Summary

you move on when your heart finally understands that there is no turning back (JRR Tolkien)

let it not be said that when came the war of the age, the West stood aside.

Or the one where Jaime rides north with an army.

Notes

Hi everyone, welcome to this little story (possibly three chapters at the most), set post season seven. With all the bashing that's been going round the Jonsa & Jonerys tags recently: I'm just going to say this. This is a story about a love triangle/square. It's complicated. Characters have mixed feelings about other characters. There will be angst.
Characters will make mistakes/do stuff you may not necessarily agree with. That doesn't mean I'm bashing them.

This IS going to be from Sansa & Jaime's POV, which means that Jon & Daenerys might not necessarily be portrayed in the best light. I very much welcome comments & concrit; it's what helps us grow as writers. But if we could keep this a respectful discussion, that would be much appreciated.

Without further ado, enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Jaime looks upon Winterfell with a heavy heart; he did not ever think he would return to the North, much less to such a place, but these are extraordinary times. In truth, he should have expected his sister to act in the way she had. The Cersei Lannister on the Iron Throne is no longer the Cersei he knew and loved, and he can no longer support her. It had been agony; as though he was tearing himself apart, as though he was cutting off his own other hand, but when she’d instructed that monstrous guard of hers to execute him, he’d known it was the end.

So he’d ridden North, and found not only Brienne and her squire but also the Lannister armies on the Kingsroad, and to his surprise, they’d pledged to follow him against the army of the dead. *Much is spoken of Northron honour,* his old friend and general Addam Marbrand had said to him, *but let it not be said that when came the war of the age, the West stood aside. We will not stand aside, and where you go, Lord Jaime, we would follow you. Your father led us well, you have led us well and not astray, and we would follow you. We would serve you and only you, Jaime Lannister of Casterly Rock, Lord Paramount of the West.*

He’d been unable to do anything but accept these oaths as thirty thousand men had sunk swiftly to one knee, swords and spears held high aloft, in the manner of the West, and had found himself the leader of his own faction to do with as he chose.
Jaime had immediately sent a raven to Winterfell to indicate that, all things being well, his forces would reach Moat Cailin two and a half weeks hence, and anticipated reaching Winterfell a week later. He had not been mistaken; the Kingsroad, by and large, had been clear, and his army, the best fighting force in the Seven Realms, can move very quickly when so desired. Now, Winterfell is upon them, and the grey castle upon the snowy moor provokes emotions in him that he does not know how to deal with.

He shakes his head and touches his heels to his black destrier. He canters to the front of the line, his generals on their own mounts beside him, standard bearers on the flanks, the Lannister lion roaring proudly.

The ancestral seat of House Stark is on a war footing, he can see, and according to Brienne, it is all due to the Lady Sansa Stark, not her idiot of a brother who is King in the North. The Northerners, smallfolk, highborn and soldiers alike are gathering in this stronghold; bringing provisions with them, working in the glasshouses and the forges, building fortifications doused in pitch so they can be set alight when the time comes. Row upon row of tents are pitched outside the stone walls, and the sounds of an encamped army carry over the fells to Jaime. The North entire has answered the Lady of Winterfell’s call, as can be seen by the pennants flying proudly in the wind. But they are joined by the Houses of the Vale and the Riverlands too, and Jaime can only admire the Lady Sansa’s finesse, as well as her foresight. Any good commander worth his bread and salt knows that good logistics win wars. The promise of some abstract, far-off ideal is cold comfort, Jaime knows, when the cold and the hunger and the misery sets in. Such a host is like to mutiny, and Jaime cannot help but wonder, having seen the Dothraki and the Unsullied’s scant clothing in King’s Landing, how the Dragon Queen’s forces intend to weather such a harsh winter, the harshest winter in a thousand years, especially when the Targaryen has a penchant for incinerating food trains as well as people.

He raises his fist to call his host to a halt, and from behind him comes the crashing sound of thirty thousand men, horses, armourers and maesters stopping suddenly. He glances at his generals; good men, intelligent and brave men all, and sees only calm impassiveness in their features. Jaime shifts impatiently in his saddle, his mount snorting.

He’d asked Brienne and Podrick to ride ahead when he’d estimated they were an hour away in order to give the castle and the Lady of Winterfell advance warning of the Lannister host’s arrival, but he had not expected such a welcoming committee as the one he gets.

For it is Sansa Stark herself, clothed in Stark grey and shining white, russet hair loose in the wind, who comes to greet the Lannister host, a white direwolf at her horse’s heels. She is accompanied by all the Lords that have come to her court, each with their own pennant flying. It is a glorious sight, and Jaime dryly acknowledges to himself how impressed he is. She might not have the title of Queen, but Sansa Stark commands with an assurance he has very rarely seen; only his father, perhaps, comes close. He watches carefully the Lords’ reactions; from the tones of their voices, from the way they enter into open discussions with her as the setting up of the Lannister encampment is co-ordinated, Jaime realises the Lords not only hold her in great respect, but that...
she has more than their fealty - she has their love. He cannot help but compare her to the other two
Queens he has recently interacted with. His sister, well… The Lady Sansa must have learnt from
Cersei precisely how not to rule. And the Dragon Queen - oh, the Dragon Queen might be able to
conquer, but he has seen nothing that indicates she would make a good ruler. On that battlefield,
indeed, he’d seen more than the ghost of Aerys the Mad; it was as though he’d seen Aerys the Mad
reborn. Sardonically, he thinks the Tarlys would agree with him: bend the knee or be burnt alive is
not a different or better choice than the choice Cersei would have given them. In fact; it is exactly
the same thing Cersei would have demanded, and actually it is not a choice at all.

The Lannisters will never bow to the Dragon Queen; her actions against the Tarlys will haunt the
West in the same way the murders of Lords Rickard and Brandon Stark haunt the North; neither
will submit, though Jon Snow might have done, to the rule of another Targaryen.

“My Lady Stark,” Jaime says, bowing his head. “It is good to see you alive and home.”

“Thank you, my Lord Jaime,” the Lady of Winterfell replies softly, mouth twitching in amusement.
“Though you will understand me if I say that I do not know you well enough to know whether or
not I return the sentiment.”

Jaime barks a laugh. “Indeed, my lady.”

“As the Lady of the North, I welcome you to Winterfell. Would you prefer to see your men settled
or come inside the keep to refresh yourself, Lord Jaime? It cannot have been an easy journey.”

“Thank you, my lady Stark,” Jaime answers, breathing more easily. For obvious reasons, he’d been
uncertain of his reception in Winterfell, and even his long conversations with Brienne on the road
about the cold, melancholy, loving Lady Stark had not entirely erased his apprehension. Though
she remains formal and polite, he senses that her tones could be far more glacial, and is grateful
that they are not. There is a willingness to co-operate in her that is absent from the very great
majority of other important people he’s met in his life. “If it is not too much trouble, I would see
my men settled first. We brought what provisions we could; grain and wine and pitch and blankets
and leathers. I would not have dreamt of asking you to provide for my soldiers, but if I might offer
the suggestion that we co-ordinate our supplies?”

He is rewarded with what he senses is a rare smile appearing on the Lady of Winterfell’s face, as
well as the Northron Lords’ expressions shifting to something resembling grudging respect. She
nods once, swiftly. “A good plan, my lord Jaime.”

“Where shall I tell my men to pitch their tents, Lady Stark?”
She gestures to the right side of the castle with an elegant gloved hand. “I can give you the terrain nearest Wintertown. Your men will be responsible for that section of the fortifications we are building.”

Jaime nods. “Excellent.” He turns to relay his orders to Addam, who has become, unofficially, his aide-de-camp. His ten Lannister generals salute their acknowledgement, fists over their hearts, before wheeling their mounts swiftly around and cantering the length of the columns, shouting orders in their best battlefield voices. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the Lady Sansa giving orders to her own lords, about building this section of the fortification wall higher and asking for another count of the pitch barrels, and then, suddenly, it is just the two of them, facing each other on horseback.

“Will you ride with me, Lord Jaime?”

He nods, and urges his horse forward to her level, halting beside her as they both scan the rows of tents that stretch for miles, the ugly fortifications that are a black scar upon the snowy white landscape, the noise of the armies a distant, incessant rumble in their ears.

“This is impressive, my lady.”

“If the next words out of your mouth, my lord, are anything along the lines of for a lady -”

That riposte gets a proper grin out of him, and he shakes his head ruefully. “That was not what I meant. Whilst every other player in the game, and I include your brother and my sister in this,” he continues more seriously, “has been squabbling about who gets to sit on that fucking throne, you’ve been ensuring there is actually a realm to fight for. It is an admirable thing, and it is no small thing.”

She brushes off his compliment, earnest and sincere as it is, with a tiny smile, before continuing, leaping to her brother’s defence. “Jon is focused on the war to the North, not the one to the South for the Iron Throne.”

Jaime eyes her somewhat sadly, though he forces himself to keep his tone light, even as he fully realises the serious nature of their discussion. “Really? Then why did he announce in public; in front of Cersei no less, that he has decided to bend the knee and declare for Daenerys Targaryen?”
Her gaze snaps to his, and he is shocked to watch her mask crumble as she struggles to contain her shock, her fury, and something he is almost entirely certain is heartbreak. “In front of your sister?” Her voice shakes, eyes wide. He can only nod in response. A bitter laugh bursts from her lips at that, as she turns her head to stare blankly into the distance. Her fingers clench on her reins and her horse tosses his head, snorting and prancing. “I told him, I warned him… Joffrey beat me for the North, Robb abandoned me for the North, your father wed me to Tyrion for the North, Baelish stole me for the North and sold me to Ramsey Bolton for the North, Ramsey Bolton raped me and cut me for the North and now my brother gives a Targaryen the North?” She grits her teeth and Jaime cannot think of anything to say. “He gave away that which was not his to give, he’s as good as given away my birthright to this foreigner from the east who knows nothing of this land…” when her gaze meets his, it is blank and dead and it makes Jaime wince. He sympathises with her sentiments of bone-deep betrayal, knowing the feeling all too well. “I will not give away the North again; the North will not submit again, because the North remembers.”

“Daenerys attacked some of my men after we took Highgarden; she burned the foodstuffs we were bringing back to the capital, burned my men alive… have you ever heard a man scream as he burns?” Jaime asks hoarsely, shuddering. “I have. It is not something I ever wish to hear again. I heard your grandfather’s screams as Aerys burnt him alive. She managed to capture some of my soldiers, including one of my commanders, Lord Tarly, and his son Lord Dickon -”

“She told them she was not there to be the Queen of the Ashes, and then immediately told them to bend the knee to her or die. I keep hearing all this propaganda, including from Tyrion, about how she’s come to save us all and all the rest of it-”

“She burned them alive, did she not?”

“Indeed,” Jaime answers heavily, absently watching a squadron of his men hauling one of the scorpions through Winterfell’s great gates. “In that respect, at the very least, she is exactly like Cersei.”

The Lady of Winterfell furrows her brow thoughtfully. “If you are asking me whether the North, the Riverlands and the Vale will ever bow to another Targaryen, the answer is no. Not willingly, at least.”

For all his quips about being a slow learner, Jaime is more than intelligent enough to read the question hidden in her words. “You know, the notion of the Seven Kingdoms united under a single monarch is a Targaryen notion; only three hundred years old. I might not have been the most assiduous scholar of history, but I do know that far from ‘saving’ Westeros, the Targaryens brought
only war and unrest; the Kingdoms co-operated far better and were more peaceful and prosperous before Aegon landed.”

He sees a shrewd light glint in the Lady’s eyes even as a pleased smile flits across her face. “A Stark never lies,” she rejoins airily. “And of course, it is not propaganda if it is true, is it?”

Jaime huffs out a surprised laugh at that. “Indeed, my lady.”

She grimaces. “I dread to think that I will somehow have to provide leathers and blankets for legions of Dothraki screamers and Unsullied.”

