing her bed with King Jon, Queen Sansa, or both. Those wolves have tamed the dragon, wrapped her around their paws.”

Tyrion hangs his head. “You’re wrong, Varys. Daenerys isn’t in love with Jon or Sansa. Not in the way you think, anyways.”

“Oh? You have some other explanation, then?”

“I’ve witnessed her in love,” he tells the eunuch bitterly, thinking of Daario Naharis, “And she would not give up half her kingdom for that. If that were the case, she never would have sailed for Westeros.”

“I’m listening.”

“She doesn’t want to be with them,” Tyrion explains to his friend, “She wants to be one of them. She’s in love with their family, not with them. She’s an orphan whose only family for most of her life was that mad brute of a brother of hers. She’s an exile. A widow. Not to mention, barren. The Starks are a family that was deposed and exiled more or less, reclaimed their home, and are bound together by love. They’re everything she’s ever wanted.”

He saw it happen at Harrenhal, how quickly Daenerys seemed to melt before them. He saw the yearning both times she returned to King’s Landing, sees her love in the actions she’s taken while away. Leaving the warfront to witness the birth, proudly declaring her most powerful rivals as heirs. He sees it now that she’s back, how distracted and miserable she is.

Tyrion knows because he’s had similar feelings. Not towards the Starks, exactly ---- though there
was part of him during his “marriage” to Sansa that held a spark of hope—- but towards his own family. It’s what compelled him to be so “complicit”, as his former bride so succinctly put it, in their actions.

Tyrion also knows because he’s still in love with his queen. As stupid, unfair, unwanted as those feelings are, he watches her, yearns for her, sees her.

Despite all the fighting she’s done to be here, she’s lost her heart to Winterfell.

The tragedy is that her life remains here.

Varys stares at him silently for a while. “I’ve seen families tear themselves apart for scraps of bread.”

“No this family. Their response to a potential power struggle is to marry one another, taboos be damned,” Tyrion replies, “And fall in love in the process. They’re the family we all wish we had.”

“Edward Stark did sacrifice his honor for his daughter’s sake,” Varys recalls.

“It’s what has caused them to thrive, while my family destroyed itself,” Tyrion looks at Varys, “And it’s why you will almost certainly die a very painful death unless we can convince the queen that Tyene acted without your approval. And why your career in King’s Landing will almost certainly perish even if we do.”

Varys cups his brow. “My Little Birds…”

Tyrion’s heart skips a beat. “If you truly meant it when you said the good of the realm is all you care about…”

Varys bows his head. “Illyrio will need to think he still has eyes in Westeros.”

“That can be arranged,” Tyrion replies, “As long as I know who everyone is, I can be careful enough. He’ll never have to know.”

The eunuch snorts. “You think he won’t find out?”

“No if you help us keep that a secret. Make Illyrio think he’s the only one left with eyes into Westeros, and have him give you sanctuary in exchange, then help us keep him satisfied with shallow information until he drops dead. Given the man’s health, it probably won’t be for very long.”

Varys swallows. “He’s been my partner from the very beginning. He’s my oldest friend.”

Tyrion gets to his feet. “Fine, then. I guess I have my answer.”

He turns to leave, but Varys calls to him. Tyrion turns back.

“As you say, it’s unlikely my friend is long for this world. And, should we prevail in that ghastly conflict up North, Westeros shall be for much longer.” Varys swallows. “As I understand it, you are not much loved in the North, are you?”

Tyrion’s jaw tightens. “I’m banned.”

“What is to happen if our queen is lost prematurely, then?”

Tyrion takes a deep breath. “That… That is up for debate. As it stands right now, the line of succession goes Jon, then his daughter Alysanne, then Serena. Forgive me if I can’t give you the specifics of the negotiations that are happening at the moment. One of us needs to remain at the
“Exactly. If my case can be argued, I may have an alternative to offer. A way that I might best serve Westeros, while ceding my Little Birds to the crown.”

This is a surprising proposal. After all, what is Varys, if not a secret-keeper? “What do you mean?”

The eunuch tells him. And Tyrion begins to laugh outright.

“Have you lost your mind as well as your balls, Spider?” The Hand asks him, “After all that’s happened, you think they’d allow such a thing!!”

“They might if I prove myself by getting rid of the Sands once and for all. It would probably be a much better and easier way to retain our Pentos connections as well.”

Tyrion groans. “Varys, you don’t understand. This isn’t just a matter of convincing the queen. Or our queen, rather. Look, I know this may be hard to believe for you, but we’re not dealing with the same Starks from seven years ago. You’ve never met Jon Snow, and the last time you saw Sansa Stark, she was a frightened girl who made a point of acting as cowed and nonthreatening as possible. Neither of them are Ned Stark, either. Imagine…” He groans again, “This is what we’re handling, essentially, with this new pack of wolves. Imagine Ned Stark’s command of loyalty, reputation, and ethics. But counter it with his eldest son’s tactical abilities and charisma. Add in a Margaery Tyrell who was tutored by Littlefinger and surpassed him, with a dash of our own queen’s dragon-riding abilities. Now take that, add our own queen, and two junior wolves with their own allegedly impressive sets of skills, and you have the current pack of Starks. And there’s no way in any of the Seven Hells they’d let you within a league of their prized pups.”

Varys cocks his head and arches a brow. “Tyene Sand managed to steal one.”:

“She didn’t get very far, though, did she? And now she and you are both in prison. Think about what that likely means for the protection these two children shall be under from here on out!”

“If they’re half as sensible as you claim,” Varys replies, “Then they’ll appreciate the opportunity.”

“Varys, they don’t trust you. You’re in prison right now for masterminding the kidnapping of their infant daughter!”

“I’m innocent of that.”

“But not of sending the Sand Snakes to them in the first place, not of spying on them.” The Hand starts grinding his teeth and pacing. “For the Maiden’s sake, Varys! Why can’t you just accept that your time is up?! It’s over! You made a mistake, and now you’re done. I’m sorry, but that’s how it works! You know this! How many people have you seen this happen to! So, for the love of the Mother, just bow out! Enjoy the years you have left!”

There’s another long silence. Finally, Varys speaks.

“I may literally be incapable of that, Lord Lannister.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Jon:

Between the crackling fire, the mulled wine, and the laughter, Jon almost feels at home. Arya leans against him on the sofa, cradling her cup in her lap and giggling at Tormund’s absurd tales and Edd’s
humorously skeptical commentary on said tales. Davos has been laughing out loud for over an hour now, sitting by the window. Even Grey Worm tries hard to suppress a smile. Jon hopes against hope that the Unsullied loses control at last. He’s never, ever seen the man smile. Not once.

“--So the stupid shit is dragged to the center of the yard and told he’s to die. And he goes, ‘If I am to die, please drown me in a vat of malmsy wine!’ Everyone looks at each other and finally Ryk goes, ‘What the ever-living fuck is malmsy wine?!’”

“Let me guess,” Edd remarks dryly, “He insisted that you go find some to drown him in.”

“Aye. But we didn’t fall for it,” Tormund says, sticking his chest out, “We gave him a chance to choose his departure, tried to be humane. But we’re not idiots. So he got his head taken clean off instead.” Tormund takes another sip. “I tell you, though, I’ve spent a fair amount of time in the south at this point, and I’ve yet to encounter any malmsy wine yet. A bit disappointing, to tell you the truth. I’d hoped it was real somewhere.”

“What, so you might drown in it?” Arya asks, snorting.

“No, my little southern lady, so I might get drunk on it! When I die, I plan to go out the only way that fits.”

“An accident?” Edd asks.

Tormund shrugs. “I suppose it’ll depend on how you look at it. But I want to go out fucking my wife until my heart explodes.”

“This would be the bear?” The Lord Commander responds.

“Aye,” Tormund says, grinning, “If she doesn’t tear it out of my chest first.”

“Ah, but you see, that’s the way of females, bear or otherwise,” Edd says, “They always find a way to tear your heart out.”

“Says the man who joined the Watch because Yoren told him that women love a man in uniform,” Jon snaps.

Everyone looks at him. Arya giggles.

Edd scowls. “Says the man whose first love put three arrows in his back!”

Jon sighs, thinking of Ygritte. “I’m the one who left her, though. She never would have if I’d been loyal to her. But I chose the Watch instead. And, as it turned out, it was those Brothers I’d given her up for which stabbed me in the heart, not her.”

“Aye,” Tormund agrees, “And she missed on purpose, I promise you.”

“I believe that,” admits Jon, “After the things I’d seen her do with a bow, it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

He takes another sip and leans back, looking up at the ceiling. “Ygritte,” he mutters whistfully.

“Well, if your wife hears you speak of her like that, she may be the one to finish the job,” Edd remarks.

Jon doubts that. He’s spoken of Ygritte before, and it’s never bothered Sansa. On the contrary, she’d asked about his later lover a few times. “You barely know her.”
“Sansa’s not the jealous sort,” Arya agrees, “Especially when it comes to dead women. Besides, Edd, what do you know about women at all? You didn’t even know the Watch was celibate. And you’ve been here how long?”

“Long enough to have heard every song and story every broken-hearted brother has ever told,” The Lord Commander says defensively.

“Long enough to believe every one as well, apparently,” Arya replies, “I had no idea you were so gullible.”

Everyone else in the room laughs. The Lord Commander keeps scowling.

“It’s not right for you to pick on a poor creature like me, who will never know the joy of a woman’s bed.”

“Neither shall Grey Worm,” announces the Unsullied all of a sudden, “I was cut as a boy. But I was freed by my queen, and loved by Missandei, my precious one. It was the Masters who took from me. And a man who fooled you into becoming a eunuch by vow. Grey Worm was a slave. You are a fool, Lord Commander.”

“Leave the pronouncements on women to the people with more romantic expertise,” Arya criticizes, “People like the eunuch.”

The whole room laughs again. Even Edd cracks and smile, throwing his cup at Arya’s face.

“Your Grace,” Davos speaks up, “Has there been any further word on the princess?”

Jon smiles softly, “Of course, why do you think we’re celebrating? Serena is fine. Perfect. Not a scratch on her. She even got over her cold, according to the raven I received today. Both girls are thriving. My wife and brother assure me that no stronger, finer children have been seen in all the Seven Kingdoms. Though I’d be lying if I told you that I’m not still tempted to send Ghost back to Winterfell. But every letter I get from home since it happened has insisted I keep him with me.”

“Speaking of which, where is that wolf of yours?”

“I have him patrolling the grounds,” Jon answers Davos, “Same as every night.”

The Onion Knight nods. “I assume the dragons are helping?”

Jon nods.

The King of Winter has trained Viserion and Rhaegal to do overhead flights every morning and evening to scout the areas. Aside from one frontal assault shortly after Jon’s return, little has been seen of the enemy. But they remain vigilant nonetheless. If anything, it sets Jon on edge. He thinks of Daenerys’s theory about the Night’s King needing to conserve his power to control the wind. What if that’s what he’s doing right now? Jon’s debated whether or not to launch their own offensive and go after the enemy, but fears that’s exactly what they want. The entire army has been in an odd limbo for over a moon’s turn. While it’s given them time to rest and resuscitate a bit, it is… troubling.

The most foolish of their men are whispering that they’ve won. That they’ve driven the enemy off once and for all. Jon won’t be satisfied until the Night’s King is dead. Something is happening, but he doesn’t dare provoke the enemy… Not until the succession is finalized.

It’s going at a snail’s pace. He’s officially heir presumptive to the Iron Throne and Dragon’s Bay. But where things go from there is still being debated. There’s major outcry from most of the court
about the possibility of Sansa being named regent in the South, and nothing has been settled in regards to Dragon’s Bay. They’ve only just gotten acknowledgment of Jon and the twins’ legitimacy from Daario Naharis and his ministers in the East.

It’s almost enough to make Jon send for a new Red priest or priestess. Because until this is settled, Westeros can’t afford for him to die. Not that he intends to do so.

With as many reasons to live as he has, both personal and political, Jon suspects he may fear death more than ever before. Especially after seeing all that isn’t waiting for him on the other side.

Perhaps he’s become a coward. Gods, he hopes not.

He just doesn’t want to leave his children saddled with chaos.

It’s so much easier to be brave when one has little to lose. He looks around furtively.

Who does he speak to about this?

Everyone is afraid, of course. All of them. Jon certainly has always been afraid. But not quite like this.

It’s not dying so much as it is the thought of leaving his family alone to fend for themselves. Even after the war… Who knows when winter will end, who or what will be left behind, what conflicts shall be brewing, what responsibilities shall await them all?

His girls are already girls in a world where women are treated like cattle. Who will face challenges from pretenders and rivals simply by virtue of being female. But growing up as the primary heirs to two different empires and three dragons? Serena wasn’t even a month old before her first kidnapping, for pity’s sake! They’ve been born in a time that couldn’t be more tumultuous. And they will be raised in the aftermath.

Jon doesn’t want them growing up without him.

It’s not just a matter of witnessing their first steps--- Jon is almost certain he’ll miss that. Or teaching them to ride, or reading them stories before bed, or seeing how beautiful they’ll become. It’s about keeping them safe, letting them know they have him, that he loves them so, so much, making sure no one hurts them, securing their futures for them while giving them time to prepare for it.

Jon glances at his sister. There’s still so much she hasn’t told him about what happened to her after King’s Landing. But he knows she had to become a killer to survive, to do, see, and suffer horrible things at a tender age, that all she’s seen and had to do still haunts her. He knows she saw and did enough to drive her to a foreign place that worships death and tried to make her erase her whole being because she felt she had nowhere else to go. He knows so much has been robbed from her.

Arya is one of the few who was supposed to be safe in this mad, cruel world. She was a little lady of one of the greatest families in the country. All the rules, regulations, customs, and justifications for said rules were supposedly about protecting people, some people more than others.

Little Ladies like Arya were supposed to be among the most protected. That’s why castle walls were built, why girls were taught to obey their fathers and husbands and remain at their needles, what the system of rank and class was supposed to do. Bear children, smile, please, and obey, because you’re a lady and you’re going to be protected.

Not so different from being one of the smallfolk, really. Obey, kneel to, work for, fight for, and pay taxes to your lords, and he and his knights will protect you and yours.
None of it is true.

Then there’s Sansa, who followed every rule, did all that was asked of her. Beaten, tortured, sold off, and eventually raped and tortured by a psychopath.

They were supposed to be the privileged, the protected. When their father died, they lost everything, and were subjected to a thousand cruelties with little to no preparation. They ultimately had to protect themselves, and teach themselves to do so as unforgivable and permanent damage was already being done.

Seven Hells, even Bran and Rickon, born into every privilege--- choices of what they’d do with their lives, all the means in the world to pursue it, trained to make their decisions and protect themselves, legally designated as people and not property, guaranteed more rights than their sisters, more choices than all of their older brothers, given the family name to keep, promised justice for any wrongs that might befall them. Even they were cast out of their homes, imprisoned, crippled, killed.

They were six, ten, eleven, and thirteen when they lost their father. Rickon wasn’t old enough to learn to protect himself in time.

Serena and Alysanne are not even six. They’re not even old enough to lift their heads.

Sansa, Daenerys, Bran, and Arya will do anything and everything to protect them--- provided they survive. Jon knows this. But it still isn’t quite the same. Robb had his mother, a direwolf, an army, a crown, kingdoms, and it didn’t save him. He made fatal mistakes for himself, his family, and his people because he wasn’t ready for all that was thrust upon him. And he was a tactical prodigy.

Jon doesn’t want to leave the task of protecting his children to his wife alone. Or even to his wife and aunt, or his wife, aunt, and siblings. He wants and needs to be around to teach them, raise them, enforce their rights.

By virtue of his bloodlines and sex, his voice carried a certain authority that could accomplish things in the eyes of many that even the incredible women in his life couldn’t manage to do as quickly. If Jon dies, Sansa may have to spend years making sure no one tries to have Bran usurp her, keeping the south from taking her children, getting people to accept that yes, the eldest trueborn child of the monarch, regardless of gender, is considered the heir. She’d have to work twice as hard as Jon, because she’s a woman. She’ll be questioned and challenged twice as much.

The same likely can be said of Daenerys, even. If she were a man, things likely would have been and still will be much easier for her.

The world is awful, so the cases of the women in his life are helped along by him adding his male voice to many discussions and supporting them thusly.

Yes, it’s likely that many people would eventually learn to show their queens the same respect they’d show their kings, but that would happen much quicker for Sansa at the very least if she had a few more years of his support. If she doesn’t have to struggle and be the twins’ only living parent.

Jon doesn’t want his family to face what comes after all this without him. And he doesn’t want his daughters growing up having never known their father, all while being saddled with his legacy while enjoying little to none of his love.

He doesn’t want them to end up suffering what their mother, their Aunt Arya, and great-aunt Daenerys suffered. He wants to give them everything.

He can’t do that if he’s dead.
Jon looks around the room again. Tormund and Davos are both fathers. Tormund’s children are men and women grown. Davos’s youngest is seven, and while his eldest living son is slated to inherit Cape Wrath, it’s not the sort of holding one would kill over. Grey Worm is a eunuch. Edd is sworn to celibacy. Arya is sterile.

None of them have to fear leaving babes with crowns.

He kind of wishes Daenerys were here. But she isn’t.

More drinks and stories are shared, but eventually his guests begin to filter out. Jon asks Davos to remain behind.

The Onion Knight moves from his seat by the window to the place on the sofa recently vacated by Arya. “Yes, Your Grace?”

Jon details his thoughts to the man. “Your youngest was not yet a year old when you sailed off to fight for Stannis, correct?”

“Almost, Your Grace,” Davos replies, “The War of the Five Kings broke out after my Stannis’s first Name Day, but I had already sailed for Dragonstone by then.”

“Did you feel any particular fear over possibly never being around to raise and protect your son?”

Davos nods. “Aye, I did. With every new life one brings into the world comes another reason for a person to stay alive. But your case is especially extreme. You’re no coward for being cautious. Especially when there are so many people who are better off if you survive. I don’t just mean your family, but also their future subjects. We’re not just fighting to rescue the world from these enemies, we’re fighting for the world that will be once it’s rescued. The Red Woman went on and on about you being Azor Ahai Reborn and the Prince That Was Promised, the one meant to defeat the Others and win the Dawn. But I think you’re meant for more than some superstitious victories. You’re meant to protect the Dawn once it’s come. Winning wars is wonderful, but ultimately shallow if you can’t maintain any peace afterwards. You’re an agent of far more than warfare, My King. I truly believe that.”

Jon smiles softly. “Yes, but is that just something you’re saying to make me feel better about being a coward? There’s a reason that I’m here, with a blade in my hand, while the queens are back home, maintaining the country and winning allies.”

“Wanting to live is not cowardly. Dying is easy. Living, ruling, pursuing important work you maybe feel ill-equipped to do for the sake of the world is not cowardice. Wanting to do as much as possible to help those you love and everyone beyond is not cowardice. Challenging yourself instead of simply letting yourself die because that’s braver is not cowardice. You are more than a weapon, Jon Stark.”

“You sound like my wife.” Jon grins thinking of how Sansa would stand before him saying those exact words.

“She’s a wise woman who knows you like no other. And she is right.”

Jon closes his eyes. “Davos… I was thinking. About the Others’ absence, about my mortality. About how they may be gearing up for something, or laying a trap, about the risks posed to us by both staying put and seeking them out. About the consequences of risking my life. And, well, I was thinking also about the last time I died.”

Davos grits his teeth. “I see.”
“I don’t want to summon Melisandre, obviously. But there are other followers of R’hollor who are capable of bringing back dead men.”

He knows how his minister must feel. The Red Priestess burned a child alive. And inviting that group in had its own risks.

The Onion Knight sighs. “I understand the urge. They’ll eventually want you to convert, though.”

“They may be willing to serve regardless in order to save the world. This is the Long Night, after all.”

“Perhaps, but they have no reason to think you’re definitely Azor Ahai Reborn. Your aunt still lives, and many believe she is the Prince that Was Promised. And she’s embraced R’hollor more than you have. Many may not think it necessary to resurrect you after all. Melisandre hadn’t even heard of Daenerys when she brought you back.”

“They’ve brought others back.”

“Others who swore themselves to the Lord of Light, forsook all other Gods, and burned the relics of their former religions. But assuming we did convince some of them… If you were to fall, there’s no guarantee they’d be able to bring you back before the Night’s King turns you into a wight. And do we really want to find out what happens when a Dragonlord becomes a minion of the Others?”

Jon hadn’t thought of that. A chill runs down his spine. But that doesn’t necessarily answer all of his questions.

“Davos, I’ve told you about Daenerys’s theory about the Night’s King, how he got Rhaegal and I to fall, and why he hasn’t used the power since?”

The Onion Knight nods.

Jon sighs, “What if she’s right and the Night’s King has been away because he’s building up that power? What if he returns here with enough strength to blow The Wall down?”

“What if our enemy has set a trap for us if we march on them? What if going on the offensive is exactly what they want us to do? They’ve had no luck against us in defense, after all.” Davos sighs, “I understand your concerns, but I can tell you that the worst thing you could do is fly out and try to attack the enemy right now. We’d be better off sending scouts.”

“Right, because we have so many men who could blend in enough to infiltrate the enemy camp,” Jon replies sarcastically.

“We can’t accomplish any deep subterfuge, that’s true. Not unless we can acquire some sort of magic that might be able to disguise our men effectively. But we can send rangers out to observe things from a distance, and discern anything major.”

“By the time they could get us any information, the Night’s King could be blowing down The Wall.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. It’s still worth trying.”

Jon nods. “It should be Free Folk who do it.”

“Agreed. We can have Tormund assemble a team first thing in the morning.”

“See that it is done.” Jon leans forward and cradles his head in his hands. “And… We should send
letters to anyone and everyone we can. See if there is some magical art we might employ to give us some further advantages. I’ll draft some letters tonight.” He thinks of Sam, who would have returned to the Citadel by now.

During their time together at Winterfell, his friend had told him much of the Citadel. At one point, Jon asked him if he thought it might be a good place for Bran. He knows that mystical studies were available to neophytes there, and even if Bran didn’t finish his chain, that alone might be worth pursuing.

But Sam quickly dissuaded him. His friend described many of the archmaesters as close-minded, stingy, suspicious of and resentful of magic. That they are even somewhat hostile towards the dragons. That Bran would not be welcome there.

The Archmaesters might not be worth contacting, but Sam is another story. However, if he’s to employ his contact within the Citadel effectively, it’s best if the authorities there aren’t aware that the King of Winter seeks such knowledge.

“Don’t have any messages sent until I give the approval,” he tells Davos, “I want to discuss it with a few others, get the opinions of the queens before I pursue this in earnest.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Ser Davos. Have a good night.”

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Daenerys:

Rarely does Daenerys encounter another person with purple eyes and/or silver-gold hair.

Edric Dayne, the young Lord of Starfall, has silver-gold hair, and while his eyes aren’t quite the same shade of violet, they’re a dark blue that is like an indigo. The young lord, fourteen years of age, is handsome, save for a few spots and patchy beard, and he holds himself well.

His regent and aunt, Lady Allyria, a beauty of eight-and-twenty name days, looks like she could be Dany’s sister.

Both stand before her desk, flanked not only by Lord Varys and Tyrion, but a number of representatives from Dornish Houses. Jynessa Blackmont, heiress to the seat of the same name. Lady Sylvia Santagar, heir to Spottswood, Cletus Yronwood, son of the current Lord Yronwood, and his good-brother Ryon Allyrion.

And, most interestingly, a beautiful, olive-skinned young woman standing between Lord Cletus and Lady Sylvia: Arianne Martell, cousin to the late Prince Doran.

Arianne was the only child of Ser Lewyn Martell, brother to Doran’s mother, who joined the Kingsguard after becoming a widower. She’d been raised by her cousins during her early life before fostering with House Yronwood.

As a trueborn Martell, she was, by all standards, the rightful Princess of Dorne. And she, and her supporters currently assembled with her, wish for her to assume that position.

“Here’s what I don’t understand, though,” Daenerys says, “Why didn’t you take that place when Ellaria murdered your cousins?”
“I was abroad at the time. Looking to meet with you, actually. My cousin Doran sent me to you to negotiate a covert alliance. By the time I made it to Meereen, you were missing and a Lannister was ruling in your stead. By the time I finally returned to Westeros, Ellaria and the Sand Snakes had taken power, were hunting me, and apparently had the Mother of Dragons behind them. I decided it was better for everyone to keep a low profile and not stake my claim until after the Others were defeated for the sake of national stability,” Arianne explains, “I considered keeping the peace in what’s left of Westeros during an invasion of the undead a priority over power and revenge.”

Daenerys stares at the young woman, eyes wide. This… This is unexpected. A rational human being.

“I see. But now you wish to overthrow your cousins.”

“From what I understand, the issue has become rather forced. Tyene kidnapped a princess of royal blood, and her mother is threatening to revolt because you’re insisting there be consequences for this. Given the support I’ve accumulated, there’d be less chaos if I were to stage my coup before Ellaria and her brood manage to destroy Dorne entirely.”

“Your Grace,” Varys says, shuffling forward quietly, his usual resplendent silks filthy from the cells, “If we were to throw our full support behind Princess Arianne, this could be quick and nearly bloodless. None of the Dornish were happy with what the Sands did to Doran and Trystane. The only major support they have left are the Water Gardens, Sunspear, and Ellaria’s family, the Ullers of Hellholt.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Arianne before?” Daenerys demands.

“Well, I thought she was dead for a while, for one thing. And once I did find out she was still alive, we were storming King’s Landing. Both Arianne and I agreed it was better to wait until after the dust settled a bit.”

Daenerys clenches her fists beneath her desk. Varys wanted her to trust him, yet he keeps secrets like this. “That is unacceptable. I’m not sure how my predecessors handled things, but I do not appreciate having such important issues kept from me!”