“That is not our problem, my lady. If the Dragon Queen is not adequately prepared for winter the fault lies squarely with her.” He says sharply, before smirking, emerald eyes glinting. “Though I cannot deny that I would thoroughly enjoy seeing the expression on the Dragon Queen’s face when she sees her fierce, brave Dothraki screamers and cockless Unsullied cowering and trembling in the snow.”

The Lady Stark shoots him an impassive look, though there is something in her eyes which speaks of her amusement. “Feeling insecure, are we, my lord?” she rejoins dryly.

Jaime raises an eyebrow. “Do I frighten you, my lady?”

She snorts, her tone frigid. “If I was able to survive Joffrey, survive Baelish, survive Ramsey’s rape of me in my own home, what makes you believe I could ever be afraid of you? You who pushed my little brother from the tower?”

Jaime freezes, bowing his head, and he swallows unsteadily. She looks at him steadily, her expression unreadable, waiting to see how he will respond. He is dimly aware of bending forwards to pluck his hunting knife from his left boot, spinning it in his hand as he straightens, sidling his horse closer to hers, and offering her the blade hilt first. She takes it with a gentle hand, her gaze quizzical.

“Here is the jugular vein,” he says softly, touching his neck with the gloved fingers of his remaining hand. “Aim here, and I’ll die. Of course, you are within your rights to use the blade however you wish so that I might atone for my sins, but if I may, I would only ask that you make it quick.” He only briefly sees her wide-eyed expression of stunned, incoherent shock before he tilts his head back, baring his neck to her, awaiting her judgement.
Your death is not mine to ask for. Before enduring Joffrey, Baelish and Ramsey, I might well have given you a different answer. I might well have slashed that dagger across your throat. But whilst I was Joffrey’s prisoner; you were my brother Robb’s. And whilst your family, your father and your brother did everything to get you back, mine let me languish in my cage. My illusions have been shattered again and again... when I learned how you were treated in your captivity, how you suffered as I suffered... I cannot end a life that has unfolded so similarly to my own. And if that makes me stupid and foolish and naive, then so be it. I’ve always been told I’m a slow learner, but I will stand by my decision as I have by the rest.

He’d been ridiculously humbled and awed by her words, by the clear, even, sincere tone with which she delivered them. He’d never really thought of the similarities in their circumstances before, but he can see them now, and it breeds a sympathy for her, an affinity that goes beyond mere compassion. He’d bowed his head and thanked her.

I hope I prove worthy of this gift, my lady.

And then they’d ridden through the encampment, and that had enabled Jaime to draw another similarity between the two of them. Their styles of leadership are very similar. Just as the Lady Sansa knows the names of every soldier sworn to her, whether noble or not, she knows who has sustained what injuries, and she is able to ask about the progress of that soldier’s specific task, he, encouraged by his father, had always made it a point of sharing a tale and a flagon of ale with his soldiers, learning their names and those of their wives and children, knowing that personal ties are an important strategic gift, and one it is stupid not to cultivate. Somehow, he does not believe the Dragon Queen finds it an important use of her time to do the same. But as he rides through the camp outside Winterfell, he notices that the Lady does the same with the Lannister soldiers, introducing herself, asking their names, if they are comfortable, if they have enough ale and meat, how they are settling in. He finds himself asking for introductions to the Lady’s men (for he finds he cannot think of them in any other way; their devotion is clear) and though he sees the Lady is surprised, she acquiesces, and from the sly smile he manages to catch on her face, he knows he’s impressed her. He finds Northmen and Valemen and Rivermen are not so different from Westermen, and he quickly finds common ground, and he sees behind him and the Lady, the men from the two separate hosts beginning to engage one another, and he realises that they are laying the foundations for something far more lasting.

They have just ridden through the gates of the castle (he has to shake away the memories that linger, a bitter aftertaste) when a relatively young man comes rushing towards them. “My Lady Sansa, Lord Bran wishes to speak with you. The Lady Arya is already in the godswood.”
Jaime nods, knowing a dismissal when he hears one. “I will see you later, my lady. I should speak to my generals in any case.”

The young man turns to him. “Oh no, Lord Jaime, my apologies, I meant you as well.”

Jaime nods stiffly. He cannot say the notion of meeting Bran Stark again face-to-face holds any sort of appeal.

“Thank you, Maester Tarly,” Lady Stark says, dismounting nimbly, and Jaime feels himself freeze again. Tarly. Young Dickon had often spoken of his kindly elder brother.

“So Samwell Tarly?” Jaime wonders.

“My lord?” the portly man turns.

“I grew to know your brother Dickon well.” Jaime doesn’t know what possesses him to say it, and the expression of delight that suffuses Samwell Tarly’s face makes him sick.

“Dickon? He’s well?”

Beside him, he sees the Lady Sansa close her eyes in forlorn commiseration, and Jaime dismounts, thinking that he owes it to this man to tell him what happened, man to man, looking straight in the eyes. Dickon Tarly was one of Jaime’s men, after all. He lays his good hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “The Dragon Queen attacked our food train. We could have taken the Dothraki, but with the dragon we stood virtually no chance.” His voice is clipped, and he tries to relay the news as briefly as possible. “But our men stood their ground against that fucking beast and fought bravely to the last man. She burnt the food and men alike.” He shakes his head. “I tried to end it. Bronn managed to wound the dragon with the scorpion, and I came very close to killing Daenerys with a lance. Your father and brother were captured with their battalion. The Dragon Queen gave them her speech about how she had not come to conquer and kill, and then gave them her ultimatum: bend the knee or die. Your family did not bend the knee, and she burned them alive. They were good men, and brave, and you can be proud of them.” His voice softens. “I’m sorry.”

Samwell Tarly nods frantically, tears welling in his eyes. “I think some part of me knew… I did not have a good relationship with my father, but I love - I loved my brother. And Jon’s bent the knee to this woman?” He breathes deeply, trying to collect himself. “Forgive me, my lord, I -”
“He was your brother, Maester Tarly. Of course you mourn.” Jaime says firmly, dismissing the apology; it is entirely misplaced.

“Go and rest, Sam,” Lady Stark interjects softly. “I believe I remember the way to my own godswood.” She turns to Jaime. “If you would follow me, my lord?”

“How long do we have?” Lady Stark asks her brother, pale.

“Days. No more than a week and they will be upon us.”

“What I cannot understand is how they got past the Wall. There has been no word from the Night’s Watch.” The Lady of Winterfell paces furiously. Jaime says nothing, only carefully watching her face.

“Can you see anything, Bran?” the Lady Arya asks suddenly from her position leaning against the Heart Tree.

Lord Bran sighs. It is the most emotion he’s shown thus far, and it isn’t much, but both of the boy’s sisters look suddenly heartened by the minute flicker of his eyes. Jaime frowns, perplexed and uneasy. What in the Seven Hells has been going on in the North? “I can try,” is the eventual reply, in an even, collected voice that sounds strange in its monotony. “I do not understand how; but the Night King not only sees me when I warg, but he can also push me out. You must understand that the risk we incur is nothing less than warning the Night King that we know now that he marches upon us.”

“I don’t care.” The Lady Arya snaps, ignoring the cautioning glance her elder sister throws at her. “Do it, Bran.”

“Arya… this is not a decision to be taken lightly.” The Lady Sansa reminds gently, before turning to address her brother once more. “Bran - your previous visions of the Night King - have they generally been worth the risk in the past?”

“They have.”
The Lady Sansa nods once, sharply, before turning, to Jaime’s great surprise, to him. “My Lord Jaime, what is your opinion?” At his stunned gaze, she only smirks, replying archly, “We are allies, are we not? And allies work together.”

Jaime blinks, struggling to regain his bearings. With that simple response, the Lady Sansa has demonstrated that she not only desires co-operation but also knows precisely how to go about doing so. He is abruptly reminded that Cersei has failed in this, that the Dragon Queen has failed in this, that even Jon, for all his grandiose speechmaking about the importance of working together, failed too. “I know nothing of wargs, but from your words, Lord Bran, I would say that this is a risk worth taking.”

The Lord Bran nods once, before turning his chair so he can look up at the face carved into the wood. He inhales once, twice, and then Jaime sees his eyes turn as white as milk. The greenseer freezes, held in place by Jaime knows not what force, and a heavy, crushing silence descends upon them as they wait; a thread unravelling and being pulled taught, about to snap.

And then the Lord Bran falls forward with a great heaving gasp, his eldest sister only just managing to catch him. She holds the greenseer’s shoulders to steady him, kneeling at his feet, eyes scanning her brother’s face.

“Bran! What is it? What did you see?”

“Dragon,” Lord Bran gasps out, eyes wild, voice hollow. “The Night King brought down one of the dragons and then resurrected it, and then melted the Wall.”

“Fuck.” The Lady Arya swears, and though Jaime is surprised he agrees with the sentiment, and without meaning to shares a hopeless glance with the Lady of Winterfell.

But before anyone can begin to raise ideas about possible strategies, the stunned silence is broken by the Lady Sansa’s startled cry as her little brother pitches forwards into her arms, body rigid and eyes white again. The younger sister, the Lady Arya drops to her knees as well. Jaime realises he’s breathing harshly, not able to understand what his eyes see, and the gnawing, peculiar feeling of helplessness he became all too familiar with during his imprisonment once again rears its ugly head, clawing its way up his stomach to squeeze his heart straight out of his chest.

This time the Lord Bran comes back to himself with an eerie, unsettled look in his eyes, before proceeding expel the contents of his stomach into the snow. Jaime winces at the awful retch-
splatter sound and the foreboding settles deep into his bones. Neither Lady speaks, and they wait for the Lord Bran to cough and spit and wipe his mouth, grimacing, with the back of his hand. The male Stark drags himself along the ground so that he is not sitting in his own filth and Jaime wants to bring up his own breakfast, feeling sick to death with horror and shame.

“Jon…” Lord Bran rasps out. “Jon not only bent the knee, but he bedded the Dragon Queen as well. He’s her consort.”

Jaime grits his teeth. Somehow, it always comes down to lust, does it not? Aerys, Rhaegar, Robert, Cersei, Ramsey Bolton, even Tyrion - had Jaime’s little brother not deliberately gone out of his way to remind Tywin of his own father, events might have unfolded differently - and now Jon and Daenerys. The Lady Arya begins to protest vociferously, pleading with Bran, saying it must be a lie, a lie, the vision must have been false, but it is the Lady Sansa’s reaction that intrigues Jaime the most. She stills so completely she might have become a statue; her disquiet betrayed only by the momentarily shattered expression in her eyes, before the frost reforges itself, Jaime knows, somehow more brittle than it was before.

When the Dead arrive, Jaime does not expect to survive. Neither does the Lady of Winterfell, nor the assembled lords, nor the soldiers. They have the scorpions; true - a slim chance of bringing down the dragon, but how many will die before they are able to do so. He sees the fury in the Northron eyes, in the eyes of his men too; it is because of Daenerys Targaryen’s selfish, self-righteous demands that the only proof worth having was to bring the army of the dead to the summit, because Daenerys Targaryen thinks so highly of herself that she believes herself invincible that they all now have an undead dragon bearing down on Winterfell.

Despite this grim mood, the Lady of Winterfell rallies them with the most stunning piece of rhetoric Jaime believes he’s ever seen. The Lady, clad in white and grey, a quiver strapped to her back and wearing silver armour and a wreath of weirwood leaves in her hair, sits astride her white palfrey, amidst the battle itself, holding the reins loosely in her right hand and a bow in her left. In contrast to the armies of the West, who use flag signalling to deploy their armies, the North use drums, the Vale and the Riverlands horns, but a system is worked out, Jaime at the Lady of Winterfell’s side atop the northmost ramparts of the castle, where they have a clear view of everything. Next to them is a small guard, along with signal bearers from the North, the Vale, the Riverlands and the West.