“In my defense, Your Grace, much of this information is stuff that cannot be trusted in print, and you have spent much of your reign absent,” Varys tells her nervously.

“No excuses. I was around long enough to learn about Arianne, and we both know you’ve kept things from me on purpose. The Sand Snakes are proof of that.”

“Your Grace, I swear to you, I did not order Princess Serena’s kidnapping!”

“Even if that’s true, you sent those women to The North to spy! Something you neglected to mention when I demanded an explanation for you sending them in the first place!” Daenerys rises to her feet and begins pacing with fury.

“If I’d told you, would you have permitted it?”

“No!”

“We need eyes within Winterfell, My Queen.”

“They’re our allies! And my family!”

“And your rivals, whatever they say!” Varys insists, “Please, Your Grace, I only wanted to protect
“From who?! My own family?!”

“I think Princess Arianne here is a perfect example of why that doesn’t guarantee much,” Varys says, “Lord Tyrion, as well. Still, I know I’ve wronged you. I made a grave mistake, Your Grace. I’ve failed you. I just wanted to do what was best for the realm.”

It’s almost admirable, really, how Varys, despite all that’s transpired, manages to still show her such condescension. Even as he pleaded with her, he just had to preface it with a snide correction.

“Your idea of the realm, you mean,” Daenerys spits, sick of hearing this, “If you really cared about the true realm, you’d never have let the War of the Five Kings happen. Countless people have suffered thanks to the machinations you’ve performed for ‘the good of the realm.’ Which, I remind you, isn’t even one realm anymore! So how about you stop focussing so much on what you think is good for a nonexistent country, and focus on what’s good for the people within it instead?!”

Varys shrinks back, gaping. Good.

“Princess Arianne, My Lords, My Ladies, forgive me,” Daenerys tells them, “But I must speak alone with Lord Varys and Lord Lannister. I will have an answer for you soon, I promise.”

Begrudgingly, the Dornish faction bow and exit, leaving the terrified-looking counselors alone with Daenerys in her study. She paces some more, letting them sweat.

Daenerys stops short, looking at her two ministers. “I know you think I show the Starks too much favor. But did it ever occur to you that I might be a little less partial if my own ministers didn’t do things like this?! Say what you will about my ‘rivals’, but they were honest about who they are at the first opportunity! Meanwhile, my own advisors don’t even tell me that we have a rightful Princess of Dorne! I’m surrounded by entitled liars and sycophants! No wonder my father went mad!”

There’s silence for a while. Daenerys thinks quickly.

“You know what?” She tells them, “I’ve made a decision. Go ahead with the coup. Draw up a list of all your ‘Little Birds’ for me. And you know what else?”

“What?” Tyrion asks nervously.

“I’m through caring about what any of you say. I can’t get rid of all of you right now, of course. But if you want to keep your positions and your skins past this war, you’re all going to start proving yourselves to me. You are all going to try and earn back my trust. And maybe, maybe if you manage to learn some honesty, accountability, and competence by the time the war ends, I won’t have you both exiled. But in the meantime?” She grins, ‘I’m going to show even more favor to the people I actually trust. I’m signing the agreement. If both Jon and I are lost, Sansa Stark will become Lord Protector of the Iron Throne and all my domains. She will rule for her daughters absolutely until they come of age. And any failure on your part to honor this and answer to her completely will be an act of High Treason. And you know why? Because I trust her!’”

“Your Grace, please!” Tyrion protests, “She’s not even a citizen of the Iron Throne anymore! And she’s only a---”

“---A young woman?” Dany cuts him off, “Aye, and all of the machinations, plotting, and brute force of your family couldn’t stop her from reclaiming her home and gaining a crown. She’s wildly popular among the people of the Three Realms. How do my citizens feel about you two, again? Remind me.”
Both men are silent.

“You both think yourselves so much smarter than everyone else,” Dany sneers, “And you think that gives you license to manipulate people, that you’re immune to mistakes, and that everyone, especially naïve young women like me, need to simply follow your lead. Lannister, you were so confident you could ‘fix’ Meereen while I was gone, that you were more equipped to run Slaver’s Bay than Missandei, who lived there most of her life, actually spoke the language and knew the culture. And what did I find when I returned? Meereen was on fire, and apparently you’d reinstituted slavery in Yunkai for another seven years. Varys, you were so sure I couldn’t handle anything without this man’s advice, or your schemes. Yet I flourished when I broke away from your man Mopatis, gained an army and three cities. You were so sure I needed you to run around a collect allies for me. But all this time, the Ironborn and even the Martells were traveling to meet me, without your help. I probably didn’t need you to enlist the Reach, either, after what Cersei did! Cersei probably did more to put me in power than the two of you combined!

“You both expect everyone to forget things like how you, Varys, told Robert Baratheon’s council that I carried Drogo’s child. Or how you, Tyrion, helped your family win and keep power, then left your mad sister with enough Wildfire to destroy the whole capital. You expect everyone to just overlook these things, trust you, follow your lead, because you’re so sure you know better. You didn’t know or even care about the enemy we’re facing now even as my nephew was writing and begging you all to take notice. You allowed House Lannister to alienate half of Westeros to such an extreme that it guaranteed succession, and tried to stem it by putting people like the Boltons in charge.

“For all your cleverness, gentlemen, what has it gained you? Tyrion, you sent Myrcella to Dorne, and she’s dead. You upheld, enforced, and protect Joffrey’s rule only so he could be assassinated anyways and your family could try to kill you for it. You ‘negotiated’ with the Masters only to break the promises my reign was built on and have them set fire to my city anyways. And my fleet, above all, forcing me to grant the Ironborn independence in exchange for theirs. Oh, and for all your cleverness, you never bothered to make sure the wildfire you used at Blackwater to keep your mad sister in power could never be misused by her in the future to, say, massacre countless innocents. Varys, you sold me to Drogo and gave me the dragon eggs, but you never put any measures in place to keep me from, say, being sterilized, or abandoned to die of exposure. You did tell Robert Baratheon I was pregnant for absolutely no reason, however. The only reason all your plans for me weren’t destroyed is because of the efforts I made utterly independent of you, and after I had conquered Slaver’s Bay without any help from you, your first response is to send me someone to tell me what to do, because you decided that the two of you knew better. Even while you were both being outwitted by a brothel owner who was destroyed by a girl you both think you’re above obeying!

“Instead of using your supposed oh-so-incredible intellects to try and curtail the ‘Tywin Lannisters’ of the world, you’ve been focussing your efforts on trying to control and ‘do better’ than the various young women you’re so sure you know better than. Even though the truth is that if you were really so clever and so committed to the ‘good of the realm’, as you say, the War of the Five Kings never would have happened, and Westeros would have been far more prepared to face the White Walkers! Seven Hells, Tyrion, you wanted me to cause more conflict with the North--- the only people preparing for the enemy--- simply over titles! Because you’re just so clever. So much cleverer than the fiery young dragon-girl, the glum-faced bastard, and the sweet Northern lady who didn’t know the word ‘shit’, right? Clever enough to flawlessly manipulated the likes of the Sand Snakes as well... Oh, wait. Or, at least control the pathetic, inbred likes of Joffrey Bara--- no, you never managed that, either. And you two think you have better ideas of who should rule for my grand-nieces than their own mother? You know, the one who already governs a country effectively under the worst possible conditions? The men who let the Long Summer end with the War of the
Five Kings? Yes, clearly I should listen to you instead of leaving my legacy and heirs in the hands of their qualified and accomplished mother.”

At this point, Daenerys has screamed herself hoarse. So she lowers her voice to a whisper. “You’re both inadequate and unfit. And you both probably assume that the reason anyone would think that is because you’re a eunuch and a dwarf. But the truth is, you are both unfit because you assume that, and because you assume you know better. Well, you don’t. You’re both just as arrogant as the people who looked at you with prejudice. I never did, and you still failed me. Now, I want full reports on EVERYTHING, and while I draw up the necessary paperwork to give these lands something resembling a future, you will both learn some humility. Understood?”

They both give silent nods. They back out, white-faced.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be shorter than the others. It'll make sense when you read it.
Run Like Hell

Chapter Summary

A major development

Chapter Notes

Thanks to @ohdede, as always!

Jon:

To Samwell Tarly of Horn Hill, Neophyte of the Citadel and Steward of the Night’s Watch from His Grace Jon the White Wolf of the House Stark and House Targaryen, First of His Name, King of the Three Realms of Winter, King in the North, King of the Trident and the Vale of Arryn, King of the Andals and the First Men, Lord of Harrenhal, Lord Consort of Winterfell and the Dreadfort, Commander of Moat Cailin, Prince of Five Realms of the Iron Throne, Prince of Dragon’s Bay, Warden of the High North, and Protector of the Realm, greeting:

...My hand is already cramped from writing all of that, I’ll have you know. I know you asked me to send you a message with my full styles listed so you can record it, but that will be the first and last time I do so, Sam. Copy this down as many times as you can and preserve this if you must, because I’m not heading my letters to you like this again. I don’t have the time or the patience. The reveal of my heritage made my list of styles even bloody longer. I haven’t even memorized them all. I copied this from a list my wife assembled for me to reference. If there are any more details of this nature you need to record, write to the queen. She’s the only one mad enough to remember it all.

Speaking of the queen, she wrote to me about your reticence about conducting a private correspondence with her. I didn’t think I could loathe your toad of a father any more. But his insistence on approving and monitoring all of your mother and sisters’ communications managed that miracle. Does he enforce this for everyone in your family, or just the women? I’m surprised your mother hasn’t poisoned him by now. If she wishes to, please let her know that the Three Realms will gladly provide her asylum from the law if necessary. But I’m pretty sure I could convince my aunt that such an act would be a public service.

But no, Sam, I have absolutely no qualms about you conducting a private correspondence with the queen whatsoever. Your father’s absurd standards are not normal. I’ve never even heard of such a thing until Sansa wrote to me about your concerns. My wife and anyone she writes to, do not require my permission. That would be true even if she weren’t a ruling queen.

Indeed, I think such a communication is absolutely necessary, considering the fact that your wife and son are, in fact, residing within our court. And it’s more her court, especially while I’m at The Wall. Neither Gilly nor Little Sam can write, and I doubt you’d want them wasting their wages on scribes. So who else is to update you on their lives? But Sansa wanted to set you at ease, so she asked me to write to you before she sends you another letter.
She says Gilly and Sam are doing well. Gilly turned out to be a bit unsuited as a Lady’s Maid, so Sansa put her in the kitchens. Your wife has resumed her lessons in reading and writing, taking evening sessions with one of Sansa’s ladies. Little Sam is getting along well with the other children of the castle. When the war is finished, the queen plans to set up some public lessons for the local children so they might learn their basic letters, and Sam will be just the right age for it. She and Gilly have spoken, and we like the idea of raising your son as a sort of companion/guard for the girls. We could also arrange for him to squire when he’s older, if you’d like.

Your family is healthy and happy, according to the queen, and you are more than welcome to ask her yourself from now on.

I admit, my friend, I do have some other, ulterior motives of writing to you. I recall what you told me of the maesters and their aversion to magic. But I’ve also grown concerned regarding our enemies’ powers, particularly those of the Night’s King. The enemy has been lying low for a while now, and I suspect that they are preparing something immense. But it is hard to gather information or prepare for whatever it may be.

For the good of the realm, Sam, I must ask you to defy your mentor/tutors for me. We are fighting a supernatural enemy, and I fear dragons may not be enough. Knowledge of the mystical arts could be crucial to us winning this once and for all. So I beg you, please use the resources of the Citadel to research any spellcraft that might help us? The art of constructing effective glamours alone, so that our scouts might infiltrate the enemy camps, might make all the difference.

My aunt and I also have a theory about an ability of the Night’s King’s. We think he may have some ability to control the wind—- it’s what caused my fall four moons ago. But we think there may be some limits to it. He hasn’t used it since. Thus, we suspect it may be a power that can only be employed once a certain amount of energy is accumulated. If so, the king might be doing that as we speak. Last time, he caused a dragon to fall from the sky. Next time, he might be able to blow down the entire Wall.

Please, Sam, find out whatever you can. We’re seeking out other sources of information, but the Citadel has resources that no one else in the world possesses. Be my eyes there, I beg of you.

Aside from my increasing fears of the activities and capabilities of our quiet enemies, I am well. If anything, this gap in battle has allowed our forces to recuperate, replenish, and train. Arya has settled into the woman’s division well, though she was forced to imprison Obara and Nym Sand after they heard about Tyene. We’ve purposely kept them ignorant about the news of their cousin Arianne.

I admit that I feel immense relief that we might be rid of the Sands so quickly. If it weren’t for the White Walkers, I’d have sent an army to sack Dorne myself after what Tyene did to Serena. I strongly suspect that her mother and sisters were involved, but Nym and Obara are, unfortunately, silent as the grave about this. Well, aside from Nym insisting that it’s not their fault that “Tyene is a crazy slut.”

It’s really touching to hear someone characterize their sister like that. I remember Sansa and Arya fighting like cats and dogs when we were children, and neither, even at the height of anger, said anything half so foul as what the Sand Snakes say about each other casually.

The good news is that there’s progress regarding the succession. Serena is slated as heir to House Targaryen after me, and Sansa has been confirmed as her regent should the worst happen. Still no final decision about the East, and there are a lot of details that still need to be ironed out, but the central issues are resolved.
I can’t wait for the war to end, Sam. I want to go home.

This may seem mad to some, given all that I’ve seen and done, but I feel like my life, my proper life, still hasn’t completely materialized. That I finally know what I meant for. And no, I don’t think it’s ‘defeat the White Walkers’. Or, at least, I don’t think that’s my ultimate purpose, but rather, a stop along the way. What I’m really meant for is waiting for me at home. It’s the life I’ve only begun, but not gotten to live fully, yet.

Melisandre brought me back because I was meant to be the ‘Prince Who Was Promised’ and end the White Walkers. And I think I definitely have a part to play there. But, even if it’s me and not Daenerys, I don’t think it’s the primary reason I’m here. I know how that sounds. After all, I’ve been handling the Others for years now. I was the first to kill a wight in centuries. I’ve stared down the Night’s King while the rest of the world was still ignorant of his existence. And maybe, if I am this person, it’ll be what I’m remembered for.

But it’s not what I feel my life is for. The war is just a stepping stone.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that as soon as I came back and declared that my Watch had ended, the love of my life appeared, took me back to Winterfell, and helped me become king. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that I fell in love with her despite our prior connection, ended up being compelled by circumstance to marry her, then discovered (through mystical means) that I’m allowed to love her. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that I ended up siring the Valyrian-looking heir to House Targaryen before I even met my aunt. Or that I discovered a sixth direwolf pup that day, and that he is the only one of the litter that hasn’t died or been separated from his human.

I may be remembered for this war, Sam, but my life is for the North and for my family. I am meant to be King of the Three Realms, husband, and father. If I live, that’s where I’ll end up, after all. It’s certainly all I want.

What about you? I call Gilly your wife, but obviously, she isn’t in a legal sense. You’re a Man of the Watch still, and to become a Maester on top of that. But she is the love of your life, your partner, mother to your (albeit, adopted) son. What do you want more? A chain, or that? Do you visualize both?

I admit, I almost wish you weren’t part of the Watch. I like the idea of appointing you as Maester to Winterfell (Syrus is perfectly competent, but he was Luwin’s replacement and served the Boltons. As you can imagine, Sansa doesn’t like him) and you living out your life and raising a family with Gilly here. Advising Sansa and I throughout our reign and tutoring our children. Our children growing up together. Us as old men, bald and liver-spotted, bouncing grandchildren on our brittle, knobbly knees. Your daughters could be ladies-in-waiting to mine, our sons could squire together. You can deliver the children Sansa and I have in the future.

Too bad you’re not an oath-breaking bastard like me.

I know I’m probably getting ahead of myself. But to be honest, Sam, with every passing day, I dread the enemies’ return more and more. And these optimistic fantasies are often the only solace I have from them. Even the few times I’ve gotten drunk have ended with me descending into a pit of anxiety.

Something big is coming, Sam. I’m afraid. I don’t want my life to be all about fighting at the Wall. I want it to be back at Winterfell. I want to end this war and go home.

I declared my Watch to have ended when I hanged Alliser Thorne, Olly, and their accomplices. But it wasn’t really, not completely. I’ve still been caught between the Wall and Winterfell ever since. Between the duty and destiny I want less and less every day and the duty and destiny I’ve been
building since I sprung back to life. Between the heroism and morbid sense of honor I entertained as a boy, and the manhood now. As a boy I dreamed of being a glorious hero like Daeron the Young Dragon, of being a great guardian and ranger and earning my honor as a Watcher on the Wall. All the while knowing nothing of the reality of those images. I knew nothing, period. Just what the stories and songs told me. But now, as a man, I know the real world, I know what “heroism” and “glory” really entail, and I know what I want. I’d rather live many years keeping my people safe, surrounded by the love of family than die a hero of some “glorious” war that will be used as an example for generations to come to make know-nothing boys sacrifice their lives for the benefit of the undeserving. To glorify warfare, violence, pain, and death. I’d rather be Jaehaerys the Conciliator than Daeron the Young Dragon.

A life about enriching others, of creating life myself that is waiting for me, and I’m caught between that and the war I’m fighting at the place where I’ve already died once. I don’t want to die here again, not without having lived fully.

If I must, I must. But Seven Hells, Sam, I don’t want to. I don’t want to die here. I don’t want my life to add up to a song that glorifies war. I don’t want Sansa to be a widow, or the girls to go fatherless. I don’t want Sansa to carry that burden alone. I don’t want others to have to deal with the outcome of the war I’ve fought.

I want to see the summer again. I want to lead my kingdom back to it. I want to keep peace once I’ve ended the war. I want to bury bodies again, instead of burning them. I want to protect and teach my children, comfort my wife, laugh with my friends, talk with my brother, spar with my sister, help my people.

Once, I could happily visualize myself dying in service of protecting the realm, having songs written about me, being a hero. The songs teach boys that a life devoted to killing and dying in service of the undeserving is one of greatness, all they should aspire to.

But I don’t want that anymore. I don’t care about glory or honor, I care about the world I’m fighting for. And I can’t help or protect it anymore if I’m dead.

Sam, I don’t want to die. I am so afraid I’ll die here again. Face the nothingness again and leave the world and everything I love behind. I’m not some selfless hero who only has some skewed sense of honor and “glory” (whatever that means, did I ever really know?) to desire and only my own skin to live for. I have a home, a name, a family, a kingdom now.

I don’t want to die for that, Sam, I want to live for that. And I’m so afraid that it won’t happen. That I’ll die in the snow once more, leaving the fate of everyone and everything to others, all alone once more.

At least if that happens, though, it’ll be before I’ve had any sons. Gods, Sam, could you imagine? What if Alyssanne or Serena were a boy, and I died? And my son, instead of growing up with a father who loves him, who could teach him everything he knows, he grew up with an image, with the memories of others, being told of his glorious father, whose glory, was, in fact, war and death? What if that’s the example I leave him?

I don’t want any son of mine aspiring to become my corpse.

I don’t want my son to be like I was, Sam. I want him to be what I could be. My daughters as well. And the girls…

Sam, if I’m lost, and if Dany is lost, make sure Sansa isn’t alone. Help her make sure that the girls are safe. I’d rather have you and Bran be the image of what a man should be like than some knight.
I’d rather have them marry men like you than a Young Dragon. Sansa will teach them to be strong, but I want them to learn that they don’t always have to be. If Sansa’s left with everything, she won’t be able to teach them that. She won’t be able to teach them how to rely on others, because she’ll be forced to do everything herself.

I don’t want to die, Sam. Not now, not here.

I’m sorry I’m laying this all on you, My Friend. Normally, I’d write all of this to Sansa, but I’m afraid of placing even more strain on her.

I also fear that if she finds out how frightened I am, she’ll kidnap me and drag me back home. She’s more than capable of doing such a thing.

But I have to face whatever comes, scared or not.

I think if anyone understands that, it’s you.

If I don’t make it, try to do whatever you can to make sure my girls marry fat, gentle boys who’d rather stay in the library and make themselves wise than muscular, violent boys who want to run off to war and get themselves killed.

I’m sorry I ask so much of you. I wouldn’t, but you remain my best friend and brother. I miss you.

Yours Truly,

Jon

~__~__~__~__~

To Sansa the Red Wolf of House Stark, Queen of the Three Realms of Winter, My Heart, and Soul, Mother of My Children, Love of My Life from Jon the White Wolf of House Stark and House Targaryen, Husband and Lover to the Queen of Winter, Father to Princesses, Accidental King and Prince, Homesick Bastard, greeting:

I love you, I miss you, and if I die, it shall be with your name and the names of our daughters on my lips and carved on my heart. Thank you for being my wife, for loving me, for giving me our children. Thank you for taking me home. I hope I never have to leave you. You’re the reason I fight. You’re the reason I know who I am and who I wish to be. I love your red hair and blue eyes and how you sound like you have a cold sometimes when you speak and how you’re so much taller than me. I love how you fight without violence, how you spur me on from my lowest point to my greatest heights, I love the way you simultaneously suffer fools and demolish them with words, I love how you rule, how you walk, and those rare smiles of yours. I love how you always smell of fresh, sweet lemons. I love how nothing stops you. I love your lips. I love your wit. I love your sewing and your hands and your long neck. I love that the child you gave me looks like you, so I have two of you. I love how you gave me a little dragonlady as well. I love how angry and bossy and brave you were when you gave birth. And whenever you’re like that, pretty much all the time. I love how much you love your family, how much you care about being a good lady, and all the things that mean to you. I love your handwriting. I love walking around naked in our bedchambers and catching you staring at my arse. I love how you run your hands up my stomach and how you scratch my back and pull my hair. I love how each set of your lips taste. I love how you see things both how they are and how they could be.

It’s cold and harsh here. You are as gentle and warm as the summer sun and I miss you so much and I want nothing more than to come home to you.
I love you,
Jon.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

To my Aunt Daenerys of House Targaryen, Mother of Dragons from your Nephew, Jon of House Stark and House Targaryen, greeting:

Aunt Dany, you are the Prince That Was Promised, and Azor Ahai Reborn. You are the greatest hero of our age. There is no one but you who is fit to sit on that throne. It is an ugly piece of rubbish without you.

I’m so happy you’re my aunt. I don’t care about the throne, or being a Targaryen. But I’m happy to be your family. You’ve saved us all, and that will not be forgotten. I miss you.

Your Nephew,
Jon

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

To Arya Stark, Needlewoman, Water Dancer, and She-Wolf from her Big Brother, greeting:

You’re unstoppable. You’re strong, clever, brave, good, and beautiful. You’re my little sister and that’s one of the things in this world that I’m most grateful for. You’re everyone’s pride and joy. You’re also the one to inherit Longclaw if I die.

Also, I’m a little frightened of you.

Forever Mussing Your Hair,
Jon

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

To Bran, from Jon, greeting:

Dragons don’t fly as high as you do, Brother. Protect us. I know you can. If I can’t be a father to my children, I know you can.

We’ll see each other again.

Jon

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

He’s at the Heart Tree, not exactly praying. He knows what lies beyond. Prayers seem pointless. He just needs a little solitude.

At first, he’s not sure he’s heard it. It takes him a moment to process it.

Bran’s voice. Bran’s cry.

“Get them out, Jon! Hurry!”

He’s on his feet and running back to the castle. A group of guards catch him. “Your Grace, the
enemy! They’re back! Less than ten miles away!”

“Get everyone off the Wall,” he orders at once, “Send your fastest ravens to the other towers, tell them to get out.”

“Wh-what?!”

“GET EVERYONE OUT!” Jon yells, running, “Out and as far away as possible! Hurry!”

Somehow, the dragons seem to know. They fly above, and Viserion swoops down. Jon leaps onto his back, taking to the air.

He flies to the top of the Wall, moving parallel to the lines. “EVERYONE OFF! NOW! HURRY! GO! GET EVERYONE OFF!”

Some men stand still and stare, acting all confused. Jon’s blood is as cold as the air around him.

“Viserion, Dracarys!”

Just enough flame to frighten them, get them moving. Seven Hells, when did they get so many men?!

He and Viserion swoop down to Castle Black’s courtyard, finding Edd and Davos frantically trying to direct the bewildered crowds.

Edd runs up to him. “What’s going on, Snow?! They say you’ve ordered----”

“Get everyone as far away as you can,” Jon tells him, “We have to get them out.”

And he takes off without another word, flying as fast and as far as he can.

He’ll never get to everyone manning the Wall, but that doesn’t mean he won’t try.

He’s made it to the third holdfast west of Castle Black when it begins. It’s sound, somehow both distant and deafening. First, it’s a horn. The blowing of some horn in the distance.

Then dead silence for a minute. Even the wind seems to quiet itself.

It’s a rumbling, it’s a roar. The world shakes. It shakes violently. Viserion shrieks and moves higher.

Jon knows what’s coming, so he fights the dragon, urging it downward.

The sound and the shaking chases them from the east. The world screams.

Then there are the cracks, the splitting. It’s like being inside a bolt of thunder. The cracks in the ice look like lightning. A heavy white sky begins to crumble.

“Get them out, Jon! Hurry!”

No matter how much he hurries, he’ll never get them all out. He knows that. But he tries anyways.

He swoops down as the world crumbles, reaching out and grabbing whoever he can. Tears freeze on his cheeks. He thanks the gods that Queenscrown isn’t actually on the Wall.

He tries, he tries so hard. He grabs whomever he can.

Everything around him breaks and screams. He screams as well. But he doesn’t break. He can’t. The Wall will fall, but he shall not.
He will go home. He will not die here.

The same cannot be said for thousands of others. They die screaming.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Arya:

She has the Sand Snakes released and every cell opened. There’s not enough room, not enough hands, to discriminate.

She’s never seen anything like it. Viserion and Rhaegal appear with mobs of people hanging from them, clinging to them for dear life. There are so many that the dragons fly wobbly and low, clearly exhausted under the weight. Before this day, only two people have flown on a dragon in the last hundred and fifty years. Now dozens can say they have.

The beasts look ready to collapse when they touch ground and people climb off, but the moment they’re unburdened, they take off again for the place where the Wall used to be.

Arya sprint through the crowds. “HAS ANYONE SEEN THE KING?!”

A commander in Mallister armor beckons her. “The king is fine,” the man assures her, “But he’s back at the ruins of Castle Black, fighting off the wights.

Arya feels her throat close up for a moment. When she regains her ability to speak, she asks, “He’s fighting them without the dragons?!”

“He insisted they transport the wounded, My Lady.”

Arya cries out for Nina Waynwood, one of her superiors. “Tell Commander Val I’m heading to Castle Black.”

“With all due respect, Princess,” Nina says as she directs people, “No, you are not. Orders from the queen.”

“Fuck the queen!” She’s never been angrier with her sister.

“Regardless…” Nina looks over her shoulder and gestures somewhere. Next thing Arya knows, she’s encased in the arms of Vyra, a spearwife who boasted of having giant's blood.

“NO!” Arya shrieks, “HE NEEDS ME! HE’S MY BROTHER! WE FIGHT TOGETHER!”

“You can either scream, struggle, and waste time and effort,” Waynwood shouts to her, “Or you can accept this and be useful. We don’t have time for this! We all have brothers, fathers, uncles, sons. You’re not special.”

Arya stops struggling and falls limp. Vyra releases her, and Waynwood directs her to go help carry wounded to the armory.

“The armory?”

“Any space we have,” Waynwood confirms, “Now get.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Sansa:
She sits in the Lord of Winterfell’s chair, answering petitions before the court, when the world shakes.

Everyone knows what that means. Some scream, others fall over, many speak at once, a few people retch. Sansa rises. Every face in the room is white with fear. There are tears. Some are her own.

Mentally, she’s been preparing herself for this ever since Jon told her of the Others. She’s just glad so many people are around to hear her orders.

“I want every wagon loaded with food, blankets, and medical supplies! All are to set off for The Gift as soon as possible! All available spaces are to be cleared out and prepared for visitors!” She orders, “Every raven is to go out as well. No one is to have their own quarters now, everyone is to start sleeping at least four to a chamber! My personal maids, brother, and children are to be set up in the King’s chambers with me! All rations are immediately lowered to two meals per day! Have every available pyre lit, and all guard posts covered! Where is Prince Bran?!

He’s in the godswood, which is fortunate. It’s the first place she goes upon leaving the throne room. She finds him crouched at the roots of the Heart Tree with Meera Reed, kissing her passionately.

She stops short and doesn’t make a sound. She even turns her back. Now, more than ever, they should have this.

But she has to turn after a while and call her brother’s name. Bran pulls away, gasping, eyes locked on the girl’s briefly before tearing them away and looking to her.

“I… I saw it and I sent Jon a warning,” Bran tells her at once, “At least, I think I did. I saw him, in the godswood at Castle Black. I think he heard me.”

Sansa sinks to her knees. She’s run out here without a cloak, she realizes. She’s freezing.

“Can you see anything else?” She pleads, “Please, try, I just want to know if he and Arya are-”

But she’s cut off as Bran begins to rise. And… It makes no sense.

For a second, she thinks he’s regained his legs somehow. That he’s standing for the first time in seven years.

But he keeps rising, well above his height, and his legs hang, they dangle, limp as ever.

The Tully blue of her brother’s eyes are gone. They’re just white. But only for a moment, before going back to normal. He continues to hover, though.

“They’re alive.”

“You saw them?!” Meera Reed asks.

He shakes his head. “I don’t need to. If either of them died… I’d know.”

Sansa gapes at her brother. “Did you… Did you know when Rickon, Robb, and Mother died?” If so, why hadn’t he mentioned such an ability? He saw Father die in a dream, but he never mentioned the others.

“No,” Bran replies, “I saw Father’s execution, but I didn’t find out about the others until later. But… Now… I can’t explain it but… I just know, Sansa. I will feel it- if and when they’re lost. I can feel them now, alive. I can feel their hearts. I can feel yours. And the girls’. And Meera’s. And Uncle
Edmure’s. And Cousin Robin’s. And…” His brows furrow. “I can feel the Dragon Queen’s.”

Sansa gapes. “Daenerys? You can feel her?”

“There’s… There’s another, too. But I don’t know it. Another heart,” Bran says, bewildered. “I know all the other hearts. But this one…” He shakes his head.

For a while, there’s silence. It’s Meera who breaks it.

“Bran… You’re floating.”

“What?” Bran looks down, and a moment later he’s in the snow, crying out from pain and clutching his arm. Both women hurry to help him.

---

Bran:

He wakes in his sister’s bed to the sound of one of the babies crying. As lots of people do as well, for multiple people stir in the darkness. The chamber is crowded. He remembers everything.

Someone gets up and moves across the room, then carries… Alysanne. Alysanne is the one crying. They carry Alysanne to the bed. He feels a weight against the mattress shift. Bran’s eyes adjust and he sees the silhouette of his sister beside him, sitting up and taking the babe into her arms.

Two of Sansa’s maids, the twins, and one of the girls’ nursemaids are sleeping in here now. The flood of people from the Wall and the Gift will be here any day now, and no space can be wasted.

His dream comes back to him, and he sits up. A white-haired woman atop a black dragon, flying so fast it was a blur. “Sansa,” he whispers. His sister shushes him.

“Aly was just hungry,” she tells him, “Go back to sleep.”

“Sansa,” he says again, “This is important. I saw her. She got the message. She’s coming.”

For the last twenty-four hours, he’s been trying to contact Daenerys the way he did with Jon. There were moments when he thought maybe he’d gotten through, but he couldn’t be sure.

Now he is. She knows. Daenerys knows the Wall has fallen. She’s coming.
Daenerys and others arrive in the North

Chapter Notes

Thanks to @ohdede for her beta-work!

Sorry for the wait, guys, I've had a ton of personal stuff, and most of my focus creatively was on my friend Tommyginger's birthday fic, but I'm back!

Daenerys:

Winterfell looks more like a city than a castle, now. The keep and grounds practically bulge with people, many of them wounded, hungry, and shaking from cold, many of them soldiers. Tents are set up, and the smell of blood and waste permeates the Northern air. The sky is a dark grey.

Any and all who aren’t refugees from the Wall file about the grounds, transporting goods, distributing supplies, issuing directions. Even the children seem to scamper about with little tasks.

When she and Drogon touch ground a mile out from the furthest tent, her dragon actually passes out. She’s never subjected him to this sort of strain. They’d flown almost nonstop from King’s Landing, as fast as possible.

She left Missandei as Regent.

When she makes her way into the camp, the people stop and stare. Some hold out hands for alms. Regretfully, she has none to offer them. She left so suddenly, barely making time to gather a bag of food and don her furs.

The crowds part for her, though some of the children follow in her wake, starry-eyed, as she makes her way to the inner keep.

The queen of the castle meets her in the entrance hall, accompanied by a few lords and ladies, all of whom bow and curtey. But otherwise, it’s an informal greeting. Daenerys feels intense relief upon seeing the other queen, running to embrace her. She lets herself cry.

She still can’t quite believe it. The Wall has fallen. The oldest, largest structure in Westeros, perhaps the whole world, gone. Just like that.

They’d been winning, too. And now they were more vulnerable than ever.

Sansa pats Dany’s back tenderly. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“I heard a voice,” Daenerys whispers her face in confusion, “It sounded like your brother’s.”
“I’ll explain later,” Sansa whispers before pulling back, “Are you alright?”

“Aye,” Dany tells her, “Exhausted, cold, in need of a bath, and still rather stunned, but otherwise, I’m fine.”

Sansa nods. “Where’s Drogon?”

“About a mile out,” Dany replies, “Exhausted. Unconscious. If you could have someone lug some carcasses out to him, though--”

Sansa snaps her fingers and issues the order. One of her attendants runs off.

“I hope you don’t mind, Your Grace,” Sansa says, “But we’ve done everything we can to free up as much space as possible here, including everyone bunking up. So you’ll be staying in my chambers, with my brother, the girls, their chief nurse, and two of my maids. It’s a bit crowded.”

Dany shrugs. It actually sounds oddly appealing, in a fun, cozy sort of way. And she can’t wait to see the twins. She lays a hand on Sansa’s arm. The other queen has dark circles around her eyes and she’s lost weight. “How have you been, though? How are you managing?”

Sansa sighs, “As well as can be expected, I think. It’s not as if we didn’t make plans for something like this, after all. Still, there’s only so much planning one can do. It wasn’t just the Wall itself or even just the people, but everything there that sustained the people. The food, the clothes, the steel, the shelter, the animals, the supplies. And it’s not as if we can recover all that much. Now, practically all of our stores are being depleted. A week ago, we had enough to last four years of winter. Now, we’ll be lucky to make it a year. I’ve had to write to the Iron Bank.”

Daenerys stops short, a chill running down her spine. That is no small act. It’s a dangerous one. If the Iron Bank didn’t get paid back in time… Well, they always had their due, one way or another. Daenerys herself always avoided doing business with them for that exact reason.

“Sansa…”

“…I know,” she says mournfully, “But what else can I do? The War of the Five Kings called all the men off to war, and so the autumn harvests in the North were not half so plentiful as projected with so few people to tend the fields. Then there were the Ironborn raids. We’ve had to burn stores of food because they were exposed to various ailments. The Ironborn captured Deepwood Motte, one of our most crucial ports, and brought the Black Lung with them. It infected various shipments. On top of that, the bastards raided, stole, and burned so much of our stock. The chaos led to banditry, poaching, and more theft. Then we had to accommodate the Free Folk. The Riverlands were practically desolated, and we’ve had to rely heavily on the resources of the Vale, but there’s only so much you can transport at a time. Many glass gardens, where we grow food even during winter, were destroyed, leaving various settlements deprived. Then there are the pyres. Some have gone out of control and caused fires in various places. Stannis Baratheon’s mercenaries also raided many of the surrounding lands after they abandoned his cause. We’ve been trying to build as many sources for food as we can, but constructing anything during winter is difficult, to say the least. The North’s wealth is in food and warmth, not so much in raw coin. But so many of our resources have been taken. And we’ve always been rural, even our greatest population centers are not used to accommodating this volume of people. We were known as the most self-sustaining areas in Westeros, but now…”

Daenerys’s stomach sinks. “You don’t need to go to the Iron Bank! Whatever you need, just tell me, and I will--”
“---We can’t rely on you that much and still call ourselves an independent realm,” Sansa interrupts sharply, “And neither of us would make our vassals with such an act. There’s only so much we can ask for before an obligation arises---”

“---So you’re going to the Iron Bank instead? Sansa, we’re fighting this war together, on your lands! Not to mention, you’re owed reparations from countless ruling bodies in the South anyways!”

“That’s debatable. And besides, we can’t become too dependent on you.”

“We’re the ones depending on you to keep the White Walkers from our doors!”

“With your men.”

“Who you all are caring for now. Why shouldn’t we contribute?”

Sansa hangs her head. “Daenerys, it isn’t just about us. It’s about you, and what your vassals will think. You think they’ll appreciate a demand that they send even more to us after everything? There will be outcry.”

Dany shakes her head. “Let me handle that. This isn’t just your war to fight. Also… There’s the Ironborn themselves. They’re responsible for much of this….”

“…They’re independent.”

“Aye, and my ally.”

“In your last war. Now you both have your crowns, and that contract is settled.”

“There are still some standing agreements.”

Sansa shakes her head. “Even if you got them to agree, how much help could they be? Their entire kingdom amounts to a collection of grubby rocks. There’s a reason they took to raiding.”

“They have ships. At the very least, they can help with transport,” Dany reminds her as they climb the stairs.

“Yes, and I’m sure inviting a fleet of Ironborn ships to touch down on our shores again shouldn’t cause any trouble at all.”

“You took in the Free Folk,” Dany reminds her, “You can stomach the Ironborn.”

“Yes, and all it took was Jon being stabbed to death to overcome that particular hurdle.”

“You’re not inviting them to live here, just using their ships during desperate times.”

They make it to the main floor, and Sansa closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

“Fine, but I want Theon Greyjoy to come and negotiate with me directly.”

This surprises the Dragon Queen. “Really? After what he did?”

“He saved my life. And I know him.”

“As you wish.”

They enter the royal chambers, and Dany’s mood immediately brightens when she spots Bran Stark
sitting between two cradles, holding one of the twins. She rushes over to them, squealing, and swoops up Alysanne.

“My darlings! Oh!” She says, clutching the swaddled babe tightly. A little tuft of auburn hair sticks out from under the babe’s bonnet. The baby gazes up at her with wide, blue eyes and sticks out her little pink tongue.

It calms her immensely to see them again, both so healthy and beautiful. It gives her hope.

She looks to Bran, “It is good to see you,” she tells him.

“Likewise, I’m glad you got my message.”

Dany freezes. “… That really was your voice?”

The Stark prince nods, “My abilities have developed a bit with the latest cataclysm.”

Dany looks back and forth between Sansa and her brother. She’d been informed that the young man had premonitions and prophetic dreams. But this…

“That’s incredible,” Daenerys remarks, “I was sitting atop the Iron Throne, hearing petitions when all of a sudden… Your voice just echoed through the hall. And it was like I was the only one who heard it.”

“I’m not entirely sure how I did it,” Bran confesses, “I don’t have full control yet. But I’m making progress. I can float a bit, too.”

“Float?”

Sansa hurries over and takes Serena from her brother. The young man stretches his neck, closes his eyes, and furrows his brow. A few seconds later, he begins to levitate out of his wheelchair, higher and higher. Daenerys gazes in amazement.

Bran opens his eyes, then slowly drops back into his chair. “There’s something else, too,” he says, “I can feel people. I can feel their hearts beat. I know if they’re alive or not.”

Daenerys finds herself a seat, trying to process this. “Anyone?”

“Not, only a few people close to me,” the prince answers, “I can feel Jon, Arya, Sansa, the twins, my friend Meera, and you.”

There are a few moments of silence. Dany feels like something has gotten caught in her throat. “…Me?”

He nods. “I suppose it’s not too surprising, I mean, you are…”

Dany’s eyes well up. “…Family.”

She bursts into tears, whether from happiness, fear, or exhaustion, she can’t even be sure. But her self-control is gone. She’s family. Even to Bran Stark, she’s family.

The other queen comforts her, takes Alysanne, and eventually shows Dany to bed. She even tucks Dany under the furs.

“Get some rest,” The Lady of Winterfell whispers, “You’re going to need it.”
That proves painfully true. Daenerys has no time to bask in the sentimentality of being with her family. She only has time to write some letters and sign some documents before she and Drogon must take off again for The Gift.

The journey isn’t easy, but the arrival is even more heartbreaking. The grounds that used to be The Wall, that used to be Castle Black, are truly a snowy wasteland. But a wasteland where the snow is stained with blood and dirt. Small peaks and pillars of the old structures peak out, like a hundred drowning souls. The horizon remains white, but while the Wall was a backdrop of glittering white, the sky that replaces it seems to swallow the world.

Men wander about like zombies, obediently performing tasks, but with their wide, baffled, rapidly-blinking eyes fixed on the ground. Tents are erected on every piece of solid ground. All building is focused on turning the sad, flaccid-looking hills of ice that were once the Wall into barricades. Pyres are everywhere.

The tale of the struggle is written on her nephew’s face. He’s no zombie, but Dany can tell that part of him is… if not broken, then altered. The Dragon Queen can hardly blame him. Even in the East she was told tales of the eternal, unbreakable Wall in the north of Westeros. The impenetrable border. One of the things that defined the whole continent. But Jon was raised a relatively short distance from it, in the family that supported it the most. He’d aspired to be one of the Night’s Watch. He spent many formative years here. This was his home. This was a part of him. It was the thing he planned his life around. It’s where he became a man. It’s where he killed his first wight, swore his first vows, said farewell to his first love, reunited with his wife, where he died and was brought back to life.

And it’s gone. It’s fallen.

“Wights are still crawling out from beneath the snow,” he tells her once greetings are exchanged and he’s escorted her to his tent. He has her sit by a makeshift map table and pours her some mulled wine. The smell of burning flesh is present even as she lifts the cup of spiced drink to her lips. “It’s harder on the men now. Many of them thus far have killed the wights of lost Free Folk. Now they have to slay the corpses of their friends. We still don’t have a solid estimate of how many we lost. We think some of the dead headed north to join their king. Some of the men are so shaken, they can’t remember who they are. We had to hurry whatever wounded we could save off to the castles immediately. The men we couldn’t save, we had to slit their throats and burn. We’ve also been tunneling like mad, trying to get anything we can salvage beneath the snow, but it’s slow going. Wights pop up. Ice caves in. And the cold itself is nigh unbearable. We have to take flood precautions before we try to melt anything--- just as dangerous. All while fending off enemy attacks.”

Dany closes her eyes and shudders. “How many survivors that we know of, at least?”

“Around twenty-seven thousand.”

Dany takes a deep breath. That’s less than half the numbers they had before. Still, it’s far more than she expected. She says as much, hoping to comfort her nephew.

“We had some measures and plans in case something like this happened. The Horn of Winter is a popular legend among the Free Folk. I made sure there were contingencies in place even for that, though I didn’t think it would really happen that way.” He looks at his lap. “I tried to prepare everyone for everything. I couldn’t even prepare myself for this.”

“Who could possibly prepare for this?”
“No one person,” Jon muses grimly, “But many might have. We’re in a foul state, all of us, and we put ourselves here. The arrogance. The fixation they had on a realm they didn’t even care to protect!”

He bangs his fist against the table furiously, startling her. Then he rises and paces. “Forgive me,” he says, “But it’s moments like these when I get angriest. How are we supposed to hold them off now, Daenerys? I ask you.”

She lowers her head. “I’m not sure you can. Not from here, anymore. We need a real base, Jon, not a wight infested ruin. We gain nothing from letting them destroy what’s left of our army. I think we need to retreat. Surrender the area and regroup further south.”

It pains her immensely and cripples her pride to admit this, but everything she’s heard on the way here have indicated to her that this is the right course. And what she’s seen has only convinced her of it. There is little to nothing here, now. Better to get the men they have left further south, where the medicines were better. Pick another base of operations.

“I swore to guard the Wall for my entire life,” he murmurs, turned away from her.

“That was a different life,” she reminds him, “Your Watch ended years ago. You’re not a Brother in Black, you’re a king, a prince. The Wall is gone. The world is still here.”

Jon bows his head. “I know. I… I have been considering it. But I can’t think of any central base that’s equipped to handle all of us, though. The Gift is too unsettled, all of it. What holdfasts and castles we have don’t possess the capacity for it. Beyond that… our castles might be able to hold them, but only in pieces. Our forces will have to spread. Command shall have to be delegated and conducted over long distance. And we only have two dragon riders. I fear the damage such a split might do.”

He turns and looks at his makeshift table. It’s a frail thing: a sawed-off drinking table with amateurishly illustrated parchment over the surface and poorly-carved pieces. Nearly all of the proper equipment is buried under tons of ice.

“We can send civilians in the Gift South,” Dany suggests.

“With what vessels?”

Dany hesitates. Chances are, Jon is going to like this even less than Sansa. “...The Ironborn Fleet.”

Jon curses and turns away again. “You must be mad. You think Northmen are going to let Ironborn ships dock at their ports?”

“If they’re desperate enough and their queen commands them to, yes.”

Jon looks over his shoulder quizzically. Daenerys shrugs.

“I had to stop over at Winterfell, so of course we talked it over. I convinced her it’s doable. Last time I checked, that’s always been enough for you.”

“Try it if you must,” Jon tells her, “But I insist the two of you come up with some sort of contingency. Theon saved Sansa’s life. But that’s not a common story among our people. There’s been no redemption for the Ironborn among the North.”

She nods. “Of course.”
“And be prepared for a less than warm welcome to the new arrivals if you get them South. Free Folk are unlikely to make friends among the Southerners. That will be your burden.”

Daenerys sighs. “Yes, Jon, I realize that. You needn’t be so condescending.”

“Forgive me,” he says in a rigid tone, “If my manners are found wanting at the moment.”

“You’re forgiven,” she responds, without a trace of irony. “Just make sure you’ve resolved that before you see your wife again. She won’t be as forgiving.”

She means this as a joke, but Jon doesn’t find this funny. “You must be mad if you think I’m going anywhere near her until the Night’s King is dead.”

Her eyes expand. This is clearly a man who wants to go home, desperately.

“But, obviously you’re going back to W-”

“-Daenerys, the Enemy sounded the Horn of Winter when I was there, not you. The Night’s King used his ability with the wind on me, not you. You’re the one with greater control of the dragons, but it was me he knocked down. He is targeting me. The last thing I am going to do is lead him to my family.”

He’s not wrong about being the target. However…

Dany waits for a moment to point out the tragically, painfully obvious. “He’ll attack your family anyways. They’ll be in more danger if you’re elsewhere.”

Jon’s hands curl into fists. “Not if-”

“No, he will. He won’t want to have it out with you when you’re surrounded by your men. He’ll want to provoke you into flying out, alone, in a blind rage. Not thinking. No, you’re going home, and will be entrenched there with a properly planned defense and strategy for when he arrives.”

“He’ll head straight for us! For my children!”

“Yes,” Daenerys answers, “Which he’d probably do anyways. But this way, we can be sure. And, well…”

“...What?”

“No one said your children have to be there. People just need to believe they are.”

“Impossible. Sansa will not leave Winterfell.”

“I disagree.”

Jon sits again, folds his hands atop the table, and looks her dead in the eyes. “Daenerys, there are many subjects on which I will gladly defer to your expertise, but don’t pretend to know my wife better than I do.”

“She’s been away from Winterfell before,” Daenerys points out, “I was there.”

“That was before the Others were on our doorstep. You’ll recall the urgency with which she returned home when word came.”

“I think she’d leave if it was for the good of the North. For her children and people.”
“She’d see departing her ancestral home at our darkest hour as disastrous, not just morally, but politically,” Jon replies, “You have to understand, Daenerys… She’s not like us. We’re wanderers. You’re a Khaleesi, and I’m a Ranger. You have the dragons, I have Ghost. We both found out who we are out in the wilderness. Sansa left her home, had her wolf slain, and discovered everything she took for granted. Even before she was queen, she was Lady of Winterfell. She’s been Lady of Winterfell since Robb died. You grew up with a name, and that for so long was all you had. Well, she had a name that was inextricably tied to a place. Winterfell is to her what the Targaryen name is to you. That place is her soul. Her response to being raped there was to turn around at the first opportunity and take it back from her rapist. That happened because she believed she had to go back there, whatever the cost. And do you honestly think it’s a coincidence that she fell in love with a man who grew up with her? And even with the personal issues aside…”

He pauses to drink a little. “She will never be able to live down fleeing Winterfell at this point. She will not see herself as fit to rule. In her mind, she will have lost the confidence and faith of her people permanently, and as far as she’s concerned, she’ll deserve it. That castle is her post, and she will not abandon it. And if you make her, Daenerys, I can assure you that you will regret it.”

She flinches, defensive. And a little guilty. She’d thought of that. “Why would I regret something that would save her life?”

“Like I said, if she were even seen as leaving her home amidst danger, she’d consider herself unfit to rule and robbed of her subjects’ confidence. That matters to her. What they think of her matters to her. She doesn’t see herself as much of a queen without the love and respect of her people. And if she even thinks she’s lost that in such a way, it will inhibit her ability to rule. You and I both need the Queen in the North, Nauntie, and we need her at her best. Even if we win the war, things will not go well if my wife doesn’t feel capable of ruling. So don’t even think of trying to extract her. Not now.”

Daenerys closes her eyes. “I suppose the fact that she is the designated regent of the Iron Throne in the case of us both dying won’t sway her?”

“The North comes first, Daenerys.”

Daenerys grits her teeth and groans. “Are all Starks this stubborn?”

“Depends on the matter at hand,” Jon replies with a shrug, “But we aren’t called the Kings and Queens of Winter for nothing. And besides, I hardly think you’re one to talk.”

“I’m sorry,” Dany snaps, “Which one of us cut their empire in half again?”

“Yes, but one does not become the Mother of Dragons without an iron will.”

She had missed his attempt at playfulness, and now she blushes at her display of temper. “I’m sorry, I’ve had a long journey.”

“Yes, so I gathered. I’m afraid we didn’t have time to make up a tent for you yet, but you’re free to use my cot while we’re waiting.”

Her exhaustion takes hold, but not before a spark of mad mischief jolts through her as she stumbles towards the sad-looking cot in the back. “You know, Sansa had me sleep in her quarters too. Out of the two of us, I was the last to share your wife’s bed.”

She thinks it’s funny. But the look Jon gives her in response is just odd.

Finally, he speaks. “Perhaps,” he tells her as he makes for the exit, “But it’s not who shared it last, but who shared it best. And no offense, I’m certain I have you beat there.”
Dany laughs as she ducks under the furs.

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Bran:

If the gods chose him to be their vassal, then why didn’t they listen to his prayers?

When Bran saw visions of a worn, weary Theon Greyjoy in Winterfell’s Halls, he’d hoped they were merely images of him when he was the Boltons’ prisoner. Sansa told him about the things Ramsay did to him, but she’d also mentioned that, when the occasion called for it, the Boltons would dress “Reek” up in his old House garb and have him perform tasks. Parlaying with occupying Ironborn troops, giving his guardian’s daughter away at her wedding… Things that required a nobleman with his connections. Bran glimpsed images of the past, present, and future, so he convinced himself that the flashes of Theon were past ones.

He never imagined Sansa would actually let him set foot back here.

It’s not that he isn’t sympathetic. He knows Theon saved her. He understands that. As far as Bran is concerned, that could be enough to spare him his life.