The massive earth and wood fortifications that circle Winterfell and Wintertown entire have one gap in them; a gate to the North, to funnel the undead into an area in front of Winterfell’s northern rampart. There are two earthen walls; and there are archers and infantry atop the inner circle, to be
set alight when the signal comes for the retreat proper. There is also a sizeable force on Winterfell’s ramparts, as well as soldiers, both infantry and cavalry, stationed in each one of the courtyards. The Great Hall has been converted by Maester Samwell Tarly into a field hospital, where those who cannot fight are also. The agreed strategy is to attempt to separate the dead into small groups, small enough to be able to pick them off without too much loss of life. The fortifications have been soaked with pitch and set alight, built with enough wood and peat for the structures to burn for days at a time. Atop Winterfell’s great towers are the four scorpions Jaime was able to bring North; and those men manning them have one task and one alone - to bring down that dragon. Most of the cavalry are stationed on Winterfell’s south side, between the encampment and the ramparts, ready to be used as a hammer blow to prevent the dead from breaching Winterfell’s walls.

Her words ring in his ears as he calls the first volley. My Lords of the North, of the Vale, of the Riverlands and the West. I do not ask you to fight now for this king or that queen; I do not ask you to fight for me. Instead, I ask you to fight for your families, your parents and siblings and children and lovers, for your friends, for this land which belongs to you by right, which has belonged to you for thousands of years. For them, men of the North, men of the Vale and the Riverlands, men of the West, for them I bid you stand and fight with me. This army that bears down upon us; they will not take your food, your land, your livelihoods, your loved ones, not so long as there is breath in my body. As my sister often reminds me, the only answer we give to the god of death is, not today. Not today!

And forty-five thousand men, Northmen, Riverlanders, Valemen, Westermen, had responded with a cheer like to shake the very foundations of Winterfell itself, swords raised high aloft, spears thumping on shields, and Jaime at her side had thought suddenly, this is what it feels like to have a worthy ruler. The sudden admiration catches him off-guard, and as his gaze catches hers, he is aware that his expression is too open, so he inclines his head to her. Faint colour tinges her cheekbones, but he sees the hint of a smile before she looks away.

And then the air begins to thicken with the stench of fear and courage, and overhead crows begin to circle, and Jaime no longer has time to think as he calls out order after order, sees and hears men begin to fight and fall, sees the crackling flames jump high into the air, and his throat is clogged with the tang of blood and dust and snow, steaming offal and screaming steel, the stench of empty bowels too; the experience of war. It is a kind of primal chaos, but it is one in which Jaime knows his place.

He looses track of time; the dead are falling, slowly, inexorably, and they might just be able to hold out, and that gives him the determination to dig his heels into his mount’s flanks and bring his sword down again and again. The dead breached the first and the second fortification, as the whole war council had known they would, eventually, but they’d had to climb over the veritable mountain of bodies into which fire arrows are being repeatedly shot to prevent them from getting up again. But the line is holding.

And then a scorpion manages to bring down the dragon, and it tumbles from the sky like a stone,
screeching and writhing through the air, to crash into Winterfell’s principal courtyard, and suddenly the Night King is standing in the castle itself, looking entirely unperturbed by his mount’s sudden and ignominious death. Jaime looks at the Lady of Winterfell at his side on the rampart, and makes his decision.

“Stay up here; as long as the men down there on the other side of the walls can see you, and see you in control, they’ll fight on, and fight well. I’ll go and send this creature back to the Seven Hells.”

The Lady of Winterfell blinks, and then nods, before smiling ruefully. “I suppose that if I’d decided your life was mine, I could order you to come back alive, but your life is your own.”

He barks out a laugh at that. “I’ve enjoyed being your ally thus far; I’ll enjoy being your ally once this is over.” She smiles sharply at that, dipping her head in acknowledgement. He frowns, musing. “Ser Arthur Dayne was my mentor when I first joined the Kingsguard; and the only one to agree that I should have kicked Queen Rhaella’s door down when I heard Aerys rape her. Ser Barristan and Ser Gerold told me it was my duty not to protect her from the King. Arthur did the opposite, though in the end, he, too, was powerless to go against Ser Barristan’s command. And he was the Sword of the Morning, and he always used to say to me, just as you Starks warn of the coming of winter, that the dawn yet follows. We can end this now, and then we’ll stand on these very ramparts to welcome the coming of the dawn.”

“Is that a vow, my Lord Jaime?”

“No, my lady,” he replies, a sharp grin on his face. “It’s a statement of intent.”

Her expression remains impassive, though her voice softens. “Then I will hold you to your intent.”

And then Jaime wheels his horse around and carefully steers it down the flight of steps to the courtyard, as he distantly hears the scorpions wheeling around to fire down at the dragon’s new position. He has almost reached the ground when his horse judders, whinnying, and Jaime has only a moment to remember how to fall correctly, rolling in order to stand once again in a single, fluid movement, drawing his sword as he does so, snatching up a shield at the same time, and then striding towards the Night King.

“I can’t be killed by men,” this strange creature announces, in a flat, oddly melodic voice, a little as though it is distorted by water.
“Well,” Jaime shrugs easily, the old cocky bravado slipping seamlessly back into his voice, his posture. “There are no men like me; there is only me.”

“We shall see.”

And then Jaime is fighting for his life. Strangely, he thinks of Ser Arthur Dayne as he does so. It is as though his old mentor is there in that cold, blood courtyard with him, whispering encouragement into his ears, breathing determination into his blood, and he vaguely registers that suddenly, having his sword in his left hand not only feels like an extension of his arm, as it did when he fought with his right hand, but that in his left it also feels like an extension of his soul, that battered part of him he’d thought irrevocably blackened and mutilated. He feels some measure of honour again, and it is this thought that pushes him to win against this foe. And then he sees his opportunity as he brings his Valyrian steel (fitting, somehow, that it should be wielded in defence of the ancestral seat of House Stark) crashing down upon the Night King’s spear, breaking it in half.

In the stunned moment that follows as both of them look down at the broken weapon, Jaime spins, shrugging off his shield in such a manner that it whacks the Night King unceremoniously in the jaw, causing him to stumble unsteadily back, and Jaime seizes this moment to grasp the shard much has he did the lance when he rode against the Dragon Queen outside King’s Landing, nestled into the crook of his elbow, tucked close to his arm, the sharp tip coming to rest in the hollow between thumb and fingers of his golden hand. The shard extends beyond his hand to a length reminiscent of a short sword, and the thought makes him smile grimly. If he is to duel the Night King and finish him, let it be in the manner of Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning, the best man Jaime has ever known.

He continues to drive the Night King back, pressing relentlessly, taking advantage of the slightest opening he can find, and at long last he strikes off the Night King’s head with his sword even has he keeps away his foe’s horizontal strike to the stomach.

In some distant part of him, he expects theatrics of some sort - for the wind to begin to howl, the White Walkers begin to scream and all drop dead - but all that happens is that the Night King’s body sinks slowly to the ground, before dissolving silently to crystalline snow.

And Jaime can only stare as he realises the battle is won, that he is more exhausted than he has ever been, and that he is about to face plant directly into the snow.
in Winterfell’s godswood, before the ancient heart tree, the boy’s white eyes turn blue, and he slumps back into his wheelchair with a simple, I thought that might be the case.
SANSA STARK I

Chapter Summary

I have learnt that to rule is to serve; I will never abandon you, I will never take you for granted, and I will fight for you. Always.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome to Part II, from Sansa's POV this time. Thank you for all the encouragement and comments on this - I can't wait to see what you guys think of this next chapter.

This chapter earns its angst tag; majorly. Trigger warning: panic attacks.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWO

SANSA STARK

The days that follow their unlooked-for victory are long and hard. She sows up soldiers’ legs and sides and heads and arms and she finds that no matter how hard she scrubs her hands the blood still congeals under her fingernails. She sings to men as they die, hearing their last words. She takes to having a scribe accompany her on her rounds in order to create accurate records. This man leaves behind three young children; perhaps a place can be found for them to serve in a keep. That man has been estranged from his father; on his deathbed he asks for forgiveness. Another asks for a tale of the sound of the sea, and yet another speaks through gritted teeth of the prize falcons he sells to the High Lords of the Eyrie. She makes certain she reads every general’s report of casualties, injuries, and men whose incredible courage should be rewarded.
She oversees the funeral pyres, and her brother Bran’s burial, the distribution of food and blankets, and at night, late at night when the moon is high and she is exhausted and she collapses into her cold bed and weeps, and in the morning she dries her tears and is the first person to do rounds in the field hospital; only Lord Jaime sometimes is there before her, and always japing with the injured soldiers, attempting to lift their spirits, and she sees the admiration and the respect they look at him with, and she marvels at it.

Before fighting this battle together, she never would have imagined such an outcome; that she might become fast allies with the Kingslayer, friends, even; but war makes strange bonds.

Four nights after the battle, when she is doing yet another round of the field hospital, the Lord Jaime appears silently at her side. He looks as haggard as she probably does; but the sincere gratitude and respect in the soldiers’ eyes somehow makes it all worth it. She offers him a wan smile in greeting and the corners of his mouth flick up briefly in response.

He sighs deeply, eyes filled with some nameless emotion, and offers her his arm. She stares at it in consternation, head snapping up to meet his gaze when he says quietly, “It is almost dawn. I was going to go up to the ramparts, if you cared to join me.”

Wordlessly, she takes his arm.

They walk in silence up to the rampart from which they commanded that battle; but it is not a tense silence, merely contemplative. They stand side by side, Lord Jaime leaning forwards on his elbows, staring out at the remains of the battle below. The earthen fortifications still burn and the bodies of the dead upon them; they will burn for some days yet, and Sansa hopes that when Jon finally returns home they will be burning still and he will be able to see all that she and her allies have achieved.

And then all thoughts of war and death are thrown out of her mind as the grey light before the dawn turns first yellow and then red as the sun rises and reflects off the snow and it is glorious and she cannot help the smile that stretches wildly over her face. Her elated gaze meets Lord Jaime’s and he smiles back wistfully, a ragged sigh escaping his lips.

“In truth, I did not expect to live,” he confesses quietly. “I thought I would ride into that courtyard and that I would die, but I did not, and I confess I am at a loss as to what we do now.”

Sansa smiles softly. “I thought to die as well, but seeing my people place such faith in me, seeing
my allies place such faith in me, made me determined to live, to show them that their faith was not misplaced.”

“I can assure you it is not,” Jaime replies intently. “You might not wear a crown, but you are worthier than any other I have known to wear it. Your people can see that. So can mine.”

“Well, considering the only rulers you have known were either mad or monsters or both, that doesn’t set the bar very high, does it?” Sansa smirks wickedly, biting back a laugh. The Lord of the West laughs in reply and her amusement is soon joined to his, and she abruptly realises that she has not properly laughed in so long that she has forgotten the sound, forgotten the way it makes the muscles of her stomach work. Who is this creature with the russet hair and the rich laugh and the glittering eyes? She does not recognise herself.

“You know what I mean.”

She smiles, a soft, shy thing. A sincere thing. “Thank you, though I could say the same for you, oh King of the West,” she continues teasingly.

He throws her a dry glance. “It helps that we’ve never wanted each other’s lands, does it not?”

She smiles again. “It does indeed.”

“And now we rebuild,” Lord Jaime continues. “How I am not precisely certain, though continuing as we are might be a good place to start, seeing to the needs of our people here.”

“Whilst we wait for the Dragon Queen of a thousand titles to grace us with her most stupendously glorious presence,” Sansa rejoins sharply, sarcastically.

“Indeed.” The Lord of the West’s eyes glint with feral amusement. “You’ve quite the claws and fangs, my Lady of Winterfell.”