Welcoming him back to Winterfell is another matter.

Bran knew those boys Theon killed and passed off as him and Rickon. He saw him hack away at Ser Rodrick’s neck. He knows what Osha had to do to get them out. He watched Maester Luwin die.

Rickon would still be alive if they weren’t forced from their home. Mother and Robb might still be alive. The Boltons may never have taken power.

And he knows about the candle. About how Theon betrayed Sansa before he saved her. Sansa let it slip that night they got drunk. How much suffering might have his sister been spared if Theon merely lit a candle?

One old woman wouldn’t have been flayed alive, at the very least.

Seven Hells, if Theon lit that candle, Sansa might have gotten out and gotten to Jon before he was slain by his men. They might have recruited the Tully forces before the Lannisters showed up to help the Frey’s with their siege. They might have recruited the Vale Army and exposed Littlefinger before he returned to the Gates of the Moon. They might have found Rickon…

All for a candle.

Bran will never forget, he will never forgive.

He remembers when Theon was occupying Winterfell, when Bran challenged him over his betrayal. Theon ranted and raved about being their ‘hostage’.

But it wasn’t their fault he was a hostage. It was King Robert who ordered he be taken. It was his father who started that stupid rebellion, who gave him up. The Starks just took care of him. They treated him as family. And this is how he repaid them.

He saved Sansa, eventually. That grants him the right to live- elsewhere. That doesn’t give him the right to be received here again.
Bran can still hear the sound of Theon hacking away at Ser Rodrick’s neck, the thunking, the sickening crunch of broken bone, of Rickon’s wails. Of his own cries.

Bran knows they need ships. He understands that. But that doesn’t mean Theon Greyjoy gets to set foot here again.

It shouldn’t mean that.

Sansa insists, and Bran hasn’t been so angry with her since she gave Arya permission to leave. Sending Arya away and welcoming Theon in. It turns his stomach.

“Why don’t you welcome what’s left of the Lannisters and Freys while you’re at it?!” He yelled at her.

“They don’t have the ships we need,” she answered simply, continuing to sew as if nothing was amiss.

“Everyone will hate you for it!” He’s reminded her of this multiple times. No one is happy about this.

“No, they won’t. Especially not after their bellies are full of blood oranges shipped in from Dorne and their husbands and fathers are home.”

“Why Theon?!”

She sighed. “Honestly? ...He’s the only Ironborn I can be sure that won’t rape anyone.”

Maybe that’s true, but it isn’t necessarily true of his retinue. Bran reminds her of that.

“That’s why he’s only allowed to bring three people. I assure you, they shall be under heavy surveillance.”

Bran still isn’t satisfied, and he’ll never be. He feels betrayed.

He barely speaks to his sister for weeks.

Meera, at least, is a comfort. They join the hunting parties almost daily, and often keep riding long after the others are returning to the castle with their game. They never hesitate to kiss when no one is around to watch.

They both know it’s not going to last. She is her father’s last surviving child. She will be Lady of Greywater Watch. She has to marry some well-connected younger son and patrol The Neck. Bran can’t give her heirs for House Reed. And he belongs here. He can’t even be sure that Jon is going to survive. And if not, the twins need a father. And if so, Jon, Sansa, and Arya need a brother.

But they have right now. And gods, does he need her right now. The world seems to be caving in. Everything is crowded and cautious and tense. Meera, though…

It’s not just that she’s the only one in the world who knows what happened Beyond the Wall. That might be enough.

But she just makes him happy.

Hell, the relief alone over the fact that she doesn’t see him as another little brother to fill Jojen’s place might be enough. But there’s just something about her that makes him feel safe and hopeful.

And she doesn’t want anything from him.
Even his siblings want his visions. They love him, and would love him regardless. He understands, he does. They wouldn’t be good leaders if they weren’t interested. But it’s still there.

Meera’s only concerned about his visions in so far as worrying about potential nosebleeds. She doesn’t want to know the future.

“It robs life of some of its wonder, you know?”

She grew up with a greenseer. She understands.

Gods, how much she understands.

Bran currently sleeps in the same bed as his sister, in quarters with his nieces and several servants. But he can still feel alone even as he feels crowded.


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Theon:

He feels every hateful eye on him.

There are plenty on Pyke that still hold him in disdain, but not for the right reasons. It doesn’t bother him so much.

These people loathe him for all of the right reasons.

It’s Bran, sitting beside his sister at the High Table, who frightens him the most. The boy - *The frightened boy. The boy whose life I tore apart* - is now a handsome young man who sits surprisingly tall for a cripple. He’s no longer being carried around by Hodor like a sack of potatoes. But even as a child, Bran managed to hold himself with a certain dignity when the occasion called for it. When Theon sacked his home, Bran looked him dead in the eye and didn’t so much as blink. That crippled lad scared Theon more than all of Winterfell’s men combined.

At the time, he had no idea why that was. But now he does. It’s because he saw the reflection of his worst self, all the love he’d lost, in the eyes of that lad that day. Ser Rodrick cried that Theon was lost, but Bran didn’t need to say a word to tell him that.

Bran’s hair is shortened into a more manly cut, there are a few bumps on the underside of his neck that indicate that he requires a shave now. He no longer dons a steel direwolf collar, he’s dressed instead in ivory wool with red leaves embroidered down the front of his doublet. The work is excellent, and the dandy inside Theon can’t help but admire it.

One small mercy, at least, is that he doesn’t look like Robb. Theon was so afraid that he’d return here to find another Robb waiting for him.

He looks like his mother. In many ways, he actually looks more like his mother than his sister does. Catelyn Stark never liked Theon. She was right.

Their eyes meet, and Theon almost drops to his knees and pleads for forgiveness right then and there.

One thing that all of Catelyn Tully’s children have inherited is that stare. That terrifying, fierce look, as wild as any direwolf. The one that seemed to see everything, right down to your bones.

It’s a struggle to tear his eyes away from Bran. He knows he should, for the sake of his own tenuous
sanity. But the Reek within him wants to surrender to the self-loathing. And in some ways, it can be so much easier to surrender one’s self worth. There’s less of an obligation that way.

But no, he can do this, and he must do this. So many lives, perhaps even every life, shall depend on his success here.

He’s not completely redeemed himself. He may never do so. But he has to try.

That involves keeping his chin up to some degree. So he tears his eyes away to the one possible friendly face in the hall.

Sansa’s face is a mask: solemn, passive, formal. Just once, Theon would like to see her as an adult not beset by exhaustion and pain. While every inch of her is stunning, the look in her eyes made her look years older.

If I’d been the man Ned Stark raised me to be, I might get to see her smile.

She’s certainly regal, if anything. The picture of impenetrable poise.

She doesn’t hate him. But Theon could forgive her if she still did. He’s seen her scars. Ramsay used to make him act as her nurse when he was done with her. Even when he didn’t make Theon watch the act itself, he wanted him to bear witness in some way.

Theon glances at his guards, impatiently indicating to them that they must bow. They can mock ‘Fancy greenlander airs’ all they like when on deck, but they will show respect within Winterfell’s walls.

Bonnifer, his lead guard and the most irreverent of his men, decides to curtsey theatrically instead, his derision written clearly on his face. Theon cringes as the sailor declares, “Your Maaaajesties, allow me to present Theon of House Greyjoy, Prince of Pyke and the Iron Islands!”

“Oh, so not Winterfell anymore, then?” Bran snaps. Theon flinches.

“Forgive my man, his manners are inversely proportional to his girth.”

Bonnifer can lift entire banquet tables with men on top of them without breaking a sweat. The size of his biceps indicate that strongly.

“Allow me to provide your man with an etiquette lesson,” the queen says, “While it’s the custom to address the God-Emperors of the East as ‘Majesty’, in Westeros we are content with ‘Your Grace.’ We don’t see ourselves as majestic.”

“Not even your—GAH!” The guard is wounded by a surprise elbow to the stomach, courtesy of his prince. Bonnifer glares at Theon. Theon glares back.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he says through the clenched remains of his teeth. She nods.

He has to bunk with them. Everyone must bunk with everyone. When another of his guards complain about the ‘disrespect’ of not giving a Prince of the Ironborn his own quarters (as if any of them have any respect for him), the page that escorts him snidely replies that the entire royal family currently share quarters with some of their attendants. “What’s good enough for House Stark is more than good enough for any of you. Last time I saw your prince, he was sleeping in the kennels.”

Theon quickly assures the man that the accommodations are more than satisfactory. Then he turns on his men.
“You can either behave now, or answer to my sister later,” he sneers, “I will not hesitate to rake you over the coals. You will show these people respect and kindness, understand?”

They begrudgingly agree. Theon has to get away from them, though. They’re maddening to be around. Typical, inbred, ignorant axe-heads. Why had he ever craved their respect?

What was so wrong with kindness, respect, decorum, and beauty, anyways?

The threat of Yara, at least, is enough to silence them. The men are cowards.

Yara wants this to succeed. In public, she cannot show fear, but that doesn’t mean this threat doesn’t concern her. Behind closed doors, she paces, wrings her hands.

To her subjects, she declares that the Ironborn cannot be seen as unwilling to face a threat that the “soft greenlanders” are fighting. It makes them look weak and cowardly. This is a great war, and the Ironborn must be part of it. That’s enough for the hard-heads.

The best way to provoke an Ironborn was to question their metal.
Sansa does nothing and everything, Jon and Arya come home, and Dany wonders if she'll ever find one.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the weight guys, IRL has been crazy lately! Thanks to fedonciadale for her beta-work!

Sansa:

With a low mood she enters the small council chamber she arranged for negotiations with the Ironborn. Or, really, Theon. As he has for weeks now, Bran pulled himself out of bed into his chair, dressed himself, and rolled out of the bedchamber without a word to her. He only speaks to her when public decorum calls for it, about matters of state, and about the twins. He’s a stranger.

This could be resolved. They could talk. She knows Bran understands, logically, why Theon is here. Why she’s made this decision. Her little brother is a mature, intelligent young man. But he hasn’t gotten to say his full piece. He hasn’t been able to impress upon her all the contributing details of his point of view. He still thinks she’s forgiven Theon, and he’s right. And if he were able to articulate every reason that’s such a betrayal to him, they’d both be able to work through this.

The problem is, there’s no time. In times like this, she must be a queen first, and a sister second. For everyone’s sake.

That makes it no less frustrating.

She’s almost ready to collapse. After so many months of being figuratively and literally (two babes at the breast) drained, she’s not sure how much more she can take. Her world is uncertainty, responsibility, cold, loneliness, and the miserable faces of those who need her.

And she can’t give them all they need. Not physically, mentally, emotionally.

The girls are starting to recognize people. When they’re on their stomachs, they can lift their heads and chests and focus on things. They babble, hold things, they mimic the faces of those they look at. They’re bigger every day. Alysanne’s pinkish fuzz is truly red now. And both girls certainly know her. When she enters the nursery; happy or crying, the moment either girl spots her, they reach out for her.

Sansa barely has time to eat, and nearly no time to sleep. And even with the few hours she has each night, her worries keep her up. The sleep she does get is restless, and she dreams of Jon and Arya suffering and dying in the snow.
Thus, she’s had to take Bran’s advice and employ a wet nurse. As the twins grow bigger, so do their appetites, and with all her work, nursing is just too much for her, especially with her food rationed. She just can’t support feeding two children alone.

It haunts her, to have failed like this as a mother. Gods, that is among the hardest things, up there with worrying about Jon and Arya. Even the poor peasant mothers move about with their children strapped to their backs and chests constantly. They’re almost never parted from their babes. Sansa has the slings that the Prince and Princess of Walano gave her, but… Her work involves her patrolling the grounds outside, riding out, answering petitions, conferring with ministers at meetings. She can’t bring them. And even if she could… She’s already exhausted enough without dragging two growing babes around constantly.

Because she’s too weak. So she must leave them in the nursery most of the day, failing as a mother. Missing precious moments as they grow all too quickly. She feels like a terrible mother. And gods, how she misses them, even when she’s only been away for a few hours.

She’s had no time to write to Jon regularly, either, beyond practical reports.

So she fails as a sister, a mother, and a wife. She cannot even handle nursing her own children.

And the White Walkers are heading right for her door. So she can’t fail as a queen.

She composes herself and enters the meeting chamber, relieved to find that Theon’s attendants are absent. He rises from his seat at the mahogany table in the middle of the room at once when she enters, and he bows deeply. Their eyes meet as he lowers his head, and she swallows.

Bran is right, in a way. There is so much that he’s done, that he’s responsible for, which can’t simply be erased. He saved her, and for that, he has her personal forgiveness for… some things.

Her full forgiveness isn’t achieved now, though, as much as she’d like to give it. Because she’s seen more and more of the consequences of his betrayal. Indeed, she’s the one cleaning up most of them.

Theon isn’t solely responsible, he had no idea what his actions would lead to. He’s repentant, and he’s suffered so much. But… So have so many others, as a direct result of him sacking Winterfell.

He still killed two innocent farm boys. He still more or less opened the doors to the Boltons, weakened Robb, killed multiple people, including Ser Rodrick.

Even now, they’d be in much better shape to handle everything if Winterfell hadn’t burned. They were still rectifying the damage, which meant fewer safe accommodations for the people who need it. The fire destroyed plenty of stores: precious food, clothing, lumber, herbs, and other supplies that they need more than ever. The Boltons gained their foothold in Winterfell and took over in no small part to Robb losing Winterfell. Which led to more people dying horribly under the Boltons’ rule. Ramsay was a poor lord, good for little more than producing screams and corpses. He’d done nothing to ensure the last autumn harvests, maintain roads, order, or infrastructure. Which only caused more suffering and death.

She never would have been married to Tyrion if Theon hadn’t pretended to kill her brothers, leaving her as Key to the North. The Red Wedding might never have happened if they’d not lost Winterfell. Rickon never would have ended up in Ramsay’s clutches.

There would be far fewer people going without food or shelter, far fewer soldiers with untreated wounds and insufficient armor. Far fewer innocents subjected to the horrors of the flaying knife.

She walks through the consequences of the North’s lack of preparation for this. Granted, no one
could be wholly prepared, and Theon’s actions were only one part of a tapestry of bad luck.

But they would all be better off if he hadn’t done what he did. And she is faced with the worst of it every day.

Despite what her brother thinks, she also hasn’t entirely forgiven Theon for his betrayal with the candle. She thought she had, until that night she and Bran got drunk.

As it turns out, too many spirits bring out melancholy and tears. And feelings she thought she’d buried. She still sees that poor old woman who tried to help her, hoisted up and flayed. A woman who just wanted to help her.

It’s not so easy to hold onto forgiveness when you’re faced with the struggles and consequences dealt to so many people each day. When one’s own brother bore witness to the worst acts of a person.

When one’s last remaining brother is so angry with you for forgiving this person.

But… She still can’t forget. At one point, he was the only person she had left. And he’d protected her.

His hair is still grey. It probably will be for the rest of his life. But at least he’s gained weight.

She can’t even tell if she wants to embrace him or not.

“Good morning, Prince Theon,” she says formally, folding her hands and moving towards her seat. He hurries to pull her chair out for her.

“Good morning to you as well, Your Grace, thank you for meeting with me,” he says, mimicking her tone and quickly retaking his seat, “Allow me to offer my congratulations on your marriage, the alliance, and the birth of your twins. I hear they’re beautiful, healthy children. And I must say that motherhood seems to agree with you. You look well.”

“In comparison to the last time you saw me, I’m sure I do. But given the circumstances…” she shrugs, “Thank you for your congratulations, though.”

She takes a deep breath. “So, why don’t you tell me why the Ironborn has ignored this conflict up until now?”

Theon flinches and leans back. “There is little excuse except that… my sister’s position was… is… tenuous when she first took the Salt Throne. It took a while to gather the necessary support.”

“There was not the only one with a difficult hold on her power, Prince Theon. But the Mother of Dragons and I still answered the call. So forgive me if I find that excuse insufficient.”

Theon closes his eyes. “The lords considered the threat to be a problem for the mainlands, not the Ironborn, and they were-”

“-Happy to let us die?”

“I was going to say ‘resistant’, until things reached a certain point. Especially when we lost so many ships since we overthrew Euron.” He swallows. “But yes.”

“So how am I to trust them now? Your own guards were seconds away from publicly remarking on the size of my breasts. Why should I trust your people to sail our armies and supplies between crucial
combat points?”

“Because their courage and mettle has been doubted. And they’re afraid. Ironborn are willing to look out for their self-interests, even if it means playing nice with some greenlanders. But my sister always intended to make it and join the conflict as soon as she was able.”

Sansa frowns. “It took her quite a while to acquire the ability. Too long for my confidence. And I assume there are conditions for the aid?”

“As you may know, one of the caveats of our agreement with Daenerys was that we cease raiding. It’s not been an easy policy to implement. Not just politically, but economically. So… my sister asks that Northern ports allow Ironborn trade.”

Sansa shakes her head and cups her brow. “You think after everything you people did, the North will accept that? They barely let me bring you here to negotiate! Even if I did issue an order, do you honestly believe that just because they’ll let you dock that any Northman will be willing to actually do business with any of your traders?”

Theon frowns. “No, I don’t. But perhaps that’s to your advantage. You could order they let the ships in, and do nothing to make them actually trade.”

“Yes, I’m sure that the lords of our various ports will be thrilled to waste port space on ships that won’t bring in any business. Especially following a near disastrous war and winter!”

The prince blushes. “That’s… a good point.” He sighs. “What about an interim period, then? You agree to let Ironborn ships in some years following the end of the war? Say, wait five or so years until things calm down?”

She actually cackles. “Five years? Are you mad? Fifty would be generous!”

“Sansa…”

She glares, not liking the familiar tone he takes, as if he were trying to get her to share her lemon cakes. She isn’t ‘Sansa’ right now. She’s Sansa of the House Stark, First of Her Name, Queen of the Three Realms of Winter. “It wasn’t just you sacking castles and burning innocent children, you know. Your countrymen raided and terrorized our western shores, burning the homes and livelihoods of countless people, abducting and killing our men, abducting, murdering, and raping our women, slaughtering our children or making them into orphans. The ones that didn’t bleed were left to freeze and starve after you destroyed their homes, stole their goods, burned their livelihoods whether it be fields of crops, fishing boats, or marketplaces. Or brought in awful diseases to infect towns and holdfasts. Do you know how many people are dead and will die because of your country’s cruelty? How many more people might be alive if we still had all the things the Ironborn destroyed? It’s a number that can only be estimated at the broadest range. And that’s just the last few years! A brutal reminder that centuries of history repeats itself. And you want me to command my vassals to welcome you to their shores?”

Theon looks pained and desperate. “The Dragon Queen made us promise to-”

“-I don’t care what the Dragon Queen said and neither do my people,” Sansa snaps, “They don’t want the Dragon Queen’s protection, and they don’t expect it. They don’t trust it. We are an independent realm. Jon and I are the rulers here, not Daenerys. Something I imagine some of your men probably realize, and will be happy to use as a loophole on the raiding moratorium.”

Theon winces. “My sister is opposed to the Old Way as well, Sansa. She’s neither my father, nor my
“Let her prove that by doing something for the good of everyone without any caveats. If the Ironborn ever want to enjoy forgiveness and trade with us, they can earn it. They’ve exhausted their supply of good faith. I am not my brother, Theon, I will not make that mistake. The Ironborn only care for the Ironborn, even to the point of self-sabotage. And I assure you that if they don’t contribute to defeating this enemy now, that’s exactly what they’re doing. The White Walkers brought down The Wall, I’m sure they can build boats as well. And once we’re gone, they’ll come for you and there will be no one to protect you.”

The Prince of the Iron Islands swallows heavily and leans back. A small ghost of a smile plays at his thin lips. “Motherhood has changed you, My Lady.”

“Queenship has changed me, Prince Theon,” Sansa replies, “The moment the crown was placed on my head, things changed. I am not just fighting for my survival now, I am fighting for everyone’s. You can either fight with me, or die screaming. Write to your sister tonight and make sure she understands that.”

Sansa rises, but before she sweeps out, she glances at him gently. “It’s good to see you’re alive and well, Theon. Just because I can’t forget what your people did to us, doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten what you did for me. But I am not that shivering girl wading through the frozen river with you anymore.”

“You’re not the only one with responsibilities, though.”

“No, I recognize that. Your people will likely suffer for being closed off from our port after the war. But despite what your Family Words claim, you do, in fact, sow. Now you shall reap.” Sansa takes a deep, shuddering breath, “you’re better off with no arrangement, trust me. If I were try to decree your admission, you can be certain our vassals will plant their feet in the dirt and reject you more stubbornly. Instead, let your actions during the war speak for themselves, prove your character to those you wish to dock with. Then, perhaps, some Ironborn may find a few friendly ports in the North. But I am not the right person to go to for this. Any sort of cooperation between our countries can and will not be achieved by mandate. Show us what your own are willing to offer, and see what you reap from that. I am sorry to put you in this position, but my duty is to my country.”

Theon nods. And he does, in fact, smile, albeit somewhat sadly. And he rises, circling around the table and offering her his arm. “I figured it would be more or less hopeless. And I did warn my sister. But she wanted me to at least try. I think she believed I could manipulate you.”

Sansa sighs as she takes Theon’s arm. “Everyone seems to think so. I may have to let go of you before anyone sees. But you can lead me to the door, at least.”

He bows his head. “I agree, by the way. The best you can do for us is nothing. Even if they obeyed the order to let us in, we’re likely to meet more resistance and harassment if they’re forced into it. No business would be accomplished. Though I am surprised to hear that they wouldn’t honor a mandate from you. From all we’ve heard, you’re very popular.” He leans in mischievously, “Just between us, my sister is quite jealous. She’s had a difficult time getting our vassals to accept her. Euron promised them all of Westeros, and some believe that if not for Yara, they’d have it.”

Sansa rolls her eyes. “I do not mistake my current popularity for ultimate security. I like to think I am well on my way to gaining the sort of influence where I could issue a mandate that controversial and seeing it be effective. But I’ve been queen for only sixteen months. I am a woman who was originally passed over for a man, and I have birthed daughters, not sons.”

“Daughters who will inherit immense empires,” Theon replies, “surely, the Iron Throne is-”
“The North isn’t interested in conquest. We care about surviving and being left alone. And it shall be a struggle for my girls, just as it has been for me, to solidify their authority. It’s not as if the lords to the South are much kinder to women.”

“But between you, Queen Daenerys, and my sister, surely they see the writing on the wall. The only man with a crown in the west still shares it with his wife.”

“Most of the lords, though, are still men,” Sansa points out, “Men who would prefer to not be supplanted by their sisters, wives, and daughters. Who will have great interest in keeping female heirs at a disadvantage. Not to mention the examples set by Cersei Lannister and the Sands are hardly generating confidence.”

“You are, though. And Queen Daenerys. And the Queen of Thorns.”

“We’ll be seen as exceptions, not the rule, if we’re successful. But Cersei and Ellaria are irrational, untrustworthy incompetents, the way people have decided as being typical of our sex. We’re judged differently, Theon. We always have been. They’ll be looking for us to fail, as well. They don’t want the ascension of women to trickle down to their ranks. Their older sisters demanding their seats of power, their daughters refusing to marry their suitors because their claims to the family titles competing with that of their younger brothers.”

Theon’s eyes widen. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Now halfway down the hall, their arms part. Theon bows. “You shall have your ships, Your Grace. I guarantee it.”

Sansa cocks her head, thinking on what Theon said about her popularity. She’s been so consumed with the work of keeping people alive that she hasn’t given much time or thought to how she is perceived, within her borders or without. “Theon… you said that I’m well-regarded?”

“Aye, of course!” Theon says, eyes widening, “Everyone knows how hard the King and Queen of Winter work. You’re both known for being self-sacrificing and dutiful. Jon is considered a great warrior who fights fearlessly, you’re considered a kind caregiver who shelters her people through hard times. They say you’re both like your father. I mean, your reputation actually gets mocked in our area, the Ironborn disdain kindness. They have more esteem for your beauty. But that is how you’re seen.”

Her heart feels warmer than it has since Serena returned to her. She remembers her conversation with Cersei at Blackwater, when she was told to rule through fear. But her first thought was that she’d always heard that love was a surer route to loyalty than fear, that she’d make her people love her.

She’s succeeded, it seems. Now all she has to do is keep that love.

The queen takes a deep breath. “Thank you, Theon.”

He nods, and they part ways. Sansa makes her way to her chambers, her breasts heavy and aching from milk. It’s well past lunchtime, and she hasn’t nursed since she woke up this morning.

When she enters the solar, she finds the wet nurse, Sinna, sitting by the window with Serena at her breast. A primal part of the queen wants to tear the babe from the woman’s arms. That’s her babe, hers to feed and love. But she can’t manage, and seeing another woman holding and feeding her child like that is just another reminder of her failure.

Her ladies rush to her, Sara holding out letters bearing Jon’s seal. “High priority message from the king, Your Grace.”
Sansa takes it and inquires about whether or not Alysanne’s been fed. Her hungry child is brought to her, and once Sansa has her little redhead settled at her breast, she reads.

He’s coming home… with the bulk of his army in tow. Her head swims with conflicted emotions. On one hand, her husband and sister are returning. On the other, how are they to accommodate the army when they’re already so full of people now?

Not to mention the fact that it very much sounds to Sansa like her family is being used as bait.

But what can they do?

The Wall is gone, the Others shall be at their doors before long. The fight has truly come to them now.

How she is supposed to manage is an entire issue on its own, however. How will she justify making their soldiers live in a city of tents in this weather? What else can she possibly do? It’s not as if she can just turn out all the sheltered smallfolk. There simply isn’t enough--- enough space, enough food, enough supplies. She’s literally sharing her rooms with seven other people already.

She can’t even produce enough milk from her breasts, let alone accommodations within her castle for an entire army. Winterfell is immense, but the amount of people seeking shelter is ungodly.