“Direwolf,” Sansa smirks, shrugging her shoulders. The Lord of the West smirks back, emerald eyes glinting, as he inclines his head.
They both turn back to admire the view in front of them, and stand in compatible silence. It feels like centuries since they’ve had a moment of peace, and it is something to be savoured.

“Would you tell me about Ser Arthur Dayne, my lord?” Sansa says eventually in a quiet voice, not entirely knowing why.

“Your appetite for the songs of old has not left you entirely, then?”

“Has yours?” She arches an eyebrow, watches him as a smile begins to play in the corners of his mouth.

“You have me there.”

“We’ve lived through so much, but the words about the dawn, and then seeing it for myself… I now believe there is always hope.” She continues quietly. “And Ser Arthur Dayne seems to be the only man you’ve ever admired. I suppose I’m curious to know why.”

Lord Jaime smiles wistfully. “He was everything a knight should be; he fought like a god, but his prowess was tempered only by his kindness. He was the most compassionate man I’ve ever known, and he took me under his wing. He was the elder brother I never had, a surrogate father, even, considering mine own was absent so often. And I loved Arthur for it.”

“A paragon of virtue, then?” Sansa’s smile widens, touched by the reverence in the Lord of the West’s tone.

“So it would appear; but men are rarely solely what they appear to be. He never made any claims to perfection, he was utterly without pretension of any sort, and could jape as well as anyone.” Lord Jaime chuckles briefly, shaking his head, before continuing more seriously, leaning on an arm to turn and look at Sansa. “He was also Elia’s man, through and through. The only reason Arthur was at the Tower of Joy was because Elia asked him to be, not wanting to make things more difficult with Rhaegar. Arthur argued with Rhaegar for days, weeks, even, when he found out about the liaison with Lyanna.”

“Good gods,” Sansa breathes. “Elia sounds like a saint.”

Lord Jaime nods. “And she received the martyrdom to prove it.”
Sansa laughs bitterly. “It all comes down to lust, in the end, does it not?”

“I have often found myself thinking the same thing, my lady.”

There is a moment of silence.

“How do you endure it?” Sansa says eventually, knuckles white as she grips the edge of the rampart, seemingly unfeeling of the bitter cold of the stone, and Lord Jaime turns to look at her, a touch incredulously, understanding that they are no longer speaking in the abstract, of people long gone.

“How did I endure it?” Lord Jaime repeats softly. “How did I endure Robert Baratheon’s mistreatment of my sister? How did I endure Cersei’s faithlessness, her utter disregard of me when I did not fit in with her plans, which was often? How did I endure her growing madness?” He breaks off, laughing sardonically. “With great difficulty, and eventually not at all.”

Sansa closes her eyes, vehemently forcing back her tears. She will not cry, not now, not in front of anyone. Why? Why, Jon? Why did you betray me? Was it because he’d felt dissatisfied with her, the night they’d lain together, the night before he began his journey south to Dragonstone? Put off by her nervousness, her inexperience, her uncertain responses? The Dragon Queen has had a whole string of lovers; Jon must have found Sansa utterly inadequate in comparison to the foreign Queen’s allure. Joffrey, Cersei, Ramsey, Baelish - every single one has thought her a frigid northern bitch; had told her so to her face. And while Tyrion might never have said such words aloud, she would not be surprised if he’d thought it, lamented her refusal to have anything but the minimum to do with him. In that case, perhaps she is frigid, even as she finds herself starved of touch, kind gestures of affection instead of the kind calculated to hurt and dominate.

She can feel the Lord of the West’s eyes on her, and she angrily brushes away her tears with the backs of her hands, staring determinedly at the landscape beyond. To her very great surprise, when he does speak, it is a voice that is soft and devoid of any sort of judgement. “What you’re thinking isn’t true, my lady. That you’re not good enough, whether in bed or otherwise, that you haven’t given them enough of you, enough trust, enough affection… it is all lies.” Her head snaps up to look at his face. He takes a step closer to her, though remaining far enough away so as not to crowd her, and her eyes scan his in bewilderment. “Cersei could not have endured what you endured, my lady. The Dragon Queen could not have endured it. But you have, and you are not frigid, you are not heartless, and that brother of yours is nothing less than a fool. More than that, he is a fucking idiot. Any man you chose to bestow your affections on would be extremely lucky to have you.”

She splutters out her thanks with a shaky laugh. “How did you know - ” she cuts herself off,
flushing.

“I do have some experience with loving someone you shouldn’t, my lady,” he answers ruefully. She inclines her head, conceding the point, and he offers her a wan smile in response. Then, gently, carefully, he extends his good hand to take hers and squeezes it. She blinks her surprise, but she accepts the gesture, and when she squeezes back, the hesitant smile that grows on the Lord of the West’s face steals her breath.

Samwell Tarly finds them there; looking out at the landscape, and their hands entwined, though a respectable distance between their bodies remains. He is entirely too apologetic to have disturbed them, but Sansa waves the platitude away, extending her remaining hand for the tiny raven scroll he brings them. Upon the red wax is stamped the direwolf’s head and Sansa quails inwardly.

“Thank you, Sam. If you could ask the Lords and my sister to come to my solar; that will have to do as a council chamber for the moment. We will be down shortly.”

Samwell bows and ambles away; Sansa waits until he is out of hearing before apprehensively opening the missive. She looks up at Lord Jaime; his face is impassive, only the slight frown of his brows indicating anything of his thoughts. She slowly unfurls the tiny scrap of parchment and begins to read aloud.

Sansa,

We have only just landed at White Harbor; we were waylaid by the Iron Born, who have somehow acquired mercenaries from the Golden Company. Daenerys unleashed her dragons, but even so, the battle was half fought, and a sizeable amount of the Queen’s forces were sunk, though some twenty-five thousand Unsullied and Dothraki now remain.

We should be at Winterfell inside of a week; that should be enough time to prepare for our arrival, and for you to warn the Northern Lords that I have bent the knee to Daenerys. She will expect you to do the same upon our arrival, and she has promised that we will then fight the White Walkers and the Night King together. I have warned her just how bitter a northern winter is; I do not think she entirely believes me, but any furs and leathers and blankets you can spare for her and her armies would be much appreciated, I am sure.
Jon, Warden of the North

Finished, she clenches her jaw and shakes her head against her tears. “I don’t know why I’m surprised,” she bites out. She doesn’t voice the rest of her thoughts, but they are plain enough on her face, she knows. How can he be so incredibly blind? And why is it always me who was to deal with the consequences of his actions?

Lord Jaime regards her seriously, eyes intent. “The West is your ally. No raven, no Dragon Queen - nothing can change that.”

She stares into his eyes, the fierceness of his expression, the stubborn, earnest set of his jaw. “I believe you,” she nods. “Likewise,” she adds, and she marvels at the flicker of light in the Lord of the West’s eyes that flares as she speaks.

“Well,” he says, once more offering her his arm, “shall we to our conclave?”

The Lords, be they Northmen, Valemen, Riverlanders or Westermen, are all incandescent with fury, as Sansa knew they would be. Arya stands, scowling mutinously next to Brienne and Pod. Sansa does not like the expression on her sister’s face, and some part of her dreads that her little sister will choose Jon over her, even though this betrayal - for it is a betrayal and no mistake - is hard to swallow.

“Peace, my dear lords,” Sansa says, raising a hand. “Jon is my brother, and I love him, but this is an insult; this is a betrayal, one that as Lady of Winterfell I cannot countenance. We Westerosi, we defeated the White Walkers. The Lord of the West slew the Night King. Not Jon, not Daenerys, not her armies. We don’t want her and we don’t need her, and she has no right to these lands. I would not presume to ask for your choice one way or another; you must each do as your own consciences dictate, but I will tell you now that I will not submit to her. I was forced to submit to Joffrey, to Cersei, to Baelish, to Ramsey Bolton and I will never allow myself to be forced to submit again; not to the Dragon Queen, not to anyone. If she wants Winterfell she can come and claim it; I will fight her myself until my last breath. I would rather die, with my integrity and my freedom intact, than live a slave again. Never again.”
Lyanna Mormont steps forward. “We’re no Southron turncloaks, my lady. Jon abdicated; he has abandoned us, he is therefore no longer our King. Bear Island stands with you. Bear Island stands with Winterfell. Bear Island stands with the North, and I’ll say it to the Dragon Queen’s face and gladly. If you burn, I burn with you.”

“Thank you, Lyanna.” Sansa nods, smiling at the younger girl. “I have no intention of burning; our victory over the White Walkers provides us with a considerable amount of leverage.”

“We’ll have even more, Lady Stark, if we leave that abomination of a dragon beast to rot in your courtyard; I’d wager the Dragon Queen’s face will be quite something when she rides in to that.” Lord Jaime says, a feline-sharp smirk on his face. This is greeted with approving nods and rumblings of laughter, and Sansa inclines her head, a grin playing on her own lips. He catches her eye and winks, and she bites back a laugh.

“I take it this idea meets your approval, my lords,” she says dryly before continuing. “I will tell you now that I intend to force negotiations, and that I intend to successfully broker an acceptance and recognition of Northron independence.”

“My Lady, the Vale would have you, not the Dragon Queen. We should be shamed to submit to her when we have you.” Lord Royce interjects, and Sansa smiles wonderingly.

“And us, my lady,” the Riverlords add, and Sansa can only scan their faces, eyes wide, smiling wonderingly. She shakes her head internally; there will be time later to parse this; at this very moment she needs must reply. Swallowing unsteadily, she makes her decision.

Shaking, fists clenched to hide her nervousness, she sinks to her knees on the floor of her solar, ignoring the shocked murmuring and shifting and exclamations this causes. Smiling slightly up at them, she raises her right hand; silence falls immediately. “You say I do not need to kneel at your feet, my lords. I do. I have learnt that to rule is to serve; in asking me to rule, I am the servant of the Riverlands, of the Vale, of the North. I will never abandon you, I will never take you for granted, and I will fight for you. Always.”

In the Godswood, Arya snarls at her. “How could you? Jon left you in charge, he trusted you, and you betray him like this. I always knew you wanted power, and you seize it the moment he leaves.”
“That is not fair.” Sansa snaps coldly. “He betrayed us to a Targaryen. Have you not been talking to the Westermen? She burns people alive. She is a tyrant, and she does not deserve to have what Robb died for, what Rickon died for, what I was sold and tortured for. It is not hers to have. The Stark birthright is over eight thousand years old. The Targaryens only landed three hundred years ago and brought with them only strife and suffering. As Lady of Winterfell it is my responsibility to choose what is in my people’s best interest, regardless of my personal feelings. That is what it means to rule.”

“But if you submit, then everything can go back to the way it was; Jon will be here too. We’re a wolfpack; remember?”

Sansa laughs bitterly. “What part of Jon being her consort did you not understand? He won’t stay here; she’ll want to keep him close, in the South. He’ll be with her, not with us.”

“And you think you can do better than him, do you?”

“I already have.” Sansa snarls dangerously. “I’ve been making sure there’s actually something to come back to whilst he’s been cruising around, fucking the Dragon Queen to his heart’s content.”

“Dear gods, you’re jealous,” Arya whispers incredulously. “That’s what all this is about, not power, not the North. You love him and you’re jealous.”

“I do love him, and I love the North as much as I love him, and my freedom and the freedom of the North is something I will always fight for,” Sansa replies quietly, pressing the back of her hand against her mouth, desperately trying to force the sobs back down to her heart where they will never see the light of day. “I love him and he betrayed me in the most intimate way possible on top of abandoning his people. What would you have me do? Forgive? Forget? Move on and bend the knee to Daenerys?”

“Yes! Can’t you be happy for him? What should it matter who he fucks if that’s the only way the alliance with her holds long enough to defeat Cersei?”