She and Jon will have to sleep in a tent, then. They couldn’t justify keeping to their warm beds while the soldiers protecting them wallowed in the cold.

It’s not the discomfort that Sansa minds, it’s that she won’t be able to sleep near the twins, tend to them when they cried at night. Yet another motherly duty she’d have to share.

Sara hurries to her when she sees the queen’s tears. “What is wrong, Your Grace? Are the king and princess well?”

Sansa nods to her maid. “They’re fine. They’re coming home, as is much of the army.”

Everyone else in the room looks at her, their expressions a mingling of excitement and worry.

“But how are we to--?”

“–Manage? We’ll find a way,” Sansa groans, “But I want an order put out for preparations to be made. I want tents, trenches, and bonfires erected around Winterfell’s walls. Ravens sent out to every friendly holdfast to send whatever they can. Food, blankets, and other supplies are to be stockpiled. Sara, go now. We can’t waste a moment. We only have a couple of weeks before the men come. Anything that can be saved and reused shall be. I don’t care if we have to make tents out of my gowns. Understand? Also, summon Ronnel at once.”

Ronnel is the castle steward. A common-born man with a wickedly clever mind, taught his numbers and letters by his local septon. He’d spent time serving on merchant ships.

Her maid hurries out and Sansa orders her maids to bring out her jewelry. Ronnel arrives, looking taxed and beleaguered, shortly after they put the twins to their nap.

“I heard the news, Your Grace,” he tells her, glancing around the solar. Her jewels--- everything from her silver direwolf cloak slips to her crown. His face falls when he sees them. “Please tell me it hasn’t truly come to this.”

She bows her head. “I need them appraised. If they’re worth enough, I may not have to sell them.
“Your Grace---”

She holds up a hand. “Baubles can be replaced. People cannot. Bread is more precious than diamonds.”

“Your Grace, I’ve catalogued everything in your possession, as you asked me. And I know for a fact that many of these belonged either to your mother or to your Stark forebears.”

Sansa nods. “I only wished the Boltons had left me more of my mother’s collection so I would have more to sell.”

“Your Grace---”

She interrupts him again, holding up a hand for silence. “The Wall came down. All the castles and everything in them are lost. I have no business with trinkets when the price of them could be the difference between a man living or dying. I can always buy more when the war is over. This is already hard enough, Ronnell, so please, take them now.”

When she was a little girl, her mother used to sit her down on the bed, and they’d play with her jewelry together. Mother would teach her the names of all of the stones, and the history behind each piece. What belonged to who, from where, how they got it, and the significance behind each piece. The world seemed so magical, life seemed so exciting, on that bed, surrounded by the glitter as she sat in her mother’s warm embrace. Those memories are among her first, going back to when her hands were tiny and dimpled and her mother’s ropes of pearls were long than she was tall.

Before a fine occasion, they’d would pick out what Lady Catelyn would wear together. Sometimes, she’d let Sansa try on a piece or two, and, when she got older, Sansa was allowed to wear one of them to a banquet or festival. A couple of the pieces were so very special--- some of them gifts from Father when Mother gave birth. Another ruby necklace he presented to her the first time he told her that he loved her. Some had belonged to the Starks, Tullys, or even the Whents for generations. Mother’s jewel box held almost as much family history as the crypts.

Sansa had hoped to do the same with her girls. Unless they found a way to recover everything once the war concluded, that wouldn’t happen now. Yes, Sansa could always get more jewels. But not necessarily these. Not the ones that were passed down from the first Sansa Stark, or the wife of Brandon the Builder. Not the bracelet Father gave mother to celebrate Sansa’s birth. Not the ring that supposedly came from the first River Kings.

There’s an amethyst brooch that would bring out the luster of Serena’s eyes stunningly some day. There’s the crown she wore when she became Queen, that she will not be able to leave to Alysanne when she leaves the throne of Winter to her.

She can live without them. She knows that. But it still hurts. It’s not about the luster or the monetary value. It’s about the legacy. And she feels she’s robbing her daughters of that. And Arya… Her sister never much cared for trinkets, but Sansa knows that her mother meant for some of her pieces to go to Arya as well. Sansa had planned to give Arya her pick of them after the war, either on her eighteenth Name Day or Wedding.

Her sister would support this enthusiastically, Sansa knows that. She might even be proud of Sansa for making this sacrifice. But still...

Sansa closes her eyes as Ronnel reluctantly gathers up the small treasure.
“I’ll get you the best estimates I can as soon as possible, Ma’am.”

“Thank you,” she says, eyes still closed, “You are dismissed.”

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Jon:

His jaw drops when he sees Winterfell. Or, rather, what surrounds Winterfell. It greets his eyes far sooner than the castle normally would have. Sansa told him that there’d be a war camp surrounding the fortress waiting for his army, but he never expected something of this scale. Somehow, some way, she’d managed to build up, if not enough of a camp to accommodate the army, than pretty close to it.

Make-shift defense towers were being constructed amongst the fields of tents, the circumference of the camp was adorned with wooden fences with internal and externals trenches, and, as they rode into the camp through the North gate, they spotted armory and medical tents. People bustled around and between the tents, lugging supplies to and fro. Paths were clearly marked, even with signs.

“Incredible,” Arya mutters to him as they ride through, “You’d think they’d been building for months.”

“Contingencies,” Jon replies, stunned himself, “contingencies that apparently counted for more than I expected.”

The court is assembled near the walls of Winterfell’s fortress, lined up in front of one of the largest tents, marked with Targaryen and Stark banners. At the center, of course, are Sansa and Bran.

Jon’s heart sinks when he sees his wife, as she’s clearly lost weight, and dark circles mark her eyes. The same could be said of everyone he sees, really. That, and the determined look on all of their faces.

Everyone looks thinner, more fearful, more exhausted, hungrier, and more determined than ever.

All but Sansa and Bran kneel when Jon dismounts. Arya gets down and, disregarding all protocol, races towards Bran and embraces him. Jon and Sansa’s eyes meet, and Jon gestures for the court to rise before hurrying towards his wife.

Just like that day at Castle Black, he sweeps her up in his arms. She’s definitely lighter than he remembers. But just as sweet-smelling. They kiss deeply, and the King of Winter feels a little warmer. He holds back his tears. She doesn’t.

“I was so afraid!” She whispers, “I was so afraid you’d never come back to us!

“I’ll always return home for you,” he murmurs as they pull apart.

He turns toward Bran and waits for his embrace with Arya to end before lifting his little brother into the air and embracing him too. Gods, how he’s missed Bran.

“I heard your powers have advanced,” he whispers.

“You have no idea.”

Jon swells with pride as Sansa gives him details on the camp they’ve assembled. They’ve done fantastic work. As the army begins to assemble, he pulls her close, heart pounding. “Let me see
them."

She nods and leads the whole family back to the Keep. They help Bran get his chair up the stairs and head to the Lord’s chambers. Jon’s eyes widen when he sees how crowded the rooms are, and to see a wet nurse rocking one of his children. He glances at Sansa, who looks at the ground, cheeks reddening.

“I’m not producing enough milk,” she whispers.

“We’ve all been sharing these rooms for a while now,” Bran says, “Sansa and I share the bed. The nurses sleep in pallets, the girls in their cradles. Everyone shares so we could House as many people as possible.”

Jon takes his wife’s hand, touched. He’s never been so proud.

“Well, you won’t have to worry about the numbers increasing too much. I intend to sleep-”

“-In a tent, yes,” Sansa interrupts, “The tent we greeted you at is ours. I intend to join you.”

He actually steps back. Shocked. “Sansa, you don’t have to -”

“Yes, I do.”

Something in her voice tells him there is no use arguing.

So he focuses on the girls, striding over to their cradles. Serena sleeps soundly in her bed, so big and so, so precious. His heart skips a beat at seeing her.

The wet nurse stands and brings over Alysanne. The child releases the nurse’s nipple when she sees him and makes something close to a smile before starting to fuss.

“Would you like to burp her, Your Grace?”

He takes his daughter at once, resting her against his shoulder and gently patting her back. She’s heavier than before. So big. And ah, her little heartbeat! She yanks at the hair near his neck and he laughs.

She burps and he’s practically undone. Now he truly can’t hold back the tears.

Serena’s eyes flutter open and he gets a flash of violet. Unable to help himself, he scoops her up and holds one in each arm. He turns to everyone else, grinning. “I can’t believe how much they’ve grown! They’re so beautiful!”

“Aye, Your Grace, they’re strong, healthy, beautiful girls. You couldn’t ask for finer daughters,” the nurse tells him.

He meant what he said. They’ve each grown a couple inches since he last saw them. They’re beginning to lift their little heads, and the pink fuzz on Alysanne’s head is now a shiny red-gold. They both have his nose. And gods… those chubby cheeks and the dimples of their hands.

Holding them is utterly sublime, a time of respite from his exhaustion and misery. He feels just a bit more hope as he looks down at them. Never has he felt anything like this. Jon almost wishes he could inhale them, take them deep inside himself and keep them warm and safe. He almost envies his wife for getting to do exactly that for many moons.

Jon looks around the room. “Before we head back to camp, just let me… Sit with them for a while?”
Play with them?"

“Of course!” Sansa says, laughing, gesturing to the nurse. A blanket, some stuffed toys and a chain of wooden rings are brought out, and the babes are laid down on the floor. Everyone gathers around them, even Bran climbing down from his chair onto the blanket, rebuffing Jon’s attempts at helping him. He sits beside Serena.

Sansa takes a seat beside Jon, their fingers furtively interlacing. Immediately, Alysanne grabs a bit of her mother’s skirts in her fat little fist and brings it to her mouth. Jon chuckles again.

“Quite the little grabber, isn’t she?” He remarks.

“You have no idea,” Bran answers, dangling the wooden rings above Serena’s head. The younger twin kicks her legs and reaches for them, gurgling.

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Daenerys:

If she had a silver stag for every time somebody’s told her that she’ll get used to this cold, she’d be able to buy Casterly Rock by now. But she’s still not used to it. And she wonders if she’ll ever be. If I ever want to be.

Perhaps it’s the strain of it all making things worse. The enemy has grown pretty much relentless, to the point where she’s been left a full half of the army to hold them back instead of the third she and Jon originally agreed upon. She can’t remember the last time she’s spent this much time on dragonback.

But at least she has her dragons’ heat and their company to keep the loneliness at bay. That’s far, far more than the men marching below her have. The Wall is gone, and in its place is a dark shadow over these people. Their safety net, their certainty, and what was left of their innocence has been stolen from them.

The Wall is supposed to be there. The Wall was always supposed to be there. The Wall always has been there. It’s been around so long that it was less a structure and more a part of a landscape. It’s as if the continent itself literally split in two.

The Wall was the armor of Westeros, shielding it from the evil and cold beyond. And now, every one of them is left naked in the dark.

They still fight, though.

This is not the same battle they’d more or less been fighting over the last year. It’s less a matter of repel now, more a matter of hinder. The Others will get to Winterfell. They all know this. It’s just a matter of slowing down the process as much as possible.

At this point, she’s stationed in the New Gift, not far from Last Hearth. She gets the occasional letter. Ellaria Sand is on the brink of surrender. Still, Dany almost wants to order that they cease this effort and redeploy all those people to the North. Wait for this war to be over to install their preferred Princess. She’s tempted to send Missandei a letter ordering that every able-bodied man and woman be marched up here. She’s tempted to write to Daario, tell him to forget Meereen and sail every available warrior to the New Gift.

And that’s on a good day, like this one, where, so far, there’s been no mass attack. The sun begins to set, and Dany flies Rhaegal to their camp. She has to blink constantly against the wind and snow. To
keep the fluid in her eyes from freezing in her sockets. She’s encased from head to toe in wools, leathers, and furs. Her hair feels stiff and her fingers can barely move.

Still, their strategy thus far has been surprisingly effective, thanks in no small part to the fact that the ground beneath them seems to be almost melting. The Wall coming down at least seems to have one advantage: the ice has begun to melt in such a quantity that it’s caused mass flooding. Mass flooding that their forces managed to avoid by leaving just before it began.

It’s disgusting, but as hard as it is for them to deal with the muck, it’s even harder for the Others and the dead horses and ice spiders they ride. It gets them stuck, making it that much easier for Daenerys, Drogon, and Rhaegal to swoop down and burn the forces whole.

She misses Daario. She misses his smile, his heat, his calloused fingertips on her nipples. She can’t even feel her nipples, but she is sure she could if he were here. She misses hot baths and how Daario loved to watch her in them, how he’d kneel in a mockery of the way he had the night he brought her his captains’ heads, then walk over and pour hot water or scented oil down her back or lather up her hair like she imagines her mother might have, had she lived. Comforting.

She misses sometimes turning over in her bath when he did this, pulling his cock from his breaches and taking it in her mouth. He was always swaggering about, smirking, teasing, with the confidence of a man who knows he could kill or bed any person he encountered. But when she did this, he yelped like a child being stung by a bee.

Gods, it’s been so long since she’s had anyone that she wouldn’t be surprised if she reached between her legs tonight to find an icicle forming in her cunny.

Rhaegal touches down, sinking a bit in the mud, and Ser Davos, Lord Mallister, and Lord Swann come running up as the dragon-minders hurry to attend to their charges. Daenerys dismounts and goes to rub the beast’s great green neck.

“No sign of an advance today,” Dany informs her commanders before moving onto comfort Drogon. Both of her dragons seem to drop down, wings and heads to the snow, in exhaustion.

Her men look relieved.

“The king and his men have arrived at Winterfell, Your Grace,” Ser Davos informs her, “A camp has been built surrounding the castle walls to accommodate them, and Queen Sansa is awaiting word from Queen Asha about the Iron Fleet.”

Dany nods, straining to register this. But she’s just so worn. “Right. Is the front holding?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Good,” she groans, “Then I need a rest.”

Her commanders nod and clear the way. Daenerys makes her way to her tent, greeted by Sharra, a field nurse who serves as her maid. The queen muses as the northwoman helps her out of her wet things.

She tries to focus on the issues, but her mind is capable only of yearning at the moment. She eyes her fur-piled pallet hungrily. She doesn’t mind sleeping in a tent. Indeed, she’s more comfortable in one than in a palace. It reminds her of happier, warmer days. And nights. When she had a man she loved to warm her bed.

Dany wishes she’d brought her bloodriders here. But they were the only cavalry she had that could
keep up with the famous Dornish stallions, so she’d ordered them to Arianne’s cause. They’d probably handle the cold even worse than their khaleesi.

She practically collapses beneath her furs. Gods, how she wishes for a hot bath, even if Daario couldn’t come with it.

She thinks of the night she last arrived in Winterfell, when Sansa tucked her into her own bed. Exactly the way Dany always imagined when she dreamed of having a mother. The woman is younger than Dany by a few years, but the illusion was helped by the fact that even when they’re both standing, Sansa towers over her.

*How is it that someone called the Queen of Winter could make me feel so warm and safe?*

It was such a peculiar moment, and it took so long for Dany to realize why: it was the first time since Drogo that Dany felt both warm *and* safe. Dany isn’t used to feel safe. After the House with the Red Door, she was on the streets with Viserys, who sometimes protected her from others, but never from himself. During the year in Illyrio’s manse, she wondered what he wanted. Both Drogo and Viserys terrified her during the first half of her marriage. Even after she and her Sun and Stars connected, her brother frightened her.

But there was that brief period, between the time Drogo “crowned” the man that had been her brother and when he was wounded, that she felt safe, secure, loved. Then she lost him and…

She even fears her own children at times.

Daenerys isn’t even sure that she should ever feel safe. How can anyone, in times like these? And would anyone, even after? She sees how some people look at her. Some more or less worship her. Some out of love and belief.

Others, out of fear.

She’s the Dragon Queen. A khaleesi of all the vicious Dothraki hoards, a conqueror, and the commander of fire made flesh. Who could ever feel safe around such a person? Being ruled by such a person? Even the men under her, the ones she’s commanding against this enemy, hesitate to meet her eyes.

She’s not even sure she feels safe with herself.

If others can’t feel safe with her, what right does she have to feel that way?

Whether it be White Walkers or dragons, a world with monsters in it is a dangerous one. People can be monsters as well. And sometimes, Daenerys isn’t sure whether or not she’s one of their number.

A moment of tenderness, innocence, receiving a basic kindness from someone who is essentially a family member confused her for weeks on end. She was overcome learning that she is thought of as family by people who seem so alien to her. Who seem so… wholesome.

The way the Starks love each other… She loves them. She envies them. They baffle her. But she adores them. Even Bran and Arya, who she knows less well. She just had to see the looks in their eyes when they interacted with Jon, Sansa, or one another to fall in love with them.

And yet… It baffles her.

Right now, they’ll all be at Winterfell, their family home, behind the walls the walls that kept them warm since birth, probably sharing memories of their childhood and others they’ve loved together as
they snuggle the babes. They’ll say things to one another, understand each others’ words in a way only a certain sort of person can.

For whatever reason, it’s Arya Stark, the fierce she-wolf that drives her proper older sister to migraines, that Dany dreams about the most. Perhaps because she knows Arya the least, and thus it’s easier to insert her own fantasies onto the young woman. Perhaps because she’s fierce, female, and stubborn, much like Daenerys herself.

Jon will put his arm around Arya and ruffle her hair, and she won’t tense up. It won’t occur to either of them that he’d strike her or grope her or do any of the things Viserys did to Dany when he was alive.

Despite the revelations about Jon’s heritage, Arya Stark will look at him and only see her big brother. She’ll never look at that man, as Dany did in Vaes Dothrak all those years ago, and only see a man who was once her brother.

Arya Stark will probably play peek-a-boo with the twins and carry them through the halls, and their mother won’t mind because Arya is one of the few people Sansa trusts her daughters with completely.

Sansa, meanwhile, will look at her husband with no memories in mind but those of tenderness. She knows the very worst of a man’s abuses. But none of those does she associate with the man she has now. Dany can’t even say that of Drogo.

Bran and Arya Stark are probably sharing rapid-fire stories of everything that’s happened to them since they last saw one another. They’ll share old, inside jokes, and recall childhood secrets.

Arya Stark will roll her eyes, grumble, and protest at her siblings glaring daggers at every man who looks at her for more than two seconds. She’ll make the logical point that she’s a soldier, that they let her go off to war, but apparently are afraid of her engaging in less than a flirtation. And the others will insist that that isn’t the point, even though they aren’t completely sure what the point even is, just that she’s their sister and they can’t help trying to protect her in any way they can.

Arya Stark will probably insist that when the twins are old enough, she’ll teach them to fight, and tease her sister that she won’t let Sansa’s daughters grow up to be ‘ladylike ninnies’ like their mother. She’s the only person in the world who would dare say such a thing to the Queen of Winter, because she knows she’s the only person in the world who can get away with it. Not even the King of Winter would dare speak that way to his Queen, and the twins are as much his as they are hers.

Not even Daenerys would dare.

But Arya Stark probably would. And she’ll probably spend her life as the one person who gets to speak to the queen in such a manner, scandalizing the court, infuriating her sister, who will still love her madly for it.

Even when they bicker, even when they fight to the point of screaming, either Bran or Jon will eventually talk to them, and things will be resolved. They won’t leave things unresolved or stay mad. They did that as children, then almost lost each other.

And Arya will teach the twins to fight, and sneak them treats, and sneak them out from under their nurse’s eye to go into town and hear the filthiest troubadours, or to the forest to ride and hunt and climb trees. And she’ll be the person they complain to when they hate their mother.

When they see Dany, though? They’ll probably see a foreigner, a legend, and a burden. Someone
they’ll mind their manners around at all times. And they’ll find attempts from Daenerys, the great Dragon Queen, to relate to them immensely awkward. And Serena especially will see the throne she never asked for whenever she looks upon Daenerys.

She won’t be with them, the way Aunt Arya will be. She can’t. She has to go back to King’s Landing when all of this is over.

Will they love their great-aunt’s dragons, or fear them?

What will the term ‘Blood of Old Valyria’ even mean to these girls?

Their father will not be a cautionary tale, a shameful spectre of a past and path they must avoid. Their father will be real, he will be the one to help them get their boots on before they run out into the summer snow, the man who makes their proper, serious, lady mother smile, who will mess up their hair, and tell them to look after their little brothers and sisters. Who will argue with Aunt Arya about who gets to teach them to fight. Who will lift them onto his shoulders to look over a high barrier. Who will make sure they know that war is anything but glorious, and make them promise to always, always look out for one another. Who will teach them about responsibility, strength, and duty, who will kiss their foreheads tenderly after each solemn lesson.

Their mother will not be a tragic figure of unrealized fantasy. She’ll be real. She’ll be the one to sing to them before bed, to kiss the scrapes and bruises they get from their adventures with Aunt Arya, who will assure them that she’s watching as they ride their ponies for the first time, who will fix their hair once their father has mussed it. Who will make them pretty new gowns for their Name Days. She’ll be the one to make their solemn, serious lord father smile, and tell them to look after their little brothers and sisters. She’ll be the one to take them on adventures of a different sort, and meet orphans and beggars their age, and teach them to make new stockings, tunics, and kirtles for those same children. Who will understand just a little better than their father when they fight with each other. Who will teach them about responsibility, strength, and duty, who will stroke their hair and kiss their cheeks after each solemn lesson.

Daenerys’s heart aches at the thought. Every night for them will be like her night at Winterfell, but with two figures smiling down at them instead of one. She imagines the girls in matching little beds, each with one of their parents tucking them in. Jon and Sansa kissing one girl goodnight, then switching positions to do the same with the other. Blowing out the candles, and leaving the girls’ room hand in hand.

Dany’s mother was terrified of her father. King Aerys locked his mother up and had her watched, obsessed with making sure she didn’t stray, not that she ever would.

Jon will never worry about such a thing. He’d never have to. Neither will Sansa.

People will sing songs about them someday, about their love, about their rule. They’ll be likened to Jaehaerys the Wise and Good Queen Alyssanne, to Aegon the Conqueror and Queen Rhaenys, Aegon the Unlikely and Black Bertha, Jaehaerys II and Shaera.

Songs shall be sung of Daenerys as well, but of a completely different sort. The songs they sing of her will probably just concern themselves with the amount of corpses she’s created. A few may be of liberation, and a few others, perhaps, of her looks.

Daenerys turns over beneath her furs. She’ll have to go back to that sharp, uncomfortable, spiky throne when this is over. The one she fought for her entire life. And she’ll be there, alone. The closest anyone will be to ‘at her side’ will be those on the royal dais, yards away. And she’ll have Missandei and Grey Worm. But also Varys, Tyrion Lannister, and whatever new advisors show up.
She doesn’t miss Jorah, she realizes. Jorah, who demanded, rather than begged for forgiveness when she discovered his betrayal. Jorah, who tried to drive her away from every other man she knew. Jorah, who loved her so much, whether she liked it or not. Jorah, who nearly introduced a Greyscale epidemic into Meereen.

She still hopes he finds his cure. And with it, some happiness. But she’s less sure she wants him back.

A piece of her heart must be missing, to feel this way.

It frightens her.

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Arya:

Even with the special wheels he has to traverse the dirt, it’s nearly impossible to push Bran through the levels of mud the camp has accumulated.

“Let me help you,” he offers, hands reaching for the little levers he uses to spin the wheels.

“No, it’s good exercise,” she insists stubbornly, pressing the sole of her boot to a bar on the back of his chair to push it free. “If Meera can do it, I can.”

“I’m not sure Meera can do it, honestly,” Bran replies.

“Neither is Meera,” says Meera, as she watches the two siblings in amusement. They were supposed to be walking the camp together, apparently seeking out some vague thing her brother is trying to find. Bran’s chair has been caught by this particular hurdle for at least a quarter hour. Arya refused the other woman’s offer to help, so the heir to Greywater Watch now leans against a post, tossing a dirk in the air and catching it repeatedly.

“Arya, if you keep doing this, you’re going to break the chair,” Arya’s brother complains, “And if you do that, I will kill you.”

“I will not!” She protests, growing increasingly frustrated, “And even if I do, you won’t!”

She hurls herself against the back of the chair to dislodge it, and merely earns some bruises for her trouble. “FUCKING MUD!”

It’s not just thick and plentiful, it’s sticky and it stinks. In just a few days, the army has turned the fairly even, if snow-covered ground into something that resembles tar more than the puddles she used to splash around in when she was little.

It’s not just the camp, either, it stretches out for miles. The camp’s mud just stinks a whole lot more, thanks to the accumulated piss and shit of a court and an army. The sewers of King’s Landing weren’t this bad.

“Be thankful for the mud,” says a voice that makes her heart stop.

No. That… That can’t be.

She freezes, not even bothering to turn towards the voice, though Bran and Meera both look towards the tall figure approaching them from behind.
Bran snorts at the figure. “Careful, Ser, if you’re coming over to help my sister, think better of it. She’s as stubborn as she is skinny, and she’ll bite something off you if you try.”

“Ah, so she is your sister, then?” The voice says, ever closer, “You’re telling me there’s a princess under there?”

Arya, like everyone else, is buried beneath leathers and furs, her head covered by a helmet with internal padding. She likes dressing as a soldier. Everyone looks the same out here. Male, female, young, old, highborn and low.

“Aye, but don’t tell her that,” Bran quips.

“Shut up!” She snaps at him, completely unnerved. She still hasn’t looked at him.

He moves up close, to her side. His face is concealed by his helmet, but it’s him. Her heart goes from being totally still to beating like a hummingbird’s wings. The holes in his helmet give her a shaded glimpse of blue eyes and a mischievous mouth.

He makes a grand bow that would earn him a kick in the teeth were he anyone else. “M’Lady.”

An instinct that she thought she’d buried long ago takes over. “Don’t call me ‘M’Lady!’”

Alysanne and Serena are both more ladylike than her, and the two of them shit themselves every three hours.