Sansa reels back. Be happy for him? When she can barely breathe from the agony she feels? Forgive him, when he has betrayed her in such a way? Forget, when the North remembers, always? Bend the knee, and humiliate herself, live and retain her lands only at the pleasure of the woman with whom Jon betrayed her? She cannot. She will not.
“I have every right to be angry with him. I have every right to be furious with him, and you cannot tell me that I do not. I trusted him, I held Winterfell for him, I fought for him when Littlefinger was trying to turn us all against one another, I have loved him, and he has thrown that all back in my face. He has used me, and I have had more than enough of being used.”

“Jon would never use any one; that’s insane!” Arya denies with a vicious shake of her head, stepping closer so Sansa is forced back against the white trunk of the heart tree. The sheer hatred in her little sister’s eyes is unbearable.

“Well, he’s either using me or the Dragon Queen,” Sansa snaps back, fists clenched, entire frame rigid and trembling, spots of colour high on her cheekbones. “Which would you prefer?”

Arya’s mouth drops at that, stunned, but she quickly recovers. “You’re just saying that because you’re jealous.”

Sansa freezes, blue eyes frantically scanning her sister’s grey ones; but she finds nothing - they are entirely impassive, the blazing fury and hatred channeled through her body. Something deep inside Sansa’s chest, something pretty and fragile and delicate, shatters like glass, and the shards embed themselves deeply in her heart. She cannot breathe; she is drowning, the distant realisation thundering in her mind that her sister hates her so much that she would rather Jon be using her and not the Dragon Queen. “I remember you once telling me that you wanted to kill me,” she says with a sad little smile, a choked laugh. “Well, you have your wish; you and Jon have managed to do what Cersei, Joffrey, Baelish and Ramsey all attempted: to break me.”

“You are so weak. You’re no direwolf.”

“Love is strength, not weakness, and nothing you can say can make me ashamed of loving him,” she states, somehow, though she cannot fathom how, precisely, somehow she is able to keep her tone even when she feels as though her lifeblood is being drained from her with every hateful glare and word her little sister tosses at her.

“Pretty little Sansa with her pretty little words,” Arya mocks. “Your actions disgust me. You disgust me. You are unworthy of him.”

Somehow, she claws together enough presence of mind to say flatly, lifelessly, “You can leave now.”
Her legs give out, agony ripping through her, her face turned up to the sky, eyes squeezed tightly, viciously shut against the tears that fall down her cheeks, her arms wrapped tightly around her torso as she tries desperately to keep herself together, one hand clawing convulsively against the white bark as she collapses against it. She opens her eyes and she screams at the treetops, before dissolving into wracking sobs, her forehead, her nose, her cheek, rubbing against the bark. She might rub her skin raw; but what does it matter? She feels as though she is being flayed alive and Winterfell knows well the sound of her screams. What is one more reverberating against the stone?

She is reeling from everything that has happened. She cannot understand it. It has always been a secret fear of hers; that if forced to choose between Sansa and Jon, Arya would always choose Jon, unconditionally. The letter Arya has accused her of betraying her family with years and years ago, at the beginning of Joffrey’s reign, was written in good faith, and it was written because she had no choice. Arya cannot understand Sansa’s trials; but her little sister also has absolutely no desire to do so. And it hurts; the mistrust hurts, the hatred hurts - that Arya thinks that Sansa would ever, ever betray Jon - does Jon think it too? Is that why they both despise her, why they hate her so much? Is that why Jon jumped into bed with the Dragon Queen? Because he thinks her so untrustworthy when she is so unconditionally loyal to him? Even now, when he has raked her heart and her trust over hot coals, still she is loyal to him. And a not insignificant part of her hates it; hates herself - that he has such power over her, that somehow he owns her; she who has never wanted to be owned by anyone. She’d given her heart freely, joyously, though cautiously - and she dares anyone to find fault with that, after her torture at Joffrey and Ramsey’s hands, and her manipulation at Littlefinger’s; but perhaps Jon had interpreted that reserve as lack of feeling, when nothing could be further from the truth.

She is being torn apart; her stays feel much too tight, the bone digging into her ribs, her stomach, her back, and she would scream again if she could breathe in the necessary air. All she has ever done has been to protect her family, and she can’t breathe -

And suddenly someone is beside her, and she vaguely sees the outline of booted legs outstretched next to her curled up frame, and then strong arms are drawing her gently into an embrace, a hand guiding her head to rest on a leather-padded shoulder. She recognises through eyes blurred with tears the design of the wine-coloured leather surcoat; it belongs to a man who has stood at her side as she fought for Winterfell, to the man who was at her side upon the ramparts to watch the coming of the dawn, and the thought that her ally has come to find her loosens one of the knots in her throat.
“Jaime,” she gasps out, almost deliriously, and she feels his live hand, an aching, heady warmth, begin to stroke her hair away from her face, fingertips gentle on her forehead before carding through the russet lengths. “What-”

“I heard you scream,” he replies softly.

“Are you -” her courage almost fails her, but she gulps down a lungful of air, and continues. “I know you’re - my - my ally, but are you - are you my friend too, Jaime?”

The hand carding through her hair in a soothing, repetitive pattern halts for a fraction of a second before continuing. “Of course I am, Sansa. We fought together, and we will continue to do so. As much as I was surprised by it, I am your ally, I am your friend, and I will defend you to the death.”

She turns into him fully then and begins to weep once more, apologising all the while. His arms shift around her waist automatically so they both remain comfortable. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m ruining your coat.”

He rests his chin on the crown of her head. “It’s only a coat. Your gentle heart is infinitely more precious.”

Despite herself, she laughs wetly. “Careful, my lord, or I might think you were flattering me.” And then she yelps as he lifts her chin with a fingertip so they are face to face, fierce emerald eyes boring into hers.

“It isn’t flattery,” he replies fiercely. “It’s the truth, nothing less. Despite being a Lannister, you know I have no talent for manipulation.”

She shakes her head, still unwilling to believe him, unwilling to let the fragile hope she feels at his words grow; she has been disappointed too many times; she has had her heart ripped from her body too many times. “Why are you so kind to me? I-I am a monster, I betrayed my family, Arya and Jon are right not to trust me, I betrayed my family, Arya and Jon are right not to trust me, they’re right to despise me, to hate me (she chokes on the word, and it is bitter ash in her mouth), to want me dead. Do you think they would mourn me if I were? Would they say the words over my corpse? Would they bury me in the crypts or would they leave me to rot in the woods to be carrion for the crows?”

His eyes blaze and he pulls her more tightly to him, so tightly that she can now feel every breath he takes, the rise and fall of his chest, and somehow, in some small way, it helps, and she begins,
unconsciously, to model her breathing on his calmer rhythm. But she isn’t frightened of him, because though his eyes are furious and his jaw is clenched, his hold on her remains gentle, so gentle, and his voice, when he speaks to her, is insistent, but it is gentle, affectionate, tender, even.

“Look at me, Sansa. Look at me, and listen to me. You are not responsible for what happened to your family. You are not responsible for any of this tragedy. Monsters are responsible and you are not a monster. Monsters don’t feel guilt, however misplaced it might be, monsters don’t feel grief, and they most certainly do not feel sympathy or love. Joffrey was a monster. Cersei is a monster. Petyr Baelish was a monster. Ramsey Bolton was a monster. You most certainly are not. Despite everything you have endured, you have not only kept your sanity but also your heart. You are strong and clever and kind, most of all. You care about your people; you love them. You love your family. You love him. And that is why it hurts so much.”

“But I’m not a good person; ever since we left Winterfell, that’s all anyone has said to me. I’ve always tried so hard to be brave and good and kind, but it never made any difference.” She is still hysterical, and suddenly her tongue is loose and she is voicing thoughts she has never voiced before. “Arya was always good; no matter how well I practised my embroidery, or my music or my dancing, it was always Arya Father would say had been good, because to him goodness meant true nobility of character, not superficial achievements. In King’s Landing I tried to learn the rules and stick to them, but I was never good enough.” No matter what she did; it was not enough to keep her Father’s attention, and the kind of attention Septa Mordane and her Mother gave her did not do anything to prepare her for the capital. She was never good enough for Joffrey to cease getting pleasure from her torment, for Cersei to cease. No matter what she did; it did not stop Baelish touching her and it did not stop Ramsey Bolton raping and cutting and flaying her.

“Oh my dear lady,” he whispers, softly resuming his gentle caress through her hair, “my dear, dear lady.” His expression is pained. “You should not have to suffer this. You do not deserve it. Indeed, no-one has ever deserved it less. They are not your friends; they are not worth listening to. You are a ruler worth following, an ally worth having, a friend worth dying for. Believe me, Sansa,” he exhorts her, and even as she is marvelling at the fact that she cannot detect a lie of any sort his words, some tight coil in her chest of grief and agony and shame loosens slightly and she exhales, and nods, shakily.

The proud, pleased grin that he wears at her gesture thaws some of the ice around the shards that are her heart.
I. - It is a well known fact that I cannot, for the life of me, stay away from the Jaime/Arthur bromance. Ever.

II. - Sansangst - I tore my own heart out with this. I think Arya is going to have a tough choice to make in season 8; this was my version.

III. Of course Jaime isn't going to ignore Sansa screaming.
JAIME LANNISTER II

Chapter Summary

How many did you lose to those lovely red berries you pluck like grapes between forefinger and thumb from between those prickly evergreen leaves that every Northron child is taught as a babe never to touch, or suffer first stomach pains, then the emptying of the bowels, retching. The hallucinations start on the second day - tell me, how many men did you lose because they wandered off into the fells thinking they were woods and find the next morning frozen to death? How many horses did you lose to starvation before the animals learned to scrape at the snow in order to get at the grass beneath? How many of your men believed they could survive a Northron winter clad only in the barest leathers? How many of your men’s corpses had to line the path from here to White Harbor before you began to listen to my brother? I’m certain he’s told you that wrapping frostbitten limbs does them no good; that they must be amputated, or your men will rot alive? Why have you come to Winterfell, Danaerys Targaryen?’’

Chapter Notes

Welcome to Part III! Thank you for all the kind encouragement with this little story. We're back to Jaime’s POV for this. Jon and Daenerys arrive in Winterfell.

I wrote this up quite quickly, so do tell me what you thought!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART THREE

JAIME LANNISTER
Scouts have been riding back to Winterfell for the past half hour, streaming through the gates, clattering into the courtyard, horses’ flanks heaving, and the men throwing themselves on unsteady legs to the ground, and now word has come at last that the Dragon Queen and her consort are on the final approach to the ancestral seat of House Stark, but the Lady of Winterfell remains calm. When Jaime had asked her about her plans, she’d only smirked, replying evenly. It is a difficult journey from White Harbor; there is no road. They must traverse moors and fells, and cliffs that are hidden by the snow and the flat winter light of the sun low in the sky. They do not know the lay of the land, they do not know which plants are safe to eat and which are not; Jon cannot police the eating habits of tens of thousands of men, much less men he does not share a common language with. Their horses have never had to scrape the snow from the ground to reach the grass underneath. Were it summer, they would be able to sail further inland, but the river is frozen in winter, and though the ice is thick, it is still treacherous. A momentary distraction, and a horse may slip and lose footing and have to be put down. There is no forest from which to collect fallen branches for braziers and cookfires; they have not the furs, the leathers and the blankets. They will end up on foot, trudging through snows that reach as high as a man’s waist. If she tries to melt the snow with her dragons, she will end up drowning her men. Whatever force she sets out with, it will be greatly diminished by the time she gets here. There is a reason no-one is foolish enough to invade the North in winter.

He is dressed in black breeches and boots; a crimson and gold embroidered woollen tunic, with his leather surcoat over it, and a heavy northern cloak made of crimson wool edged with the fur of a black lion he’d come across on his journey north, sword belted at his waist, wool-lined leather gloves also edged in black fur protecting his hands. On his chest he wears his father’s chain, golden lions proud and rampant, and he awaits the Queen in the North in the courtyard, so that they can ride out to meet the Dragon Queen together.