“Sorry, M’Princess!”

She’s not felt irritation like this since she was at Harrenhal. “It’s Arya!”

He knows. Of course he knows.

He’s about to reply when Bran interrupts.

“Well!” Her brother says, reaching for the little levers on his chair, “It seems we found what we were looking for! Meera and I will head back to the keep while you handle things, Sweet Sister.”

With that, he tugs a couple of the levers, then does a sort of lunge, instantly freeing himself from the mud and wheeling himself away. A smirking Meera follows him.

Arya gapes at her brother. “YOU LITTLE SHIT!”

Bran ignores her. Arya continues to shout expletives at him until he and Meera are out of sight. And a bit after. The moment she stops ranting is the moment she has to actually confront her situation.

Eventually, her voice goes hoarse. But she’s still not ready. She’s too angry, too hurt, too scared, too…


She emphasizes the ‘S’ sound deliberately.

Gendry winces, the mischief gone from his mouth.
Chapter Summary

Arya tries to handle the Gendry thing, Bran has to face the circumstances of his relationship with Meera, progress is made in Dorne, Jon tries to comfort his wife.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to sassyclassyass for her beta-work!

Sorry about the delay, everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya:

It’s not that she blames him for what happened with the Red Woman. But she does blame him for wanting to run off with a bunch of knaves who were so willing to sell him off, for rejecting her, only to show up now, of all times.

“You wouldn’t be my family. You’d be M’Lady.”

What has changed so much between then and now, then? She’s heard enough to know that Gendry’s discovered he’s Robert Baratheon’s bastard, and that he’s picked up a knighthood in the intervening years. Him being King Robert’s son made all sorts of sense; not that it ever did him any good. Even now, Sansa’s advised him to keep a bit quiet on that, since his father deposed and tried to murder their current chief ally.

And also in the meantime, Arya’s became a princess, officially entangled in a web of royal connections and four different high Houses. Her sister is Queen of Winter, her cousin now a King of Winter and heir presumptive to the Iron Throne, one of her nieces is heir to Winter, the other second-line-line to the Iron Throne, her other cousin is Lord of the Vale and her uncle is Lord of the Riverlands. Arya’s title and status has skyrocketed, and she’s been given her own command recently to boot.

Once upon a time, she wanted to disregard titles and status entirely. But now they’re a shield.

She’s furious with him. Not just for choosing his “brothers” over her, but for taking so bloody long to come back, and to act so… expectant.

He’d ambushed her, more or less, clearly expecting her to throw herself into his arms. As if nothing had happened. As if he hadn’t once told her that she couldn’t be a Stark and be close with him. As if they’re not on the brink of the world ending.

Part of Arya knows that, given the short time they may have left, she should probably let go and just
get whatever happiness she can. That she’ll probably regret the destruction of her home and people more if she meets it having not taken advantage of this reunion and forgiving Gendry.

But she just… she just can’t. Or maybe she can, if her stupid siblings would stop interfering, and if the idiot would just give her some space. But he follows her around like Nymeria used to.

He’s a distraction, and that just causes her more stress, because she’s terrified, and she has a home to protect. And he doesn’t even seem to notice or care. Arya can’t afford space for him at the back of her mind, constantly. But he’s stubborn, undaunted by Jon and Sansa’s absurd interrogations, Jon throwing him into the mud, and Arya’s own consistent rejection.

Both of her older siblings are protective. Jon is enraged that Gendry broke her heart, and wants to frighten him off. Sansa wants him gone, but at least thinks focussing on the matter too much is a waste of time.

But Gendry, as it turns out, is a valuable source of expertise and craft that they need. Shortly after his arrival, he proposed methods of using the practical swamp of mud that’s accumulated over the past few weeks to their advantage. And their army simply needs as many men who can wield a hammer as possible.

He’s been put to work like mad, at least. Right now, he’s likely constructing some sort of beam or device in the forge with the other smiths. Arya’s happy for it. The volume of both of their workloads keeps her mind occupied and creates a distance between them.

Except for times like now, at the darkest morning hours when everyone but her sleeps, and she’s got no task to distract her. She sneaks down to the underground baths to try to clear her head and soothe her aching muscles, relishing the rare privacy the hours afford her. Winterfell is so crowded, so she rarely ever gets to bathe alone.

After years of having to pretend to be a boy, watch out for bandits and assassins, conceal her identity and her vulnerabilities, Arya honestly loathes to be seen naked by anyone. The other women, especially the wildlings, think nothing of peeling off their leathers and chatting in the steaming water, but Arya always gets in and out as fast as possible, trying to conceal as much as possible. It’s one of the only situations in which shyness afflicts her.

If she has to be alone with her thoughts, she might as well soothe her aching joints. The heated pool brings back happier memories. Father always joked that while Arya didn’t get the blue eyes or red hair, in the water she was more a Tully trout than any of her siblings. She recalls games the Stark children used to play, where they’d pretend to be mer-people. Sansa would be either the mermaid in distress to be rescued from a “shark” (one of the boys, or Arya), or the ocean queen in their “sunken treasure quests.” Or they’d play-act stories involving water.

She tries to focus on those memories as she sinks into the water, but it’s rather bittersweet. Recollections of Robb and Rickon make her heart ache. Gods… But she doesn’t want to think about Gendry.

He makes her heart ache, too.

Arya leans back against the wall of the pool, trying to relax. Trying to sleep. The list doesn’t help as it used to. So many on it ---- Joffrey, Cersei, the Freys, Meryn Trant, etc--- are dead now. No more kills. Just bad memories without any sense of purpose. Before they died, the thought of killing them gave her an idea, gave her a mission, gave her hope of washing all the pain they’d caused her away. A sense of resolution to aim for. But as it turned out, whatever relief her revenge-kills gave her was only temporary. But Father, Mother, Robb, Syrio, Mycah, Jory and the rest… They are all still gone.
If anything, the pain of it all has only been compounded by how disappointing she found her revenge.

She killed every one of Walder Frey’s dozens of sons before slitting his throat, but she’ll still never see Robb’s smile, or feel the warmth of her mother’s arms ever again.

She can practically hear the laughter of her childhood romps in these pools with her siblings echoing throughout the empty chamber. It’s as if the place is haunted, really. Not just by Robb and Rickon, but by the children that the rest of them used to be. The innocent dreamers that yearned for their own adventures before blood soaked them through. Arya Stark back then was a girl whose greatest problem was not being as pretty, ladylike, or good at stitching as Sansa. A Jon who loved the idea of leading men into battle like Daeron the Young Dragon. Robb, who smiled and laughed in the security of knowing his life would always be within these walls, who had along, perfectly planned life ahead of him. A Bran with working legs who would be a knight. A Sansa who couldn’t wait to leave and be the lady to some handsome lord. A Rickon who would always have all his family around to gather him up in their arms and dote on him. No stench of death, just the beckoning aroma of the lives they yearned to start. When the harshest thing they had to ever fear was a rebuke from Septa Mordane.

All of them are ghosts now, in some form or another.

She’s startled by the sound of the door opening. And, of all people, it’s her sister who enters. Last time this happened, Arya had scrambled to cover the tell-tale scars across her belly. Now, she instinctively moves to cover her breasts, but when she sees it’s Sansa, the oddest thing happens. Her hands fall away. And Arya’s usual shyness about her body falls away with it. Sansa’s seen it all already. She knows the worst of it. She’s discovered the method in which Arya has failed their family, failed her. The last time, her sister learned her secret, discovered the crushing pressure and disappointment of having the entire future of their family resting solely upon the elder Stark sister. That the only hope was Sansa conceiving with the man who she called ‘Brother’ at the time, that she couldn’t rely on Arya at all.

But it all worked out there, didn’t it? Jon wasn’t their brother by blood, and he and Sansa were secretly mad for each other, and they have the girls and perhaps a dozen more babes to come. Sansa’s womb ended up literally doing the job of two Starks, and she popped out heirs for two dynasties. Arya wouldn’t be surprised if Jon’s managed to seed Sansa again since they returned. There might be three wolves in this bath-chamber now, not two.

But then, Sansa was always good at picking up after everyone, or covering for them. The golden daughter. It’s only upon reflection of many of the times Arya would get in trouble that she realizes how frequently her sister would actually be trying to help or protect her, when all that time Arya just saw it as her sister being a fussy, stuck-up ninny. Sansa lying to Septa Mordane so she wouldn’t hear of whatever uncouth thing the younger Stark girl said. Sansa desperately yanking twigs and leaves out of Arya’s hair, fussing over her clothes, and rubbing her face with a washcloth so that Mother would’t know Arya had snuck out. Sansa dragging her into her bedroom, ripping off Arya’s kirtle, and hurriedly trying to mend it before anyone saw that it was ripped again. Sansa telling her to shut up before the wrong person overhears a remark that would get her sent to bed early without dinner. Sansa telling her that she was doing her stitches wrong and trying to correct her before Arya knotted beyond repair.

Doing all of this with the frustration of an older sister and the insensitivity of a child, leading to mutual resentment and hurt feelings.

Arya would be heading into a banquet with rat’s nest, so Sansa would furiously try to rip all the
knots out and force it into place before anyone found out. Arya’s womb is torn to shreds, so Sansa has twins.

She’s spent the last two years mending Winterfell and the North back together after the mess Robb left in the same way she used to mend Arya’s gowns. She married her “brother” in order to resolve any and all instability, then fell in love with him for good measure. The Boltons take the North thanks to poor decisions by Theon and Robb, she takes it back. Jon runs head-first into a trap set by Ramsay, causing his army to be more or less engulfed by enemy forces, and Sansa shows up with a new army to win the day. Daenerys Targaryen is rendered sterile, Sansa produces a baby dragonlord. Uncle Edmure secures Riverrun for the Lannisters, Sansa restores his dynasty, lands, and title.

Arya’s life has been chaos and misadventure. Either she’s made a mess herself, or is caught up in the disasters those in power have caused. Then there’s Sansa, who is running herself ragged to put things back into place, trying to mend the holes, untangle the knots, put things in place. Going through the rubble and sorting it into neat piles. Putting things as they ought to be. Preventing or rectifying the disorder.

What was once insufferable fussing and obnoxious perfectionism is now resourceful leadership and caretaking. And perhaps that’s also why Arya greets her sister’s unexpected arrival with an odd relief. She is a mess. She needs to be cleaned up.

Normally, Arya would confide in Jon. She always did before. But not now. Jon has not handled the Gendry situation well. He cannot handle the topic of the boy who broke her heart rationally. Also, he’s a man.

Sansa is very much a woman.

Her sister looks startled, of course, blue eyes going wide. “...Arya?”

“Couldn’t sleep either, I take it? I can’t imagine the tent is all that comfortable,” Arya replies, “Come in, the water’s nice.”

Hesitantly, her sister strips off her furs and wools and gets in, her movements oddly tense and her hands covering her belly.

“It’s not the tent,” Sansa confesses, “I’ve slept in war tents before, and in worse conditions still. I just keep jolting awake, expecting to hear the girls. I’ve gotten used to having them near and waking in the middle of the night. So I slipped out of bed and went to the bedchamber to check up on them. They were fine, but I noticed you weren’t in bed…”

“...And you came looking for me here?” It seemed odd.

“I just had a feeling, I guess. Are you alright?”

“No.” And with that, she essentially vomits up all her confusion, anger, fear, insecurity, and conflict. “...And I just hate that he showed up the way he did, his little conspiracy with Bran, as if he’s just returned home a day early from a trip away instead of showing up in the middle of everything after so many years, after telling me there could and would be nothing, as if I can just… just love him and not be reminded of that day he told me he was joining the Brotherhood and fear losing him again, not have anything else going on when I’m preparing for this battle and trying to protect everything. Like amidst doing my duty I can just be swept up and resolve everything with him! Like I have time to even know how I feel. Or to put the pain away again.

“It’s a wound opened anew, and I just… I’m already so exhausted by everything. And I want to be
able to focus on what I have to do, and he just shows up! As if I hadn’t lain my heart out to him only to have him tear it in two last time we saw one another. As if he hadn’t told me we could never be close--- even after everything we’d been through together!--- and that this group of criminals was a more fitting family than I was. That all the times we saved each other wasn’t enough. As if I’m still that lost little girl, with nothing more in my life than survival. As if I’ve been waiting for him with whole time. As if the reason he gave for breaking my heart is somehow resolved! As if I’m not currently preparing for an army of the dead! And the worst part is that I know that if the worst happens, I know I’ll go to my death without having let us love each other. That it shouldn’t matter since we may be so close to the end, and that I should just put things aside to be resolved once we’ve survived.

“But I can’t. I can’t put it aside. He told me we could never be family, and so I picked up the pieces of my heart and I moved on. I did. I found my family again. I fought and searched and worked to find my place, my pack again. And once that happens, when I have so much else, he just shows up, as if I can just let him in. As if there isn’t so much more to consume me. As if I can either just forgive, forget, and fall in love at once, or make time to work through it all. But I can’t. And I feel like selfish, lovesick fool, because he has this effect on me, when there’s so much more to worry about! So I feel guilty, too!

“I mean, your situation with Jon couldn’t have been more confusing and fraught, but you managed to not only resolve your issues and do your duty, but also use what you had to do things better. To use what is between you to be better, stronger, and more secure. But I’m not better for what I feel. All I am is distracted, confused, angry, and self-sabotaging. And I know it. And it’s so stupid!”

Arya’s gasping by the time she finishes, feeling as if she’s just finished a ten-league sprint. She dunks her head under water for a few seconds, as if trying to rinse away all of her problems.

It doesn’t help. She shakes her head slowly. “If you could figure out how to be in love with our brother, I should be able to handle this. But I’m too weak, clearly.”

Her sister finally takes a deep breath. “Arya… This is not a matter of weakness. And it’s certainly not the same thing that I went through with Jon. Jon never broke my heart, never rejected me. I ran to him, and I found sanctuary with him. And we have a lifetime of history with each other. After we reunited, we had so much time to build what we have between us. We working towards the exact same goals, on the exact same terms. Our paths in every way were aligned. You haven’t seen Gendry in years. Yes, you two used to protect each other, but you were still both children, and you were on the run. You didn’t have time or a place to just sit together and speak and learn how to be in love with each other. He told you that you never would. You buried your feelings and moved on. And then he sprung back into your life and pulled them to the surface, all when you still won’t have time to truly get to know each other. This is more or less the opposite of Jon and I. Except the love. And the love… Gods…” Now she shakes her head. “It’s not something you can ignore. It will always be a distraction. You have to learn how to manage it. You’ve had absolutely no opportunity to do so, and, like you said, there’s too much going on now for you to do so at the moment. Gendry clearly loves you, and it’s clear he wants you to know he’s not leaving, that you have him. He’s trying to make up for his mistake before. And his timing could not be worse. Unfortunately, men don’t have the best instincts for this sort of thing. That’s why I’ve been trying to keep you both occupied.”

Arya smiles weakly. “I knew it…”

Sansa nods. “For what it’s worth, his insight has been invaluable. But I have been making arrangements here and there to keep your paths from crossing too much.”
Arya sighs. “So what do I do now?”

“I think your best chance for sanity at this point is to let him know that there is a chance, but that it will have to wait until after the world has been saved. Tell him the truth, basically. That the only way for you two to have a future is if you can concentrate on fighting for it. Tell him you love him, even. But the world has to be saved before anything else happens, so you’re both better off attending to that for now, and you need space.”

Arya’s eyes narrow. “So… I tell him, ‘Love you, but fuck off until I’m sure we won’t be turned into wights?’”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t think I’ll regret it if we all die before I get to be properly in love?”

“I wouldn’t fuss over that. If we all die, it’s not as if you’ll be regretting it for that long, anyways. What with being dead and all. So you may as well risk the regret instead of torturing yourself like this for the rest of your life,” Sansa deadpans.

Her sister has a point. Arya stares at the surface of the water again. Then she hugs Sansa. “Thank you.”

Of course, this course of action is easier said than done. In the morning, it’s Arya who seeks Gendry out, and quickly finds him en route to his assigned tent. They both stop short upon seeing each other, and Arya feels her determination wither at seeing him.

They stare at each other, standing in the middle of one of the camp paths, then move to the side to free up traffic. Arya takes a deep breath.

“I need you to know,” she says, “That there is a chance for us. But only after we secure a future for everyone. And I need to focus all of my attention on contributing to that. If you want to be part of my future, you have to withdraw from my present. I can’t have you in the corner of my eye now. Not now.”

Gendry winces, but quickly stands straight. “I understand.”

She’s been preparing for this all night, and come to a few conclusions on how she must handle this. Gendry at the very least deserves some honesty. She walks up to him, moving in close, and lowers her voice to a whisper. “There’s something else you should know.”

“What?”

Arya takes a deep breath. “I cannot have children.”

It’s something he has to be aware of. Something he can’t go on not knowing, if he’s going to make any further commitments to her.

Gendry’s eyes widen. His face becomes a storm. Arya takes a deep breath.

“I don’t think I have to tell you that this information is confidential,” she says, “But if whatever you want with me involves children, well, that’s not going to happen. And if that’s something you were ever counting on, then you’ll need to decide if it’s more important to you than I am.”

He’s silent for a few seconds, long enough for Arya to start to move away. But he catches her arm as she turns. “There’s more than one way to have a family, you know.”
She gapes at him. And an odd elation overtakes her.

Gods, he’s just made things much more difficult.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Bran:

Bran waits for Meera at their usual spot in the godswood, about twenty yards from the Heart Tree’s clearing, at the base of the smallest weirdwood in the forest. In these days of shared accommodations and makeshift camps, privacy is almost extinct.

The godswood is one of only two parts of his home that are not, for lack of a better word, crammed. During the evenings and at dawn, a crowd may gather at the Heart Tree’s clearing to pray, but these are also days when no one has much time for anything, let alone exploring the rest of the wood. They go to the heart of the woods, say their prayers, and leave. So the outer collection of trees is one of the quieter areas of the grounds.

Frustration eats at him as he waits for her. Lord Reed came down from The Wall with Jon, and both Reeds have enjoyed scarce time together. She’s with him now, though. Bran can’t begrudge her that. As much as he wants to see her, though, he’s afraid of what she’ll tell him when she joins him. The Prince of Winterfell suspects her father intends for her to return to Greywater Watch. She’s heir to it, now, after all, and the war is coming here.

It’s what Bran would do, if he were Lord Howland.

And he doesn’t want Meera in harm’s way. But he’s also selfish. She’s been his main comfort for the past several moons.

There’s going to be a time when Meera truly leaves him. She must. Her life doesn’t revolve around dragging him around and tending to him. Jojen is dead, Meera is the last scion of House Reed, due to be the lord of not only her family lands, but the unofficial leader of the Crannogmen in general. Bran isn’t the only person who needs her.

But oh, how he needs her.

The thought might not be so bad with Arya back. He’s in love with Meera, but that’s not the whole of their relationship. She’s crucial to him not just as a woman, but as a confidante. And that’s what he relies on the most. Arya served as an excellent confidante, but now…

It was supposed to make her happy. That was the point.

When the Wall fell and he had his odd “experience”, as everyone had taken to calling it, he’d been more than a little confused by the heartbeat sensation in particular. He’d felt them and at once, he knew exactly who they were--- all but one. He could feel Jon, Arya, Sansa, Meera, and even Daenerys, of all people. But then there was that one he just couldn’t associate with anyone he’d met. Indeed, the mystery of the sixth heartbeat was so all-consuming to him that he didn’t even notice that he was floating in the air.

The floating is yet another ability he can’t seem to control. It just happens to him randomly, when he least expects it.

But the heartbeats were a bit easier to work out. They weren’t so different from the warging and greenseeing sensations, really. It required the same sort of concentration. And as he explored things more and more, the more he noticed things about the Stranger’s Heart.
He had a rough idea of its distance whenever he focussed on it, and it became clear that whoever this person was, they were heading towards Winterfell. Then he began to notice that each of the hearts had certain personalities to them --- there was a tone, a rhythm, and a certain pressure to each heart. He came to think of the Hearts as not being simply the literal organ, but almost a rough, underlying sketch of whomever the heart belonged to. That it took just as much from the person’s mind and soul as it did from the heart, that it had a personality.

It was like listening to someone sing a song they’d written, with only part of the arrangement to accompany, and hearing it from under water.

Dissecting the similarities and differences, he did pick up some similarities and differences between them. And he began to hear his own.

For instance, his and Meera’s beats are at the exact same pace. Their tones and pressure are different, but the pattern is the same. Jon and Sansa’s heartbeats are almost identical, save for a slight echo quality to Jon’s. The echo quality of Jon’s heartbeat is shared by Daenerys’s, who has a quicker pace, but similar tone.

Every Stark, in fact, has the same beat pattern.

The Stranger’s heart, however, had a remarkable similarity to Arya’s. Same pattern, same pace, same pressure. But they were as similar as Jon and Sansa’s, save for the sort of accent of the Stranger’s Heart, which slightly resembled the accent of Daenerys’s.

Once he noticed the similarities, he couldn’t think of anything else. And before long, he began having visions of his sister during the first half of her time as a fugitive, and he saw her with the Stranger.

He knew the Stranger at once, too. A tall, muscular, handsome, burly young man with piercing blue eyes and short, black hair who looked at Arya with eyes that truly saw her.

She’d only been a girl in Bran’s visions, so there weren’t hints of lust there, at least, not on his end, and not at first. But Bran could see it, hear it. Their hearts are always in sync, always speeding, slowing, catching at the same time.

His heart broke when he witnessed them parting, when Arya told him that he could be her family.

“You wouldn’t be my family, you’d be M’Lady,” Gendry--- that was his name--- told her.

Gods, no wonder Arya was so quick to accept the relationship between Sansa and Jon. She was desperate for anything that kept them all together.

Bran loves his sister all the more after seeing that. And he just so badly wants to make her happy.

They might all be dead soon. He wants her to have some joy before the end comes. She deserves it.

Clearly, the Brotherhood Without Banners had not worked out, and Gendry was trying to make his way to Winterfell.

Meera had suggested Bran try to hone his powers by focusing on a particular project, so Bran followed this advice and made Gendry’s journey to Winterfell that project. It was surprisingly effective, particularly for his warging skills. He taught himself to possess animals far, far away to ward Gendry away from slower routes to the castle, and even hunt game so the man would have food the entire way here. The one time Gendry encountered a Heart Tree, Bran managed to send a whisper of inspiration to the man to go the best way.
Gendry ended up arriving to the gates of Winterfell in the dead of night mere days before Jon’s army was due to show up. Bran saw the man in his dreams, and woke at once. He made sure the man was let in.

He was a man of few words, as it turned out, utterly baffled by the Prince of Winterfell coming out to vouch for him and welcome him to the castle. And, as it turned out, extremely wary. Gendry had no idea how Bran knew who he was or why he was here, and he truly didn’t like that Bran knew these things. Indeed, his reaction was stronger than most, with Gendry nearly flipping over the table in the Great Hall when Bran sat him down to eat. It didn’t take long for Bran to figure out why.

“You’ve had terrible experiences with the supernatural,” Bran said to the wide-eyed former blacksmith, “So have I. I’d do anything to rid myself of these abilities, I assure you. And unlike the last magical person you encountered, I certainly don’t possess any fanaticism or even any trust in the source of it. Quite the opposite. I abhor sacrifice, and thankfully, my abilities don’t require it. I’ll tell you everything, if that’ll help. If not, you’re free to leave whenever. You have every right to be afraid. I’ll even get you a horse and food, if you want. But I personally think my sister is worth the risk.”

Gendry had hesitated, but eventually sat down, and the two spoke.

Bran didn’t tell Sansa. And not just because he was angry with her. But because he knows her. If she’d known that a “suitor” for Arya, as she would undoubtedly put it, had arrived, she’d have had him dragged before her, interrogated, examined, and warned. The man was already wary enough. Bran’s mystical abilities were frightening enough. The Queen of Winter would be too much.

The only other person who knew was Meera.

It was a secret worth keeping and an effort worth making, Bran figured, to give Arya some of the comfort and joy she deserved before it was too late.

And now, it seems, it’s all shattering around him.

He not sure how, but he’d forgotten how bloody impossible his sister is. This is a hurt she’s been carrying, clearly, and unlike her issues with Sansa, it’s not one she intends to mend anytime soon.

Instead of overjoyed and relieved, she’s furious. Furious with Gendry, and furious with Bran.

Indeed, Bran and Meera had barely uncorked a bottle of wine in celebration of their scheme when his sister burst into the solar, furiously ordering the servants to take the twins out and even demanding Meera vacate.

It was so shocking and offensive that Bran actually levitated out of his chair. “Don’t you dare speak that way to her!”

He’ll tolerate a great deal from his family, but he draws the line at anyone insulting or issuing orders to Meera Reed.

“I’LL SPEAK HOWEVER I WISH, BRANDON STARK, I’M NOT THE ONE WHO HAS MEDDLED!”

Meera bowed out of the room both literally and figuratively, making Bran drop back down in his chair and shrink back. The expression on her face was clear: I’ll protect you from wights, bandits, and white walkers, but I am not protecting you from her.

His sister ranted at him for half an hour. That was bad enough.
Bran thought that once she got it out of her system, she’d mellow and accept him.

It’s been nearly a week, and every time Gendry attempts to approach her, she draws her blade. And today, it seems, he’s finally given up, no longer tailing Arya and instead spending all of his time at work. Good for the war effort, but bad for Bran’s morale.

It’s just all such a waste. Primarily of time. And it’s his fault.

Sansa, of all people, is the most sympathetic, not that she’s all too pleased with these developments. But she is primarily annoyed with Jon for wasting everyone’s time further with all this. Still, she’s gently remarked to Bran that he “not pursue matchmaking any further.”

She doesn’t need to tell him that.

Never again.