When she emerges from one of the keeps, he inhales shakily. She is dressed in a riding gown of Stark grey, the edge of her sweeping skirt and her tightly-fitted sleeves hemmed with white fur and embroidered white ribbons, but it is her cloak that truly draws his attention. It is pure white, studded with iridescent white pearls, hemmed with snowy wolf fur in a similar manner to his own, and embroidered on the fabric with shimmering silver thread that catches the light in a most fetching way are snarling direwolves, leaping trout with tiny blue crystals for eyes and falcons with wings fully extended. Her shining russet hair is loose beneath her wreath of red weirwood leaves, and her smile is sharp as she walks elegantly towards him.

Jaime’s squire Podrick holds the reins of both of their mounts, Jaime having asked for his second destrier, a proud, energetic blood bay with a star on the forehead, to be saddled after his black was shot down during the Battle for Winterfell.

“That is quite a cloak, Sansa,” Jaime drawls as she approaches.

“Oh, I know,” she rejoins archly, eyes glinting. She purses her lips as she sweeps her gaze over the
destriers. “There’s one more thing,” she continues mischievously. “Bring the caparisons,” she calls to one of the stable boys, and he immediately hurries over, the two embroidered woollen cloths that are draped over the horses’ flanks for warmth and protection bundled into his arms. She turns to Jaime. “If I were to suggest we exchange mounts, what would your answer be?”

He takes her meaning immediately, his mind turning over the implications. “That is quite a provocative statement, my lady.” He tilts his head, considering both her and the two horses. Her, riding a Lannister crimson, he riding a Stark white, cloaked in the colours of his House, and she in those of hers. An inverted mirroring. It would work extremely well. “I’m game if you are, dear Sansa.”

Her smile broadens. “Excellent.” She motions for the horses to be re-saddled with the caparisons underneath. The horses snort and prance about, pricking their ears and arching their necks, showing off. Jaime snorts, a fond smile on his face, but considers privately that the result is most striking. The bay accentuated by the white cloth, hemmed and embroidered with silver thread and pearls and crystals in the same way as the Queen in the North’s cloak, and the grey-white dazzling with the embroidered golden lions, snarling and roaring, shimmering as though alive. It is incredible work; the Lady’s reputation for exemplary needlework is well known; but these are masterpieces; and he can scarcely believe she has done this in so short a time.

She catches his disbelieving, marvelling expression and laughs lightly. “I had help,” she admits.

He runs his hand lightly over the white-grey stallion’s covered flank. “I’ve never seen the like; it is masterfully done, truly.”

She gestures. “Shall we?”

He nods his agreement and vaults nimbly into the saddle as she does the same. Around them, their Lords and standard bearers are mounting up as well.

They’d discussed where to meet the Dragon Queen and with what force; in the end they’d decided on the moor from which Winterfell is approached from the east and the south, the very same one she’d greeted Jaime upon, the one from which the entire valley and Winterfell can be seen. It means the Dragon Queen will see their fortifications, the remains of the battle, the endless rows of tents, the pennants that are flying, and it means that they will be seen approaching as soon as they canter through Winterfell’s main gates. They will leave first, their armies marching and riding at their backs, streaming from their tents in a single, seamless movement to join their rulers’ procession.
The Lady of Winterfell meets his gaze and nods, and soon they are clattering out of the courtyard and through the gates at a smooth canter. “Raise the banners!” he calls as soon as they clear the first row of tents.

“Raise them! Raise them all!” the Queen at his side continues, and Jaime hears the subtle flap-flap-flap that spooks untrained horses and that means the standard bearers have raised the poles so the pennants fly in the wind. The Stark and Lannister banners, of course, but so too fly the colours of every House under either his or the Lady’s rule; a greater show of strength, indicating the true breadth of the alliance the two have forged. They can see vague outlines of horses and men waiting at the top of the moor, obeying the instruction carried to Jon Snow and the Dragon Queen by Pod an hour or so before.

There is some emotion he is beyond naming that sits lightly on his chest as they canter through the encampment at the head of such a procession, the proud carriage of the horse he rides carrying him forwards with a certain amount of energy, mane and tail and cloak flying, hooves striking the ground firmly. This horse is truly a fine animal, a joy to ride, responsive too - he only has to lightly touch his heels to silky flanks and the destrier bounds smoothly forwards, ears pricked and alert. One twitch of the reins and he pirouettes airily, barely touching the ground. He glances sidelong at his companion, and sees a small smile on her face.

“Enjoying yourself?” she questions archly, raising an eyebrow, though keeping her focus on the path ahead.

“Oh, you know I am,” he replies with his normal teasing drawl. “That is why you’re smiling.”

She does look at him then, fighting to remain impassive, though the laughing glint of her eyes betrays her. “You are a vain man, Jaime Lannister.”

He inclines his head, unable to keep the broad grin off his face. Had they not been where they currently are, he would have sketched a flamboyant bow, folding from the waist, twirling his good hand in an exaggerated, sweeping motion, but that would not convey the impression they wish to convey to the audience that at this very moment awaits them on the hill, and so he must content himself with a verbal response. “Guilty as charged, dear lady. But I notice that you do not deny my words. Might I perchance have the right of things?” She shoots him an unimpressed glare, but there is no bite to it.

As they get closer, Jaime sees the expressions of the Dragon Queen’s faction shift to something more unsettled. This is not the welcome they were expecting, and Jaime sniggers inwardly as they come to a halt, a respectful distance from each other; close enough to be heard, far enough away to not be within sword-reach. Sweeping his gaze over them, Jaime sees that the Lady of Winterfell had not been wrong in her estimation. To say that the force that greets them looks bedraggled and
“Sansa,” Jon Snow calls, nudging his horse forward, stopping in consternation, eyebrows drawing together in bewilderment when the lady at Jaime’s side raises her left hand in an easily comprehensible gesture for silence.

“Welcome to Winterfell, Daenerys Targaryen,” she says clearly, voice carrying easily, and her tones polite, though utterly glacial. All of winter’s promise of danger can be heard in her words. “I would ask how your journey was, though I see I have no need to do so. It is apparent enough. How many men did you lose on your way from White Harbor? One thousand? Two? Five? Ten? My brother’s raven indicated your host was twenty-five thousand strong.” She sweeps her gaze along the host. “And yet, what I see is… pitiful. How many did you lose to those lovely red berries you pluck like grapes between forefinger and thumb from between those prickly evergreen leaves that every Northron child is taught as a babe never to touch, or suffer first stomach pains, then the emptying of the bowels, retching. The hallucinations start on the second day - tell me, how many men did you lose because they wandered off into the fells thinking they were woods and find the next morning frozen to death? How many horses did you lose to starvation before the animals learned to scrape at the snow in order to get at the grass beneath? How many of your men believed they could survive a Northron winter clad only in the barest leathers? How many of your men’s corpses had to line the path from here to White Harbor before you began to listen to my brother? I’m certain he’s told you that wrapping frostbitten limbs does them no good; that they must be amputated, or your men will rot alive? Why have you come to Winterfell, Danaerys Targaryen?”

The same girl Jaime remembers from the Dragon Pit, the one with the tight black curls and dark skin, steps forward, and proceeds to present the Dragon Queen to them through chattering teeth, enunciating every single one of her many titles, and explaining that she has come to save the North from the threat it faces. Beside him, Jaime hears fierce little Lyanna Mormont barely hold in a snort of disdain. The Northron have never particularly cared for what they consider to be excessive Southron pageantry and ostentation; proud banners and embroidered caparisons and cloaks are basically the extent of what they are willing to accept.

Jaime is happy to let his ally continue the conversation, when she finally decides to speak (he senses she wants to let the awkward silence draw out) so he scans the opposite line until his eyes meet Tyrion’s. He watches as his little brother takes in the horses, the embroidered caparisons, their cloaks, the banners and their soldiers standing proudly, disquiet showing on his face. For once, little brother, you’ve no idea what you’re walking into, because the picture in front of you is too removed from what you can conceive, and that discomfits you deeply. And then his eyes fall to the chain on Jaime’s chest; their father’s chain and the sigil of office of the Lord of the West and Casterly Rock, and Tyrion’s face darkens as his expression flicks back and forth between the chain, and the faces of the many Lords and generals sworn to House Lannister who have accompanied Jaime.

“I did not agree with Tywin Lannister about many things,” Sansa says eventually in a conversational tone, deciding that she has made the other side squirm enough, and Jaime bites the
inside of his cheek to keep himself from choking on his laughter. He already has a fair idea of where this is going. “But there is one thing we did agree on. Surprisingly enough, that was about Joffrey. Joffrey would go on and on and on, in council meetings, in the great hall, anywhere and all the time, really, about how he could do whatever he liked to whomever he liked whenever he liked because he was the King. And Tywin Lannister, the Lord of the West, Lord Hand to two mad kings, would always reply, without fail, any man who must declare that he is King is no true King at all.”

There is a moment of stunned silence before guffaws break out all along Jaime and Sansa’s line even as the Dragon Queen protests angrily that she will not be treated in such a way, thank you very much, or she will burn them all where they stand.

Far from being intimidated, the Queen in the North replies evenly, keeping her tones conversational. “You have just proved the point I wished to make.”

“And what point is that?” the Dragon Queen snarls. Jaime sees Tyrion close his eyes in frustration, and Jaime feels a surge of vicious satisfaction. If you thought we’d all roll over and submit to your ruler, little brother, you are most sorely mistaken.

“That you are nothing more than a spoiled child having a temper tantrum.”

The Dragon Queen’s face contorts with rage and she makes to step forward, but Jon Snow lays a restraining hand on her shoulder. “No, Dany,” he says, and Jaime feels rather than sees his friend and ally stiffen beside him, and he restrains the urge to comfort her. Jaime grits his teeth at the other man’s audacity, and he can’t decide which is worse; either Jon Snow does not realise what he has done or he does not care.

He glances quickly at the young Lyanna Mormont riding beside him. He’s come to refer to her fondly as the Kingmaker, and she always japes back with Kingslayer King. She catches his gaze and nods smartly.

“Your Graces,” she states loudly, with the assurance of one used to taking command of the floor and being heard, no matter her age or sex, and she ignores everyone on the opposite side as they turn to the diminutive figure in surprise (the Westerosi Lords sworn to Jaime and Sansa know better than to dismiss her). “Perhaps it might be a good idea to explain the situation.”

“A good plan,” Daenerys Targaryen agrees swiftly. “Speak.”
“Forgive me, but I wasn’t speaking to you,” Lyanna Mormont replies, turning in her saddle to Sansa with a broad smile on her face.

The Queen in the North ignores the shocked, gaping expressions on the Dragon Queen’s followers faces, and nudges her horse forward a few paces. “You’re too late,” she states baldly. “The army of the dead, led by the Night King fell upon Winterfell two weeks ago. And we managed to destroy them.”

“Cersei kept her word?” Jon Snow wonders.

Jaime can see the slightest proud smile touch the corners of Sansa’s mouth as she replies. “No. She did not.” She turns in her saddle then to look at Jaime and her smile broadens. “But the King of the West did.”

It is his turn to ignore the spluttering outbursts of shock from Daenerys Targaryen and her councillors and urge his horse forward so that he is once more level with his ally. With his good hand, he reaches out to take the Queen in the North’s hand and lifts it to his lips to press a gallant kiss to her gloved fingers. She shoots him a glance that tells him she knows exactly what he’s doing, but he winks and he sees her bite back a pleased smile. He knows exactly what it looks like to observers, and it is exactly what he wants them to believe. He can almost feel Jon Snow’s eyes boring holes into his back, and Jaime forces down the urge to punch the idiot for causing Sansa such agony.

“How?” Tyrion coughs.

“Oh, it was quite simple, I assure you, little brother.” Jaime drawls. “When you ride out of King’s Landing, you make certain you get onto the Kingsroad and from there, it’s a straight shot north to Winterfell. You can do it in a month, three weeks if you move fast.”

“No, no, I meant, how did you come to declare yourself King of the West?” Tyrion continues disbelievingly.

“Yes, I’d like to know that too. How did yet another realm come to be in open rebellion against me?” Daenerys Targaryen interjects hotly.

“Open rebellion?” Jaime continues nonchalantly. “My dear Dragon Queen, if you really think the West would ever again countenance being dictated to by a Targaryen, you truly are a fool of the
highest order.” Jaime shrugs, continuing. “And as for my becoming King, I was elected, in the manner of the Kings of old. I assure you, it is quite hard to refuse when all the great Houses of the West and thirty thousand Lannister soldiers clamour for your appointment.” More solemnly, he adds, “It is an honour to exercise this function, and it is an honour I shall execute to the best of my ability until the day I die.”

“Oh, that can be arranged,” the Dragon Queen retorts dangerously.

Jaime shrugs again and juts his chin out. “Go on then. Burn me. But you should be aware that should you do so, you lose any chance of ever entertaining friendly relations with the West.”

“Burn him, and you shall have to burn me also. Burn me, and you lose any chance of coming to any sort of settlement with the Vale, with the Riverlands, and with the North. That’s four Kingdoms out of seven turned irrevocably against you.” Sansa states, deliberately reaching her hand out this time, to take Jaime’s good hand. He squeezes it tightly, and the warmth of her hand in his a greater comfort that he is perhaps willing to admit, all the while marvelling at her bravery. This risk is a calculated one, one previously agreed upon between them and their lords, but he can’t deny the frisson of nervousness that races down his spine. Calling the Dragon Queen’s bluff in this manner is dangerous, but he is King of the West and he will not, having killed one mad King, ever let his people be tied to the yoke of a pyromaniac tyrant ever again.

“You will have to burn me too,” little Lady Lyanna tosses out then, cantering forwards and offering her hand to Sansa. The Queen in the North takes it, and one by one, the Lords of the North and the West and the Riverlands and the Vale declare in their turn, each grasping their neighbour’s hand. Then, behind the line of riders, Jaime hears the horns and drums and sees in his peripheral vision the flags flying to signal the locking of the shield wall and the spears coming down to form a horizontal wall of spikes that can stop a horde of Dothraki screamers in their tracks.

“My grandfather was not afraid of dragon fire. My uncle was not afraid of dragon fire. I am not afraid of dragon fire.” Sansa calls out, and Jaime sees her determinedly avoid the pleading expression readily apparent on her brother and once-lover’s face, fixing her blue gaze upon the Targaryen’s violet eyes. “Burn us. Burn us and make eternal enemies of four of the seven Kingdoms of Westeros.”

For the first time, he sees fear and uncertainty in the Targaryen’s countenance. She looks first to her lover and then to Tyrion, and it is Tyrion who eventually steps forward.

“Sansa, Jaime,” he begins carefully, palms out in a placating gesture, before swallowing unsteadily at the impassiveness of their expressions. “Your Graces, perhaps we could find some sort of peaceful resolution, some sort of acceptable settlement to this quandary.”
“That, Tyrion, depends entirely on what you offer us,” Jaime answers harshly.

“We are listening,” Sansa raises an eyebrow. “Negotiate.”

The Dragon Queen steps forward. “If you bend the knee to me, you will keep your lives, your lands, your gold and your families. All will be as it always has been. All you have to do, is bend the knee to me,” she says, earnestly.

“You would insult us thus?” Lord Royce exclaims. “You think us sheep to bleat in agreement when you have given us absolutely no cause to trust you?”

“I agreed to ride north to save you from the White Walkers and the Night King! I came in good faith!”

“Save us?” Lyanna Mormont laughs incredulously. “Ride north for us?”

“In good faith?” Sansa scoffs icily. “Perhaps you would care to explain precisely what kind of proof you had to be provided with before you deigned give your proposal of being our saviour? Let me explain something to you; something I gather, not having ruled anywhere successfully, you might be unaware of - oh, yes, we heard about that failed Meereenese experiment of yours - that to rule is to serve. It is not to demand things from people. Simply put, it means that if there is a threat to some part of your kingdom, you crush the threat, you fight the battles, you win the war. You do not say, I will only fight for you if you do this for me in return. That is not the way ruling works.”

“The Seven Kingdoms are my birthright. You will bend the knee to me.”

“You dare speak to me of birthright?” Sansa retorts evenly, her tone as frosty as the winter of her realm, and Jaime admires the ice in her eyes, in her posture, in her every clipped syllable. “I, who am a Stark of Winterfell, descended in a line unbroken for more than eight thousand years from the Kings of Winter? You Targaryens crossed the Narrow Sea a blink of an eye ago. A mere three hundred years is nothing.”

Jaime decides to intervene. “Unless you have anything more to say, Dragon Queen, I think it time to leave. This is a waste of our efforts.”
“Indeed.” Sansa’s lip curls, and they pirouette their horses around, and the shield wall parts before them like a knife through silk. They hear the pounding of hooves that means their lords follow them, and above that Jaime hears the strident, pleading sounds of the Dragon Queen’s consort pleading with his sister to reconsider.

Beside him, he sees Sansa’s face is set, as impassive as the granite countenances of the statues of her ancestors in Winterfell’s crypts, as she determinedly ignores the calls for her name.

Barely an hour later, Jaime, Sansa, and the assembled lords watch from Winterfell’s southmost ramparts as Tyrion approaches gingerly, accompanied by Ser Davos, a hastily constructed white flag flapping in the air.

“Well, that didn’t take long.” Jaime murmurs.

“The Dragon Queen and her consort send envoys. I would respond in an equal manner.” Sansa replies, voice low. Both of them understand the game; Sansa and Jaime could choose to be insulted that envoys are sent instead of Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen, but they choose instead to make the most of this fortuitous opening. Jaime might be unable to predict his brother, but Ser Davos is most certainly not loyal to the Dragon Queen, and has a real aversion to people being burned alive. The pressure they can bring to bear on Daenerys Targaryen is considerable as a result, and gives Jaime some hope for a more positive outcome, one both he and his ally can accept.

“Your sister?” Jaime suggests.

Sansa shakes her head. “No. She might disdain the title, but she is the Princess of the North.”

“One each?” Jaime continues. “Ser Addam, I would send you to treat with these ambassadors.”

“Of course, Sire.” Ser Addam bows. “I should be honoured.”

Beside him, the Queen in the North has made her decision. “Lady Lyanna,” she says, turning to the
younger girl, who looks at her Queen fiercely. “You drive a hard bargain, and I know I can trust
you to act in the best interests of our people and our lands. If she asks us to fight and die in her
Southern war you will refuse outright. We are well equipped for a siege; if starving them out is
what it takes, then starve them out is what we shall do. You will settle for nothing less than the full
independence and autonomy of our realm without owing Daenerys Targaryen a single thing, is that
quite clear?”

“It is, your Majesty.” Lyanna Mormont inclines her head, eyes shining.

“If they protest, you could always invite them to come and look at that rotting dragon corpse, and
then remind them that our scorpion sharpshooters took that thing down with a single clean shot to
the eye at four hundred paces, and wouldn’t they just enjoy some extra practice.” Jaime adds. This
causes scattered laughs and hear, hear’s amongst the assembled lords.

“I would also give Ser Davos the opportunity to come home, if he so desires.” Sansa continues, and
Lyanna nods her understanding. “I doubt he anticipated this; I doubt he agreed to Jon abandoning
his people in such a manner. He is a good, honest man, and I would welcome him back to
Winterfell and gladly, if he so chose.”

In the end, Jaime and Sansa manage to negotiate the treaty they want, but only after hours of
haggling back and forth, and it is quite obvious, when Sansa indicates where the Dragon Queen’s
bedraggled host may encamp, and has rooms for the Targaryen party prepared, that to call them
irritated and unsatisfied is the understatement of the century. She reminds her guests what Stark
retribution was enacted against House Frey the last time Stark guest-right was taken advantage of
in a bid to keep this fragile peace.

But it has been so long since even a tentative, fragile peace of any sort was something more than a
nebulous dream that both of them sleep a touch more easily, and tomorrow they will be able to
build on the day’s successes.

Chapter End Notes

 do tell me what you thought!
Chapter Summary

“I don’t think I want to let you out of my sight,” he admits as he climbs the flight of stone steps up to the parapet, his grip on her tightening, and she breathes more easily for it because it is a reminder that she is no longer alone, that she does not have to do things alone again.

“I don’t think I want you to,” she replies eventually, when she’s managed to master herself a little.

Chapter Notes

Welcome, everyone to Part IV. As always, thank you for your encouragement & comments - they are much appreciated.

Trigger Warnings: much angst, non-consensual sexual advances, panic attacks, references to marital rape (Robert/Cersei & Aerys/Rhaella, Sansa/Ramsey)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART FOUR

SANSA STARK II

She expects, that sooner or later, Jon will want to seek her out. She does not, however, expect to hear raised voices she recognises as belonging to him and to her sworn shield, when it is not yet dawn, the day after the Dragon Queen’s arrival. She is only awake because she intends to go up to the ramparts again, as has become her habit every morning to watch the rising of the sun. The King of the West too, has taken to joining her there, and they stand quietly, looking at the light, sometimes talking, sometimes remaining silent, enjoying the peace this brings them.
Muttering to herself in annoyance, throwing a cloak over her chemise, she pads across the flagstones to wrench the door open. “What is the meaning of this?” She snarls, looking at Jon, and oh, it takes everything she is for her to keep some semblance of composure at the kicked puppy look he gives her. She wants to strangle him and she wants to weep at the same time.

He steps forward. “Sansa, I need to speak to you-”

“Before dawn?” she replies incredulously.

“Please,” he sighs, grey eyes wide.

“Fine.” She spits out. “Five minutes.” She turns her head to look at her sworn shield; Brienne is shifting awkwardly behind him. “Brienne, please tell Jaime I shall be out momentarily. If I am not out of my solar he may enter.”

Brienne bows. “Your Majesty.”

With a scowl, Sansa turns back to the man standing outside the entrance to her chambers, and she wrenches the door open more widely so he can step inside. “Well,” she begins, leaning against the door for support. “Speak your piece and have done with it.”

“Sansa,” he whispers desperately, reaching out his hands to cup her cheeks, faltering at the furious expression in her eyes, at the way she wrenches herself away from him.

“No. Stay where you are. Whatever you have to say to me, you can say it just as well from there.”

“She was so sad after her dragon fell, and it fell to rescue me-” she laughs incredulously at that.

“A rescue mission that was only necessary because your word was not enough; she demanded proof in the form of a wight!” she snarls with all the ferocity of a direwolf, before continuing mockingly. “So of course, like a good little dog, you went to get her the present she wanted.”

“She’s really not so bad once you get to know her,” Jon continues, and Sansa can only gape at him.
“Once you bed her and become her vassal, you mean?”

“You know about that?”

“Indeed.” She replies coldly.

“Sansa, please.”

“Bending the knee and bedding her are not mutually inclusive; you do realise that?” She is ready to beat him over the head with a pan for his sheer idiocy at bending the knee, for creating the whole mess they currently find themselves in; but that is a separate conversation.

“She has dragons and is very beautiful. I was not exactly in a position to refuse.”

“Oh, is that how you justify it?” Her voice lowers dangerously.

“I love you, but loving you makes me feel sick to my core. You’re my sister, and I’m not a Lannister; I’m not a Targaryen.”

“I’m not.”

He blinks, nonplussed. “What?”

“I’m not your sister. You’re the son of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen. The fools married in a secret ceremony in Dorne and Rhaegar set Elia aside.”

“How - how can you possibly know this?” He splutters.