It’s a distraction from what matters: his powers. He still can’t make himself levitate when he wishes, nor can he entirely control his visions, though there’s progress there. He can, in fact, summon visions. But he can’t dictate exactly what he sees, unless it is a past event that he’s seen before. And there’s apparently no clear future to be discerned, either. He’s received images of the North celebrating a victory, of a dead Daenerys, of the citizens of King’s Landing hailing their beautiful, silver-haired queen as she rides through the streets, of a monstrous swirl of wind swallowing up the dragons, of Jon falling from Rhaegal’s back and screaming.

He’s not sure how much of this he can trust, either. Especially since he doesn’t trust the Old Gods anymore. After all, it was their magic that the Children of the Forest used to create the Others in the first place.

But other times, he can’t control what pops into his head whatsoever. For instance, despite his efforts not to focus on the man, Gendry keeps popping into his dreams.

Not for the first time, he yearns for Jojen to be back. Jojen understood. Now, no one does. Except for Meera, a little.

Meera finally emerges between the trees, hands in the pockets of her doublet, looking strained. Bran’s stomach sinks.

“Your father wants you to leave, doesn’t he?” He asks at once.

Meera nods solemnly. “I managed to talk him into letting me stay for one more month, but then it’s back to Greywater Watch. He says that I’m the last Reed, and our people and family need me.”

Bran feels tears prick at the corners of his eyes. “The whole North needs you! We need as many capa—”

He stops when he sees the tears running down her cheeks. “Bran, I have to go.”

His shoulders fall. “I know, but… I don’t want us to be separated.”

Meera wipes her eyes in a futile attempt to dry them. “It’s not just that, though, Bran… I think my father is going to die.”

At that moment, Bran feels swallowed by fear. “Wh-what?”

“He seems to think so. I even think part of him wants to.” She walks up to him and sits in his lap.
Bran wraps his arms around her, horrified. She sobs. “Jojen was the heart of our family, Bran. You remember how he was, how he approached all this… mysticism?”

Bran nods. His journeys with his friend were the only time Bran didn’t feel cynical about his abilities. Jojen had a way of making things feel like a true adventure, even when they were at their lowest points.

“Well, imagine his attitude before he started having all of those visions of death and pain. I can’t even explain what a joyous, sweet child he was. And so talented… He was the favorite, and I didn’t even care, because he was my favorite as well. And I think… I think my father wants to be with him.”

Bran gapes, lost for words. Meera shakes her head.

“Not all of him, of course. Father loves me. I know that. But… Jojen used to have these private meetings with our father, you see. And he’d tell him things, things he’d seen. And there was a point about a year prior to when we left that things… changed. Father started giving me special training for running Greywater. And he just… seemed so much more melancholy. I think Jojen told Father that he was going to die. And I think… I think Jojen had a vision of Father perishing as well. And he knows. Bran, I’m going to lose my father when the Others come.”

She lets out a fresh round of sobs, covering her face with her hands. “Weren’t my mother and brother enough?!”

Bran holds her close, utterly miserable. He feels so selfish, being so consumed with losing Meera, not even giving a thought to what she might lose. His heart breaks for her.

He tries to comfort her as she cries, not having many ideas except to rub her back, whisper weightless assurances, and kiss her cheek. It’s not easy for him. Bran spent most of his life as the baby of the family, always being the one to run to Sansa’s bed when his favorite scary stories gave him nightmares so he could hide under her covers. And Rickon always went to their older siblings, too. He’s not used to being on the giving end of this sort of comfort. But he tries.

Eventually, she lifts her face from his neck and wipes her eyes again. “I feel like such a fool, saying this to you, after all you’ve lost. Two brothers, both parents, friends, your home…”

“You’re not a fool. And I understand, I assure you,” Bran tells her, “Grief is not a competition, Meera. I’m so sorry.”

She clutches his face and kisses him. He can taste the salt of her tears on her chapped lips.

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Tyrion:

The blasted Dornish heat makes him want to scream. He almost regrets volunteering for this. His unpopularity in Dorne almost rivals the opinion of him in the North. The scorn of the Dornish burns almost as harshly as their sun.

But that’s why he’s here, isn’t it? He must be the one to show the most support of their new Princess, to encourage friendship between himself (and, by extension, House Lannister) and the future of House Martell.

It has to be him who witnesses this, out of the regency triarch. Not Missandei, not Varys, him. For many reasons. Personal and political.
On the personal end, he must do this for Myrcella. Sansa Stark was right; Tyrion was complicit in much of the wrong his family did. But Myrcella wasn’t. She’d been truly innocent, and it was Tyrion who sent her to Dorne. To be the family’s bargaining chip. He’d ignored the risks and tried to justify what he did. He ignored the intense grudge that House Martell had against the Lannisters. And he sent her there with insufficient protection.

Not that he was entirely to blame, of course. So much more played into Myrcella’s murder than merely sending her to Dorne. The Sand Snakes are lunatics who murdered their own kin, after all. And the protections of guest right were undermined by the Red Wedding.

But he owes it to his niece to witness justice being done to her murderers.

He loved his niece and younger nephew, and though he couldn’t dispense justice for Tommen, he can for Myrcella.

As for the political reasons… He’s killed his father, his siblings are gone. The mines of Casterly Rock are depleted. He can’t make the sort of reparations to House Martell that might satisfy them fully. But he can represent Lannister support as well as royal support to the new Dornish regime, remind the court of the Water Gardens that “justice” (in the form of child murder) was claimed, and work out a deal with Princess Arianne.

So he endures the Dornish heat and the Dornish glares. He doesn’t to take advantage of the Water Gardens’ pools, not interested in exposing himself to more disdain from his hosts.

He keeps to his rooms until the day of the trial, assuming a place of honor on the Princely dais of House Martell.

For a woman who has spent much of her life in hiding, Princess Arianne sits her ancestors’ seat regally, clutching the armrests that speaks of someone who was never sure they’d get to assume their birthright. Tyrion can relate. He’s only made a brief visit to Casterly Rock since assuming the title, but he basked in the privileges of being its lord as much as possible. That included sitting the Lion’s Chair the same way Arianne now sits her own royal seat.

Ellaria Sand is brought in first, in rags and chains. Her charges are read out: Multiple counts of treason against Dorne and the Iron Throne, murder, conspiracy, and violation of Guest Right. Then, Tyene Sand, graciously provided by the crown to face judgment from her princess. Her charges are similar to her mother’s, minus one conspiracy charge, but with even more counts of treason, including kidnapping of a royal heir and endangering a royal alliance.

Evidence is presented, and Tyrion cannot help but feel a twinge of resentment towards the two women, as they are given far more of a chance to defend themselves than he was at his trial. Ellaria is allowed to present witnesses claiming that she had no idea that Arianne was alive when she took the throne of Dorne, and on that count, she and Tyene are actually acquitted.

Not that it ultimately helps them too much. Sure, their plausible deniability frees them of the charges of knowingly stealing the rulership of Dorne from a trueborn Martell, but their treason towards the crown and their kinslaying cannot be argued.

They’re found guilty of nearly a dozen capital offenses.

Arianne Nymeros Martell rises when she is ready to present their sentences. “Ellaria Sand, daughter of Lord Harum Uller of Hellholt, you are hereby sentenced to death by beheading. However, we offer you clemency for your daughters. If you formally renounce any claim to the Dorne for yourself and your kin, and confess to your guilt, we shall offer your eldest daughter, Tyene, the choice of
execution or life with the Silent Sisters. In addition, your four youngest daughters, Elia, Obella, Doreah, and Loreza Sand, innocents in all this, will be provided dowries and honored positions within my household for the rest of their days.”

Ellaria glares at Arianne with the sort of venom that would make Cersei proud. “I consent to these terms.”

“Good.” Arianne looks to Tyene. “Tyene Sand, upon your mother’s formal confession, you shall be sentenced to either execution or lifelong seclusion. You may give your answer at that time.”

Arianne motions for her court scribe to come forward with mounted parchment, and present it to Ellaria. The scribe reads its contents aloud, prompting Ellaria to repeat at the end of each line, then hands her a quill. Both by text and voice, Ellaria Sand declares herself and the other Sand Snakes guilty, renounces any and all claim she and her kin might have to Dorne, and recognizes Arianne Nymeros Martell as the rightful Princess.

In doing so, Obara and Nymeria Sand, still up North, are declared guilty by proxy. As of now, they were effectively exiles of the Iron Throne, and would need to convince the King and Queen of Winter to grant them asylum once the war is over if they wished to avoid Arianne or Daenerys’s justice.

The deed done, Tyene is brought forward.

“What shall it be, Tyene Sand?” Arianne asks, “The Silent Sisters, or The Block?”

The Sand Snake glares at Arianne. “I’d rather die than live that way!”

Tyrion can’t help but smile. He’d hoped she’d say that.

A block and an axe-man are brought. Tyrion finds himself the subject of both women’s last words. They accuse Arianne of conspiring with their enemies to kill her own kin, a laughably hypocritical line from them.

Arianne is amusingly dismissive of all this, not even waiting for Tyene’s body to finish spasming before declaring the next matter to be resolved. She points to Tyrion. “You, Lannister, we want all Dornish-transported and Dornish manufactured goods to be free from Westerlands taxes, including tariffs and port fees, for the next fifty years.”

Tyrion gapes. This is easily one of the most brilliant plays he’s seen. Demanding such an arrangement from him before the entire Dornish court, putting him on the spot. One he actually could implement, and it’s a demand that would lead to Dornish trade exploding. Numerous merchants who wished to gain Westerland gold would hire Dornish transport to avoid those taxes, and the profits to Dornish farmer, craftsmen, and manufacturers would only go up. She was publicly enriching every one of her vassals right in front of them.

And she wasn’t demanding a mountain of gold, thank the gods.

Not that this isn’t a bitter pill to swallow for Tyrion. His own vassals will not be pleased about this, and it’s going to cost his own realm a great deal in tax revenue. But it’s better than revealing the state of Lannister mines to the entire kingdom.

Tyrion feels every eye upon him. He cringes. “And if I refuse?”

“You’ll be permitted safe passage back to the border as per guest right, but after that, Dorne and the Westerlands shall officially be at war. The dragon queen will hold your kingdom responsible if that
happens.”

It’s a war they’ll lose. Tyrion never intended to refuse, but he couldn’t be seen as giving in at once. If anything, Arianne is doing him a favor by laying out the consequences of a refusal so plainly. The Lord of Casterly Rock sighs.

“As you wish, Princess Arianne.”

He’s been played well, he knows. But if anything, this is mercy. And at the very least, his queen can be assured that she’s put a skilled politician in power. And she’ll have to take notice of the sacrifice he’s made to secure this ally for her, if nothing else.

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Jon:

“Leave Gendry be,” his sister tells him once she’s knocked him into the mud, “He’s mine to deal with now.”

Arya’s tone and expression are enough to assure Jon that there’s no negotiating this. So, reluctantly, he pulls himself to his feet and nods. “But if he breaks your heart again—”

“I break each of his bones,” Arya replies.

And Jon feels a bit more assured. He heads back to his tent, mud-covered and eager for a bath. He’s pleased to find the platforms are completed.

The sudden deluge of thick, tar-like mud that has beset the lands caused flooding and made their camp near-uninhabitable. The men had to get to work creating walkways and platforms to fix it. Jon and Sansa insisted their tent not be completed much sooner than the men’s, so the construction took a few days. A few days in which they had to carefully make sure that the first thing they did every morning was slip their feet into boots to keep from being sunk to their ankles. But now, the ground of his tent is sturdy wood.

He enters the bedchamber of his tent to find the copper tub full of both steaming water and his wife. Sansa lifts her head and opens her eyes when he enters. Her maid blushes, bobs a curtsey, and runs out.

She’s rosy in the candlelight, shining from the water, red hair darkened and slicked back, breasts bobbing at the surface. She smiles at the sight of him. “Who was it who left you in that state, My Love?”

“Our sister,” Jon replies wryly, moving to disrobe. He wipes off the excess mud and smirks as he steps into the tub. The water begins to turn brown. But if the queen minds, she shows no sign. Water spills over the ends of the tub, and Jon grins as Sansa embraces him.

They’d requested an enormous tub for their tent for exactly this purpose.

His wife lathers his skin and hair, humming as she does, and Jon just sinks into her. He often takes comfort in her touch that he wouldn’t associate with a wife or lover. One he didn’t quite enjoy with Ygritte. One he knows to be at least somewhat perverse. Sansa makes him feel nurtured in a way he missed out on as a child.

He can’t help but nuzzle her breasts and neck.
“You do that more than the twins,” she jests, “One would think you’re one of my babes.”

Jon’s cheeks go red. He starts leaning away, but Sansa practically yanks him back.

“No,” she whispers, clutching him to her chest, “I like having you there. I didn’t mean to tease, I’m sorry.”

“I just don’t want you to think I want you to be my mother as well,” he murmurs, “You’re my wife.”

Their relationship has already been confusing already.

She chuckles. “No! Not at all! And it’s an instinct for all men, I think. Perhaps even all people. When my mother used to comfort me, I’d rest my head on her bosom. Why wouldn’t people rest their heads there when they get the chance? They’re soft.”

Now it’s his turn to laugh. “That they are.” He gives one of her teats a playful tug, prompting some liquid to leak out. He almost topples the tub. “I’m sorry!”

It’s Sansa’s turn to redden. “It’s no matter.”

She rinses off her chest. Jon watches her curiously.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what made you decide to finally enlist a wet nurse?” He’s so, so happy she did. Bran’s letter made it clear that she was utterly draining herself, both literally and figuratively.

Her face falls slightly. “After a while, I simply couldn’t produce enough milk.”

Now his face falls. “Oh.”

“So you and Bran got your wish,” she replies, resentfully.

Jon reaches over and rests his hand on her shoulder. “Sansa…”

“Don’t ‘Sansa’ me. You men simply don’t understand. And that’s fine. You can’t help it. But… This is something mothers are supposed to do for their children. And I can’t do it completely.”

“Sansa, you know you’re a wonderful mother, this doesn’t make you any less of one.”

“It’s not just about that, Jon!” She says, “It’s about the miracle of it. It’s about the power in it Childbirth is excruciating, it is. It’s months of terror and discomfort, then terror and agony at the end. It’s all worth it, of course. For the love alone, it’s more than worth it. But it’s not just the love alone. It’s the sense of power and accomplishment. I produced two whole new people with my body. I built them, I brought them into the world. And on top of that, I could feed them with my body. I was everything they needed. And when they were hungry and crying out, I could just unlace my bodice and I’d have enough to feed them. I felt so strong, I felt invincible. After years of being a pawn, of being reliant on others to keep me safe, I was everything to someone. I could do incredible things on my own without even trying too hard. I felt like I could do anything. Then, it turned out, I couldn’t. Not to mention…”

She sighs. “The sweetness of it. The way they sometimes look up at me as I’m feeding them. I’ve never felt anything like it. And now… Now I half to share it with another. Another person who will bond with them. Who they will always remember at the back of their minds. They love her because she’s giving them what their mother is supposed to give them.”
“You still give that to them, though,” Jon interjects, “And you will always be the most important woman in their lives. Our children will all worship you.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m greedy and jealous about them, Jon. I want to be the only one who gives them that. It’s like…” She takes a deep breath. “Imagine if you were injured in a way that meant you could no longer fight. And you had to send someone in your place and command from the rear. How would you feel?”

Jon glances at his lap. “Not well.”

“Precisely.” She groans. “Look, why don’t we finish our bath and relax a little? Have some fun?”

“What about your---”

“I’ll see to that.”

When they finish bathing, Sansa dresses and disappears into another compartment of their chamber, and doesn’t return for several minutes. Jon awaits her, only donning his robe.

When she re-enters, he sweeps her up into his arms and kisses her deep. They only break apart to breathe.

“You…” He gasps, panting, “Are the most… incredible… woman… in… Westeros.”

“And you…” she replies, also panting, “Are the greatest… and most wonderful… of men…”

He carries her to the bed and gently removes her robe and chemise. He tastes her between her legs, and is rendered almost deaf to her moans thanks to her strong thighs strangling his head. Her thighs drop aside from exhaustion, but she quickly recovers, flipping them both around and climbing down his body to repay the kindness.

And does she ever. Jon loses himself to her mouth, and cries her name as he spills.

They both burrow under the furs and hold one another.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I'm planning for this to have 30 chapters, so we're getting closer to the end.
Jon's Lesson

Chapter Summary

Everyone plans for the future, Gendry offers ideas, Daenerys has a bad day

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to Hannah for her beta-work!

Jon:

He’s still not entirely thrilled by Gendry’s presence, but he can’t help admitting the man is an asset. He possesses nearly unparalleled skills in smithing, but also in survival and building. Not to mention, he’s strong as a bull. And he’s not bad in the yard, either.

But Gendry’s primary contribution came a few days after Arya made Jon lay off him, during a court session Jon and Sansa were presiding over jointly. Ser Gendry knelt.

“What is it that you ask of us, Ser Gendry?” Sansa inquires.

Jon expects the man to request a higher command, supplies, or even recognition as Robert Baratheon’s bastard. The man looks up sheepishly.

“I do not have a request so much as a proposition, Your Grace. About the mud that has been flooding the camps and countryside. I believe it can be used to our advantage.”

The mud has been nothing but trouble. It clogs the sewage systems, flood the grounds, blocks the roads, and is a general menace. The thought that it might be an advantage is almost laughable.

But Jon is a fair king, so he asks how.

“We can drown and slow the enemy with it,” Gendry replies, “Their army is mostly made up of lumbering corpses, they rely on horse-wights and ice spiders for cavalry. They cannot traverse such conditions easily. So of the mud is so thick and far-like that regular horses are stopped by it. Imagine if we got a large chunk of their forces caught in that. I have a number of ideas for using it, that includes re-purposing the damaged sewage systems and moat, trenches, and a few contraptions that would make the mud into an asset.”

‘Asset’, ‘repurposing’. Big words for a Fleabottom blacksmith. Jon notes how Gendry’s eyes glance to the wings of the royal dais, where Bran and Arya sit. They both seem pleased. Jon eyes the young man carefully.

“Do you have any plans that you might be able to show us?” Sansa asks. “We’d need to evaluate your ideas further before we implement them, as resources are scarce. Blueprints, perhaps. Or instruction lists.”
The knight goes red. “Ah… No, Your Grace, forgive me. I am unable to read or write, you see. I can draw a little, and I can probably dictate to a talented scribe, but I cannot put my plans into text myself.”

Jon winces and glances at Arya. Not only is she giving another chance to the man who broke her heart, but he’s illiterate as well.

Before he can comment, Bran, sitting at Sansa’s other side, leans over and gestures for the rest to listen. “Your Graces,” Bran says quietly, “I have reason to believe that Ser Gendry’s ideas are worth exploring. At the very least, it would give us something to do with the mud.”

Jon scowls. Sansa’s right, their means are tight, and they can’t waste anything. He’s about to send the young man away when Sansa speaks up again.

“Maester Hobar!” Sansa calls out.

A chubby, mousy, young man in a Maester’s robes and chain comes forward. “Yes, My Queen?”

“You possess two bronze links on your chain, signifying that you have studied architecture and construction considerably, correct?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I actually have three links, as I learned the proper arts for inventing.”

Sansa smiles. “Perfect. Then I want you to work with Ser Gendry on constructing blueprints and explanations for his ideas, and I want you to evaluate them. I’ll give you both three days, starting at sundown, to present one or two of what you believe to be the most effective concepts to the court. If you can explain it to us and impress us, we will assign a group of men to aid you in constructing preliminary examples over the course of another week. If they work, we will forge ahead with the projects. Does that seem doable?”

“Yes, My Queen,” Maester Hobar says.

“Yes, Your Grace, thank you,” Gendry replies, looking relieved.

It was a tight time frame, but generous, considering. Jon bites his tongue, but once he and his wife are alone in the Small Council chamber, he confronts her.

“Why are you encouraging this?” He demands.

“Do I need to ask what you’re upset about in particular?” She asks, sitting down at the table and looking over some documents.

“No, I’m talking about Gendry, as you well know,” Jon says, annoyed.

“Jon, we have to do something about the mud. And if there’s a chance it can be used to help us, we need to take it. Bran seems confident. I’m guessing he had a vision about it.”

“We’ll see about that,” Jon grumbles, “But that’s not all I’m talking about. You’re encouraging him for Arya, aren’t you?”

“I’m encouraging him for the opportunity he presents us,” Sansa snaps, now starting to lose her patience, “That it might make Arya happy is a tertiary benefit.”

“For pity’s sake, Sansa, how is it that you of all people are fine with this?” Jon asks, frazzled, “You’ve always been the most formal of us. He’s an unacknowledged Bastard from Fleabottom who
sent most of his life eating bowls of brown by a forge. He can’t even read!”

“He can learn,” Sansa answers, “Ser Davos can barely read, and only started learning in his fifties. But you keep him by your side regardless. Ser Davos, need I remind you, is also from Fleabottom and was a smuggler.”

“Ser Davos isn’t in love with our sister! This is different!”

“Jon, for pity’s sake!” Sansa turns to face him, scowling, “I don’t care if the man is in love with Bran! If he can improve our chances at winning this war and surviving, I am going to employ him! It’s not as if I promised him Arya’s hand or anything. I just promised to give him a chance. He may be illiterate, but Arya insists he’s extremely clever.”

“He’s Robert Baratheon’s son!”

Sansa shrugs. “So he probably inherited his brains from his mother. What does it matter? As long as he gets results…”

“How do you think Daenerys might feel about our sister ending up with one of ‘The Usurper’s’ children?”

Sansa does a double-take, and Jon feels a surge of satisfaction. Apparently, his wife hadn’t thought of this. A surprise, really. She’s usually the one more inclined to think of these things. She’s been distracted, sure, but no more distracted than he’s been.

“That’s just a rumor,” she finally replies, lamely, “And he’s not acknowledged. And even if he and Arya were to wed, which is unlikely, she can’t have children. Daenerys is understanding. Besides, why would she think we’d want to create another rival line when you and our daughter are the heirs presumptive? If anything, we’re getting a potential rival out of the way were he to marry a barren woman. Trust me, we aren’t risking the Dragon Queen’s wrath.”

“And what if Bran didn’t have a vision?” Jon demands. “What if he’s just biased? He is the one who welcomed the man here.”

“If he is, then I doubt he’s the only one biased here,” Sansa replies impatiently, turning back to the documents. “But if you’re unsure, go ask him. Talk to our brother.”

“I will!” Clearly, he is getting nowhere with her. He sometimes worries his wife is too indulgent with their siblings. She puts too much stock in Bran’s visions, and seems to be bent on repenting for her strained childhood relationship with Arya. And so, she trusts Bran blindly, and agrees to practically everything Arya asks of her.

He storms out and heads to the royal bedchambers, only to learn that Bran has visited the crypts. Jon finds his brother in front of Ned and Catelyn Stark’s crypts.

Jon approaches cautiously, not wishing to desecrate this moment of mourning for his little brother. So he waits for Bran to turn towards him before saying a word.

“Bran,” he asks, “Did you see a vision of Ser Gendry’s ideas working?”

His brother looks despondent. He sighs. “I saw wights drown in mud. I saw ice spiders break their legs and throw their riders in efforts to get unstuck.”

“But no indication that Ser Gendry is responsible for it.”
Jon groans. “Bran! We don’t have time, manpower, or resources to waste!”

“I don’t believe we’re wasting them. But we would be if we don’t do something with the mud.” Bran turns away, groaning and cupping his brow. “Jon, please, I would like to be left alone right now. Give me some peace.”

Jon’s heart quickens and his blood runs cold. He doesn’t like this. Bran’s been struggling with his abilities for a while, and Jon has been concerned about the effect on his health. Sansa insists that all his examinations show him to be in fine health, but Jon has never been entirely calmed by that. These abilities are mystical, and it doesn’t seem out of the realm of possibility that they might cause some ailment or injury detectable by an average maester’s exam.

“Are you unwell, Little Brother?” Jon inquires in a softer tone. He sometimes fears he’s been failing as an older brother over the last several months. There was a certain awkwardness between them since Bran confessed to Jon about his parentage. And between the crown, the war, being a husband and a father, Jon has had little time to reconnect with Bran the way he’d like to.

“I’m not sick,” Bran snaps, sounding thoroughly irritated, “Or injured. I don’t need to be fussed over.”

“Are you sure?” Jon asks, stepping closer, “Because---”

“---Why is it that you’re so hostile towards Gendry, anyways, Jon?” Bran demands, turning to face him again. He glares. “Why is it that you and Sansa are the only ones who get to be with the ones they love?”

“That’s not it,” Jon insists, “I like Mee---”

“---You and I both know that Meera and I have no future,” Bran insists. “She’s heir to Greywater Watch, and I’m a cripple.”

_Oh._ Jon’s stomach sinks.

“Meera’s going back home, then?”

Bran bows his head. “In a few weeks. Her father doesn’t want her here when the White Walkers arrive.”

Jon sinks to his knees and takes Bran’s hands in his. “Hey now, it’s going to be alright…”

He’s not sure what else to say. Bran squeezes his hands.

“You knew you were in love with Sansa well before you two decided to marry, right?”

“Yes.”

“And before that, you loved a wildling woman.”

“Yes.”

“How did you handle loving a woman you couldn’t have a future with?”

“Given that I fell in love again and ended up marrying my second love anyways, I’m not sure I did,”
Jon replies, “But I guess I simply didn’t have a choice, did I?”

“You were lucky enough to have that work in your favor,” Bran admits, “I am not. But there was another love you had. And there was a point even with Sansa that you thought nothing would come of it. Nothing real, anyways. Even when you were wed, you both still thought you were siblings. You thought that you’d have to repress your feelings your whole lives. And there was Ygritte, of course.”

Jon closes his eyes and bends his head. Ygritte. Yes, I suppose that’s applicable. I could never marry her, never could give her children. He tries to think of her as little as possible these days. He feels it’s disrespectful to his wife, and, in a way, to Ygritte herself. She’s gone. And her memory should not be defined by the man she loved, the one who betrayed her. “I had to run from that. And in a way, I suppose that was lucky. I was already a man of the Night’s Watch when I met her. I was with her for more reasons than love. It was also out of duty to the Watch and instructions The Halfhand gave me. But it didn’t make things any easier. For either of us. But I never loved Ygritte any less for having to fulfill my duty to the Watch. And Meera doesn’t love you any less, either.”

He takes a deep breath, and his heart aches a bit. He reaches out and puts a comforting hand on Bran’s shoulder. “I do think it speaks to your character, however, that you’re pulling so hard for Arya to be with the one she loves when you can’t do the same on your terms. It’s just that I can’t accept things based on that alone. As her brother, or her king. I need to be sure there’s more to keeping Gendry around and supporting his efforts than wanting Arya to be with him.”

“You have every right to feel that way, as does Sansa. You often stress how the two of you are partners. I told her what I’m telling you. And I assume, by what you’ve said, she in turn told you what I said. So what is the issue? Do you trust me less than she does? Or do you trust her less than you claim?”

Jon winces. “I just think the two of you perhaps have a way of communicating that makes your mutual decisions worthy of an outside opinion. I wanted to speak to you of this myself, is that so wrong? I want to understand you better, Bran. I haven’t seen as much of you as I’d like.”

Bran sighs. “I understand. And I’m sorry. I merely want you to understand that I would not mislead you or Sansa about these things. I have seen enough to convince me that even if Gendry isn’t a mastermind behind our victory, that his ideas will at least lead us to discovering an important advantage with the mud. If his exact ideas won’t work, someone else will probably come up with an idea from his experiments that will.”

Jon nods. “Alright then.” He takes a deep breath. “Where Meera is concerned… War forces lovers to part. Even Sansa and I have to, and we’re married. But once it’s over, that doesn’t mean you can’t have any sort of future together, even if you can’t have a conventional one, you know.”

Bran looks at him with hopeful eyes. Jon winks at him, then grabs the handles behind his wheelchair.

“That doesn’t make the separations any easier, I know. But it’s something to look forward to. You won’t be able to marry Meera, or have children with her, but there are other things. This doesn’t mean you have to give her up forever, in every capacity. You’re a Prince of the Three Realms, not a Brother of the Night’s Watch.”

Bran gestures towards the exit, and Jon begins pushing his brother out. Something else occurs to him, though.

“About those heartbeats you sense, though… It’s for family members and loved ones, correct?”
“Yes.”

“Then, conceivably, if a new family member were to come into being, you’d be the first to know.”

Bran looks up at Jon, and it’s clear from the look on his face that he knows exactly where this is going. “I wasn’t in tune with the heartbeats until after the twins were born, so I’m not sure if I can sense a heartbeat pre-birth. But if I can, then Sansa’s not pregnant, or at least, not far enough along for whatever’s inside her to have a heartbeat, whenever that is. So I have no news for you at the moment. But do you want her to be with child again right now?”

“No,” Jon admits, “But I would want to know at the earliest opportunity if she were.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. But until then, I’d suggest employing whatever supply of tansy we have if you aren’t already. She’s already exhausted enough, and this is hardly good time for her to be in such a condition.”

Jon blushes. He’d have to ask Sansa about it. But discussing such things with Bran is hardly comfortable. Then again, he’s the one who has brought this up.

“Bran,” He says, changing the subject, “I know things are hard, but you can come and speak with me about Meera, or anything. You understand that, right?”

“Of course. And thank you, Jon.”

Jon ends up carrying Bran up to the main floor. His brother heads out to the godswood, and Jon makes his way back to his tent. His wife is still there, at her desk, signing papers.

Jon moves up behind her and rests his hands on her shoulders. “You win. I believe Bran. Also, there’s something we should discuss. Have you been drinking Moon Tea?”

Sansa turns, wide-eyed. “Should I not be? I’m sorry, I thought we’d discussed this already for some reason.”

“We haven’t,” He says, sighing. “I think we’ve both been too busy to do so. But I’m glad if you are. This is hardly the time to subject you to another ‘delicate condition’.”

Sansa gives a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank the gods. I’m sorry that I forgot to bring it up. It wasn’t on purpose, I promise.”

“I understand. I forgot to ask. And I should have.”

Her face softens. “I’d understand if you felt differently though. I mean, I haven’t given you a son yet…”

Jon’s stomach twists. She isn’t the first person to bring this up to him, and she won’t be the last. He’d hoped she wouldn’t have heard of such things. Unfortunately, no matter how much they all stress the new order of things, that the girls are not to be supplanted, the issue of sons is brought up. “I’m not sure I want any boys at this point. I wouldn’t want there to be room for discord among our children regarding their claims, another Dance of the Dragons. Some may grumble about it. Let them. We have our heirs, and we will continue to support them. But I have no qualms with a lack of boys.”

“Truly?” This seems to truly shock her.

“Really, truly.” He leans down and kisses her forehead. “Call me mad, but I don’t think it’s such an awful fate to spend the rest of my life surrounded by beautiful women.”
She giggles and gets out of her seat, turning to him and cupping his cheeks. “Have I mentioned how much I adore you recently? Because I adore you.”

“The feeling is mutual, My Lady, I assure you.” He kisses her lips now, marveling at this moment. They’ve come such a long way since the Battle of the Bastards.

He backs her against the desk as they kiss, prompting her to break away. “Ah! Careful! The ink is still drying!”

Jon laughs, scoops her up, and carries her to the bed. “Alright then, the ink can go dry, and something else can get wet.”

“You’re ---oof!” She falls onto the mattress. “Filthy!”

He descends over her, mouth heading for her neck. “I’ll let you give me a bath afterwards.”

Their lovemaking is oddly cozy, given their location. Jon enjoys looking down at her as he thrusts his hips. He can’t tell which he likes more: meeting her hazy eyes, or seeing them shut or roll back from pleasure.

When they finish, Jon half-expects Sansa to re-lace her gown and go back to the desk. Instead, she lies on her back, one arm bent behind her head, and stares at the canvas canopy of their tent. Finally, she speaks.

“Do you think you’re going to die, Jon?”

His blood goes icy. There’s a long pause. “I… I think I could die.”

Ever since his fall, he’s had dreams of losing control of Viserion, or of Rhaegal. Even Drogon a few times, though he’s yet to fly the black dragon on his own proper. Drogon is Daenerys’s chief stead, the fiercest and most dangerous of the dragons. He’s in no hurry to fly the black one.

Daenerys told him that his dreams, especially those involving dragons, could be prophetic. “You’re of the Blood of Old Valyria and the First Men,” she informed him one evening after flight training, “Your my nephew, and I had dreams that warned me of the future. Your cousin is a seer of some sort, and you not only can ride dragons, but you have that ethereal connection with that wolf of yours. I’m sure you’ve had dreams before, vivid ones, which in retrospect, clearly foretold things that would happen.”

She wasn’t wrong, actually. After that discussion, Jon thought back on some of his more memorable dreams. Among them was one he had as Lord Commander, of seeing Ned Stark and Robb at a table which he could not sit, while a crow nearby squawked the word “king” repeatedly. He dreamt of drowning in mud and blood and being pulled from the muck by falcons with red and blue feathers --- not all too different from what happened in the battle against Ramsay. He’d dreamt of The Wall falling as the Night’s King whistled. Prior to the girls’ birth, he’d dreamt of being back in the woods the day they found the wolf pups, coming upon the mother, only instead of six pups, there was only one, and a dragon egg.

Jon never considered any of that in the context of prophecy, though. Many of his dreams his whole life had something to do with things going on in his life. The dream about Ned, Robb, and the Crow happened right after Stannis made the offer to name him Lord of Winterfell. He’d taken the dream to mean that he could never be a true Stark, and figured the crow was Stannis. The dream about the falcons happened on the eve of battle, and he just thought it nerves. And the direwolf dream seemed no secret: He knew he was having twins at the time, they were already discussing succession for
both the North and the Iron Throne. It seemed logical that the direwolf mother was Sansa, giving birth to an heir for the Starks and one for the Targaryens.

But he sees the future in those dreams now. He had, after all, had one child who looked just like her Stark mother, and another who looked like a dragonlord. Him not sitting at Robb and Lord Eddard’s table could also have meant he wasn’t meant to stay dead, just enter the hall of death, but not take a place, but instead become a king, which he did. And the battle dream seems obvious.

So what of these dreams? He keeps having them. The last time he lost control of a dragon was when the Night’s King used those wind powers to knock him and Viserion from the sky. And he’s also had nightmares of his loved ones as wights.

He looks at Sansa now, heart pounding. “I don’t know, Sansa. It… It is possible. We know that.”

She nods.

“Why bring this up now, though?” It’s not as if they haven’t discussed this sort of thing before, just not so soon post-coitus. It seems an odd time.

Sansa looks at him sadly, “Aside from the nightmares you’ve been having? Well, there’s the rate at which we’ve been coupling. At least twice a day since you returned. Last time, it took us weeks to couple again once you regained your health. Granted, we were busy then, but now it’s even worse. You’d think we’d have no time for this. But you’ve been on me constantly. And we’ve established that it’s not about conceiving again. So… Are you trying to do as much as possible because you think the end is coming?” She turns on her side and takes his hands in hers. “Jon, if Bran has seen something that neither of you are telling me, if you’re sure you’re going to die, I must know. Please. Tell me. At least give me the chance to prepare myself if I can.”

“Bran hasn’t seen me die,” Jon replies, “But I’ve had some dreams of losing control of the dragons while riding them. Of screaming. And Daenerys says that my dreams may carry prophetic weight.”

Sansa sits up, hugs her knees to her chest, and buries her face. “You survived last time you lost control.”

“Barely, and I may not be so lucky next time.” He feels terrible, saying this. “I’m so sorry, Sansa.”

His wife shakes her head. “For what? Being the bravest man in the world? Being mortal? Having dreams and fears? Do not apologize to me for that.”

“I’d be leaving you alone,” he murmurs, sitting up and wrapping his arms around her, “That’s what I’m sorry for.”

She turns her head and kisses his lips. “You know, I always wanted a hero. Always. As much as I’ve learned, as much as my perspective over the years has changed, there are certain things that I’ve held onto. Not lost or changed so much and learned more about. When I dreamed of handsome, gallant knights… Well, I learned that wasn’t Joffrey, sure. I learned how to better understand what makes the ideal sort of man. But even after I learned, I still wanted that hero. Someone brave, gentle, and strong, as Father said. A hero. A man who truly represented all the things a true knight should. And you are everything I ever could have hoped for and more. You’re even the things I didn’t care about anymore.

“And if you weren’t the sort of man who goes out to the front lines to lead your armies and face the enemy head on to save us all, you wouldn’t be that at all. And I care about that not because I like the idea of a husband with glorious victories or brute strength. No, because I want a man who truly
cares, who will weather the very worst things not just with me, but with everyone, who would do anything to protect the innocent. You are the restoration of my faith in people. I was so sure for so long that in life, there are no true heroes, that the monsters win, that there was only survival and endurance. But I see you and I am inspired. I know there’s a better world to be had, that there’s a chance to build it, that good can triumph and influence others to be better. That’s why you were named king after the Boltons fell. Because you showed all those lords that there are those willing to die for what’s right, who can win.

“I’m a better person because of you. Without you, I probably would have become cynical and ruthless. Maybe I’d have taken Winterfell back, but I’d have made cruel sacrifices to get us through this winter. Us meaning myself, Arya, and Bran, maybe. I would have ruled through fear and given our people no place to really run, between the Night’s King and myself. I might have ended up bending the knee to Daenerys and becoming reliant on her dragonfire to win this war and keep myself in power. Become dependent on her, almost her puppet, even, since her dragons probably might have ended up the only thing between me and open revolt. Tricked myself into thinking myself tough, but making myself weak, really, because the world had done so much to teach me cruelty meant strength. I’d have lost myself.

“But then you… You just… You came with me. Gods, I remember that day… By the fire, with that terrible ale. Asking you where you’d go and your response. I was so confused when you said ‘Where will we go?’. You were the first person in years to say you were going to take risks to help or protect me without some ulterior motive or secrets or mixed motivations. No intention to use me as the ‘Key to the North.’ You weren’t simultaneously aiding my family’s enemies, or showing me kindness out of fear that if word got out of poor treatment that it would hurt someone you actually cared for. You weren’t intending to seduce me, use me, sell me off, make a pawn of me. You weren’t being paid or threatened. You just intended to stay with me and keep me safe because that seemed so natural to you. That’s what guided you. I think that was the moment I started falling in love with you.”

They both have tears running down their cheeks at this point. Jon feels as if his heart is about to explode. Sansa sobs a bit.

“Now, I feel as if… Even if it’s true that ultimately, good won’t win, I don’t care anymore. The only way to be sure of that is to give up. It will be worth fighting regardless of whether or not it’s a losing battle. Because moments like that one are the only reason to survive at all. There’s nothing else but what you’ve taught me, Jon. It’s what our children should be raised by. What our future should be based on. There’s so much of you, so much I’ll lose if you die, but that? That’s what I’m going to have forever. That’s what will keep me going if you’re killed. But I… I… still don’t want to lose you! I don’t want to do this alone! I will if I have to. Otherwise, I’ll have lost all of you. And I refuse to do that. And I know part of you shall be lost if you don’t act as the man you truly are and face the worst dangers. But I need you to know what you mean to me, Jon.”

There’s so much to this. Jon isn’t sure if she’s ever said so much in a confession of love.

“I know now,” he whispers in her ear, “And I’m more frightened than ever.” He swallows. “Promise me something, if I’m lost.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t let the children grow up hearing songs of my glorious battles and death. Of my military prowess. Don’t teach them to idolize that, make them think that’s something to aspire to. I don’t just mean our girls, but every child. Have the troubadours sing songs of what you just told me. Of my devotion, my kindness, of what you say I taught you. I want that to be my legacy, not my sword.
Teach them to seek glory in unity, charity, family, and goodness, not battle.” His eyes close. “I want to live so badly, Sansa. I want to build things, learn things, feed and clothe and shelter people, as you do. I want the highlights of my reign to include bloodless achievements. And if I die in this war, that won’t be. My life thus far has been one violent episode after another. I don’t want the children of this world growing up as I did, believing that greatness is achieved through combat, conquest, and death. The only thing I want impressed upon them, battle-wise, is that I fought at the front, because no lord or king should ask anything of his people that he’s not willing to do himself. Tell them I unified Westeros with the Free Folk, about how I brokered peaceful secession from the Iron Throne, that I got people out when The Wall fell, of how much I loved you and our family. I’d even rather go down in history as ‘Husband to Queen Sansa’ than ‘Warrior of the Dawn.’ Teach them what I taught you.”

“Of course.” They embrace once more.

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Arya:

She can’t resist being present when Gendry and Maester Hobar present their work in the main courtyard. And she can’t help but feel some pride as they demonstrate two of their ideas. One, a sort of device that uses pulleys like the winch elevator from The Wall to gather cauldrons of tarlike mud up to the towers and wall landings and spill over the other end continually. Another to draw the contents of the sewers to a specific place to flood whichever area chosen, and remove it just as quickly. The idea was for a retractable, hidden moat. One which, given the consistency of the mud and sewage would appear to be solid, and even somewhat support weight at first. Then, the right levers would be pulled, causing the mud to be diluted and washed out, sweeping the grounds out and causing the enemy to be impaled on spikes that were submerged in the mud.

“We could even tip the spikes with dragonglass, to make them effective against the Walkers as well,” Hobar explains. “We could arrange the hidden moat to force the enemy into whatever direction we wish, right into the proper traps.”

“We can use it to drown much of their army, or trap them in place for our men to pick off,” Gendry says, “With the added benefit of clearing much of the filth from the castle itself. The best part is, it won’t take forever to arrange, because we’ll be connecting it all to the sewers and the system you have from pumping the hot spring waters through the castle, which already exist. The most difficult labor will be the actual digging and extension of the trenches we have already. And, when the war is over, it can all be easily converted into a more efficient irrigation system.”

When they demonstrated it with a sort of miniature system dug into the courtyard ground, even Jon couldn’t find much to object to. He even seemed a little fascinated.

“So you essentially propose we drown our enemy in our own shit?”

“More or less,” Gendry replies, shrugging, “We have enough water with which to dilute the mud to whatever consistency we need, with all the snow and ice. But trust me, this mud will be our salvation.”

“And you’re sure this can work on a scale large enough to defend Winterfell?”

“Certainly. We’ll need everyone working on this, though. And we can’t surround the entire castle, but with everyone involved, we can make enough of this to enhance the castle’s defenses considerably. We will need everyone either digging or helping to craft the implements, though. And we’ll need plenty of metal and obsidian,” Gendry explains.
Sansa walks forward. “I will grab a shovel and dig myself if necessary.”

The entire court laughs at this, but Sansa insists that she’s serious. “You think I’m unwilling to engage in filth? I’ll remind everyone here that I used to have to kiss Joffrey Baratheon.”

The crowd laughs again, for a different reason. It is funny.

Jon shakes his head. “What other ideas do you have, then, Ser Gendry?”

Arya comes away from the demonstration with great relief. She hadn’t realized it until today, but she’d been very anxious to have Jon approve of Gendry. To see her brother let go of his antagonism towards her potential sweetheart. This, at least, is a large step in that direction.

Deep down, she’s still the little sister who wants her big brother’s approval desperately.

Arya’s given a command of a section of the digging crew. Sansa is kind enough to give her a center moat assignment, rather than one of the squads responsible for connecting the new moat to the sewers. Everyone really does get involved. Even children. Indeed, Arya makes up games for the younger set, having them pretend to be magical mole people, or mud warriors, the men who built the Red Keep. She also makes competitions, for the children and the adults. Sansa helps her with that. At the end of the day, the amount of dirt and mud dug up is measured. The adult and the child who manage to dig up the most get to have dinner at the high table with the royal family.

Once enough progress is made digging, the masons, smiths, and builders move in to arrange the various sections, devices, and parts. They run low on dragonglass, prompting Jon to fly Viserion to the western shores and fire upon the beaches there, turning the sand to dragonglass. The new obsidian is mined and crafted into many things, including tips to attach to the iron spikes installed in the ditches.

Everyone works and contributes, even those who are not trained in masonry or crafting. A new system is installed wear multiple people are taught a single, separate, little task that is a step in the crafting process. They are put into groups, into lines, made up of different jobs, then materials are passed down among the group, with each person performing their little step in the process quickly and handing them off to the person responsible for the next step until each job is done, and the object is fully crafted. It speeds up the progress considerably.

Reports are sent every few days from Daenerys’s lines, keeping them updated on the progress of the enemy forces. Valiant efforts are being made, but the pressure grows.

Gendry, mastermind of so much of this, is so busy that keeping a distance is hard for neither of them. But as the Others grow closer and time runs out, the more Arya doubts her decision to put off her reconciliation with Gendry.

The fact that Jon is dragging Sansa off to couple every spare minute doesn’t encourage confidence in her choice. Then there’s Bran. A moon passes, and Meera Reed sets off for Greywater Watch. Her little brother has been quieter, more withdrawn ever since. He spends nearly all his time at the Heart Tree, either having visions or seeking them out. It seems more like he’s trying to escape than anything. Arya tries to coax a smile from him, but it’s fruitless. She gets the feeling that Bran resents her decisions regarding Gendry, especially now that he’s been deprived his own sweetheart’s company.

Arya throws herself into working, training, and commanding. She purposely exhausts herself so that she has little opportunity or energy to indulge her doubts. Her life becomes metal, mud, and men. It suits her, she likes to think. And yet…
She’s afraid of the day when her labor bears fruit. She’s as afraid as everyone else. At spare moments, she finds herself looking off to the North horizon line, half expecting the army of the dead to emerge.

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Daenerys:

Shrieks, everywhere. Shrieks from Drogon and Rhaegal, from the men below, from the White Walkers, from their Ice Giants and Spiders, from the wind that whips past them. Daenerys’s ears have been damaged beyond repair. She’s started hearing a ringing whenever her surroundings are quiet, and sometimes, that’s all she can hear.

They’re not far from Ironrath, that much she knows. And she hopes that this skirmish will not make it close to the castle. She’s been luring the enemy away from populated areas during these battles. It’s required her to learn more than she ever expected to know of the geography of the North, but she’s glad for it.

She’s not too happy by the giants, though. They will make powerful assets in a siege. There aren’t many, though, at least, and she’s managed to take one out.

Unfortunately, she’s not brilliant with weapons. Fighting the giants requires her to fling full-sized blades at them, as arrows rarely do much to slow them down unless they hit very particular points, and Daenerys is not a good enough shot to manage. She’s had a collection of Dothraki Arakhs, coated in poison, forged for her that she throws. But she has to get at close range to hit them properly.

She intends to hit them properly. If she doesn’t hit enough to kill the giant, then her weapons cannot be retrieved. And forging new blades in a moving battle retinue is difficult.

Men are crushed under one giant’s massive feet. The giant, ugly creatures are not slowed by the mud trenches her forces have dug, and they carry Wights and Others on the shoulders and backs. The creatures riding the beasts fire arrows and throw spears.

One of the three giants heads right for the center of camp—where the most crucial supplies are stored. Daenerys yanks at Drogon’s reins and whispers for him to fly straight toward the creature.

The speed Drogon reaches, shooting right for the giant like an arrow itself, only makes the wind shriek louder. He goes almost too fast for Daenerys to see the torrent of arrows in time. Several miss her by a hair. Three grazes her leathers, one hits her steel helmet so hard it knocks her dizzy, bruises her, and makes it sound like she’s stuck her head inside an enormous bell.

Drogon roars as two arrows pierce him: one near his neck, another at his flank. Dany, shaken by her own wounds, barely manages to climb and lean over and yank the arrows out.

She shouts orders for evasive maneuvers, and her dragon zigzags and dodges as more arrows fly at them. They circle overhead the giant, distracting the enemy. The giant swats at them like a cat with yarn until, at long last, it seems the icy passengers have run out of arrows. Daenerys reaches for one of her blades as Drogon moves within range.

She flings the blade at the giant’s neck with all of her might while ordering Drogon to fire. The arakh, camouflaged by her dragon’s flames, gets lodged in the enemy’s back. Several all of the wights are destroyed by Drogon’s breath, though the White Walkers remain alive. The giant roars. But instead of trying to dig the blade out as Dany expected, it reaches out towards them again.
Daenerys calls for Drogon to evade, but not quickly enough. The giant grabs hold of her dragon’s tail and gives it a sharp yank.

The Dragon Queen is thrown back off the saddle, one ankle getting twisted and caught in her left stirrup. She screams as she feels her joint come apart. She is banged hard against Drogon’s flank, landing hard on her arm and sending another terrible pain through it.

“DRACARYS!” She shrieks.

Drogon is too thrown, though. For a moment, Daenerys is sure this is the end for both of them. But another torrent of flame, one with emerald sparks, comes from another direction. Rhaegal.

Daenerys attempts to pull herself back into position with both arms, only to experience another shockwave of pain from the one she landed on. Gasping, she tries to pull herself back with her good arm alone, something she barely accomplishes.

The giant’s head erupts in Rhaegal’s flames, and the White Walkers riding it try to put it out as the giant begins to fall to its knees. Blinking back tears from the pain, Dany reaches for her other weapons: small dragonglass knives, about twice the size of the average arrowhead. She throws them as much as she can with her good arm. Some hit. Some don’t.

Drogon begins to fall, unable to reach proper balance. The giant falls to its knees, and finally, to the ground completely. A squad of men, led by Grey Worm, rush the beast and the remaining Others, firing arrows, flinging spears, throwing blades.

Daenerys tries to focus on getting her and Drogon to the ground safely, crying out orders to her wounded stead. They manage not to crash, but their landing is far from easy, and Dany is nearly thrown from his back on impact. Almost at her limit, Daenerys uses what’s left of her energy to untangle her dislocated ankle from the stirrup, then lets herself slide from the saddle down one giant, black, extended wing. She comes to a stop at the end of Drogon’s leathery flesh and stays there, arranged like a broken china doll.

That’s how her men find her and carry her off. She’s given milk of the poppy and a leather belt to bite on as the maester on hand painfully resets her ankle. She loses consciousness before getting an answer on the results of the battle and when she wakes, her arms is in a dressed splint and cast. She’s broken her arm, cracked two ribs, bruised her tailbone, nearly severed all the sinew in her ankle, and had a concussion.

The good news is that most of the injuries can be healed quickly, and those that can’t can be accommodated. After a few days, she can fly. And the battle went well enough that she can rest for those days. Two of the three giants, including the one she faced, were killed, and the third was wounded. Drogon will heal quickly as well.

She’s transferred to Ironrath castle and treated well by the Forresters, the ruling family.

It’s a queer experience, being injured like this. She hasn’t been properly bedridden since Drogo’s death. The bed is warm, and the people are kind, but Daenerys finds herself troubled. She wishes she were at Winterfell, being tucked away warmly by the Starks. She doesn’t know the Forresters at all, and she’s at the most vulnerable she’s been in years. At least when Drogo died, she knew those of her khalasaar that attended her.

After weeks of freezing in a tent, ironically, it’s this warm bed where she feels the most lonely.

When she’s finally allowed to fly again, her arm is still in its splint, but she’s eager to get back into
the action. The enemy makes progress while she is indisposed, and she’s determined to push them back a bit.

Easier said than done, however. A fortnight passes, and it’s clear that they’ve reached the point where they can barely keep them at bay at all. Too many men were lost holding back the enemy while Daenerys was bedridden. It leaves them with only one feasible option.

Time to retreat. Time to return to Winterfell and regroup.

*Jon, Sansa, Bran, Arya, Alysanne, Serena, please forgive me,* she thinks as she directs Drogon to fly her south.

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