“Sam found the records when he was at the Citadel in Oldtown. Lord Howland Reed can confirm it as well; he was there, at the Tower of Joy.”
“You’re my cousin… I…” He is reeling back, head in his hands, shaking desperately as though that might lift the fog.

“And you ripped my heart out. You shattered my trust. Unless you have anything else to say, you may leave,” she cuts him off mercilessly, standing tall, her entire frame trembling with anguish.

“I love you,” he insists, stepping closer, pressing his torso to hers, trapping her between his body and the wall. She tries to step away, but he is faster, and he pins her in place with his hips, his arms either side of her head, caging her. “She meant nothing; it was mere lust, nothing more. Please, forgive me, and we can have each other again. With your revelation, we don’t have to hide; we can marry and be happy!” She turns her head away from his beseeching gaze. Oh, this man knows precisely how to rip her to shreds. Before Dragonstone, in the deep dark recesses of her heart, how she’d longed to hear those words! How that small, futile hope had been something to hold onto, some shred of blissful naivety - she’d not been stupid enough to believe it was something that could ever come to fruition; but there has never been anything to stop her from dreams. And so for him to offer it to her like this; it feels like an insult, like small cuts being made again and again into her soft skin, so she bleeds slowly, a mere drop at a time; the perfect way to prolong the agony for as long as possible.

“You are insane,” she retorts, shoving at his shoulders. Let me go. “I can not even begin to understand your nerve - you would come to me, want to marry me, when you’ve just come from her bed? I can smell her on you, Jon!”

“You want me. You wanted me before, and you want me now. You love me; I know you do.” He muffles her protests with his mouth, and she chokes out a sob, scrabbling at his tunic, trying to gain leverage to use against him.

“No,” she gasps out when he eventually releases her lips from his violent kiss, and she continues to protest as his mouth moves to her jaw, her neck, and further down. “No, no, please, get off me.” She swallows back a cry of despair. “You have no right to touch me, stop, please, stop.” You’re hurting me, you’re tearing me apart, you’re flaying me alive, you’re killing me. Gradually, she goes limp, goes utterly silent and still, and begins to lock away her screaming mind, and walks towards the black oblivion that has been her only recourse. She’d thought of Winterfell when Joffrey had begun to mistreat her, and over the years, she’s built all of the castle into her very own refuge in her imagination. Here, she is safe; here, she does not have to speak to anyone if she does not wish it; here, there is no danger. Here there is only peace. She walks the halls, every heavy oaken door slamming shut behind her as she crosses each threshold. She makes for her childhood bedroom, where her direwolf awaits, and there, curled up on her bed with Lady beside her, a merry fire blazing in the hearth and her door firmly bolted shut, nothing can touch her.
But she does not need to go as far as her childhood bedroom because suddenly the hands and mouth roaming her body are absent, and she can breathe again, she is free again, gulping down harried, painful lungfuls of the crisp morning air, collapsing to the ground against the wall.

“The lady made her refusal quite clear, Jon Snow.” Jaime, she realises vaguely, blinking, disoriented, struggling to make sense of - Jon, Jon was trying to seduce her into forgiveness, into forgetting, but she won’t let him. How dare he. Just because she’d told him, before he sailed South, that she loved him; that does not give him the right to expect her to leap back into his arms so they can pick up exactly where they left off. That he thinks her so biddable… so easily persuaded… and suddenly she is lashing out, a cornered animal.

“If you touch me like that again without my consent I will rip you to pieces with my own teeth. Get. Out.”

“I only wanted to show you my passion for you, you hateful, frigid bitch; I don’t feel nearly so strongly about her-”

“Leave!” She screams at him, curling herself up to make herself as small as possible, bursting into heavy, body-wracking sobs, her hands over her ears, attempting desperately to block out the sickening memory of his vicious words from playing over and over again in her head. She understands that he is lashing out at her, but she can’t deny that he has cut her to the quick; using such a potent fear of hers - that she is inadequate as a lover - against her like that…

“Sansa,” a voice says gently, and she feels the voice kneel down beside her. “Open your eyes, dear lady.”

She recognises the voice, and that is what makes her slowly, cautiously flutter her eyelids open to look at the man on his knees beside her. His palms are open, and in his expression, she reads only concern, instead of judgement or pity or truth, truth that she is indeed what Jon says she is, a frigid, heartless bitch of a woman who should have yielded to him, should have responded to him, should her opened her arms and held him to her breast and let him have his way with her.

“Breathe, Sansa, breathe. I can see your thoughts running away with you. Breathe.” His eyes, his voice, his entire bearing, everything remains gentle, and she frowns, confused. Why is he - she
feels set adrift, lost in a snowstorm, and frozen down to her very bones, and although she doesn’t understand how this intense agony has not yet killed her; she wants to perish and still she yet lives. But there must still be some deeply buried corner of her soul that wants to live, because she finds herself reaching both hands for his, and he complies immediately. The sense of calm she feels as his gloved fingers fold over hers is something overwhelming, as though she’s thrown a bucket of fresh snowmelt over her head. Parsing it is not something she is capable of; but it is nevertheless something she is profoundly grateful for.

She considers the black gloved hand she holds, and murmurs mournfully, “I think I’m breaking, Jaime. I’m breaking and I don’t know how to stop it. I don’t know if I can.”

“You’re allowed to break, Sansa,” Jaime replies softly, thumb stroking her knuckles. “The important thing is that you put yourself together again.”

“But how?” She chokes out. How can the torment she feels be appeased?

“I am intimately familiar with this pain, my dear lady, and I will tell you now, that the only thing to do is to breathe. Keep breathing, keep walking with your head held high, keep ruling. Keep talking to your lords, to your soldiers, keep playing with the children of your smallfolk. The shame in this theirs,” he is impassioned, and Sansa’s eyes widen, a rush of affection filling her heart. No-one has ever defended her as Jaime Lannister is now doing. “Not yours; do you hear me? Not yours. Never yours,” he growls, and before she’s even aware of having made any sort of decision, aware of having moved, even, her head is resting on his shoulder, his arm has come to wind, somewhat hesitantly at first, around her waist, and she is curled into his side much as she was the day he found her in the Godswood.

“How much - how much did you hear?” she asks eventually, somewhat nervously.

“Enough.” His jaw clenches. He looks away, sighing, before beginning to speak. She can’t hear the beating of his heart in his chest due to the heavy cloak he wears, but she can feel his chest rising and falling with every breath he takes, and it soothes her, lulls her, almost.

“Strangely,” he continues, “aside from being Lannisters, the one thing I have in common with both my brother and my father is an aversion to the mistreatment of women. We don’t agree on much, and I disagreed with my father more often than not, but… you might have heard the rumour that Aerys raped my mother on my parents’ wedding night; it’s all true. She had the scars on her back to prove it. That is what caused the rift between Aerys and my father. I know your marriage to Tyrion remained unconsummated. And I…” his expression hardens. “I have learned more of the suffering of Queens than anyone else still alive, I believe.”
“Jon wouldn’t have raped me,” Sansa denies. “He’s Jon. He wouldn’t.”

“He was still touching you against your will. He was still insisting, still pressuring you.” Jaime finishes his point firmly. “No matter your relationship, you were entirely within your rights to refuse; you always will be.”

She blinks at that, trying to marshal her thoughts. “I tried to fight Ramsey when I realised how much he planned to hurt me, but it was soon apparent that I didn’t have the strength, I didn’t have the knowledge, and so I stopped… but I never stopped fighting him inside my head, and I never wanted him to touch me, but my mother always said it was my duty - she filled my head with those ideas when I was a girl,” she drifts off bitterly.

“That was nothing less than torture, my lady. It is not meant to be that way, for either person.”

“Jon said I was frigid… perhaps that’s why…” she stares at her skirts, embarrassed, but she shoves the emotion away. It isn’t as though she can talk to anyone else about this, and Jaime is her ally. Jaime is her friend. “I - I know I’m inexperienced and-and untutored,” she stutters, choking tears with the words that taste as ashes in her mouth, “but it - with him - it wasn’t - I didn’t particularly find any pleasure in the act itself.”

Jaime’s eyebrow raises at that, and he opens his mouth to speak, before abruptly clicking it shut and for a moment she thinks she’s managed to embarrass the famed Jaime Lannister. “Whatever it is you want to ask me, ask,” she says, squeezing his hand encouragingly.

He chokes out a small laugh, shaking his head ruefully. “I marvel at your courage, my lady,” he says sincerely. He swallows once before continuing. “If I were to assume that he spread your legs and pushed himself in, without doing anything else, would I be correct in that assumption?”

What other things? she thinks genuinely. I assume he doesn’t mean the things with the cutting and the beating and the flaying that Ramsey did? I assume Jaime means good things? She blinks, rage crashing through her. Other things exist? “He seemed a trifle… impatient, and I - I did not know, until you implied it, that there could be anything else. I did want him, but I was nervous, and he could have taken that for reticence, and I did not know how to reassure him.”

Jaime’s jaw tightens at her words, and his brows draw together. “Oh, my dear lady, your cousin is a fucking idiot. It was not your task to reassure him; it was his task to reassure you.” His mouth softens. “You deserve all the good in the world, Sansa, because even after all you have endured, you have kept your conscience and you have kept your heart.”
She offers him a wan, watery smile, but a smile nonetheless, and she sees the tense set of his shoulders and his jaw ease in reply. She brings his gloved hand to her lips and presses a soft, grateful kiss to his knuckles. “Thank you,” she whispers quietly, her breathing settling slightly.

He rests his hand gently on the back of her head, and he sighs, his mood turning pensive, turning introspective. “It was not Cersei’s faithlessness that hurt the most - though the memories of walking into her chambers and finding her otherwise occupied were a blow that was all the more stunningly swift and painful for its having been so unexpected - but her lack of trust, her lack of faith. Her spite killed Tommen and Myrcella, who were good and kind and innocent, and her lust for power twisted her into a creature I no longer recognised. I gave up my own life for her; and she considered it nothing more than her due. I put her first, always, but…” she looks up at him then, and she sees him furiously swallow down the tears that cling to his eyelashes.

“You were always the second choice,” she finishes quietly. He gives a sharp, unsteady nod in response, more of a jerk of the head in truth. She smiles sadly, and squeezes his hand which still holds hers. She knows exactly how he feels; what it is like to be cast aside by someone you have pledged and given everything of yourself to. “Your heart is truer than you realise, Jaime. And your sister is a cruel fool not to realise that.”

He laughs ruefully, and then is silent for a moment before speaking. “Shall we agree to take each other’s advice?”

“I think I can manage that,” she whispers. “Given time enough.”

“Shall we go up to the ramparts?” he offers softly. “It is still early.” She makes no verbal reply, but nods against his shoulders. “Very well,” he continues. “Can you stand?”

It is, she will realise throughout the course of the morning, the only oblique reference he will make to the incident he interrupted, and he will treat her as he always has, with kindness, with a teasing wit and appreciation she eagerly reciprocates once she realises he isn’t going to treat her like some fragile bauble, instead providing her with the reassurance of his presence and the support of his respect.

“I - no,” she flushes, humiliated. “I don’t believe I can.” She feels so weak, as though she has been eviscerated, as though her heart has been cut out of her chest with a rusted spoon and then dragged over the still burning embers of a fire. Jon’s words have bled the strength from her veins.
“Then, with your permission, I’ll carry you,” Jaime replies easily. Her gaze snaps to his, stunned.

“You wouldn’t mind?” she asks, and oh, she hates how small and high her voice is with uncertainty, and she tenses for the inevitable mocking that will follow, but she has forgotten that this is Jaime Lannister, a man whose life has been so akin to her own in so many ways, and would therefore only treat her well.

In her presence, Jaime Lannister’s smile is no longer a rare thing; whether a wicked, mischievous smirk, a teasing grin or a sincere smile, his face is open. Now, it is subtle, with a touch of melancholy around the eyes and lips that soften with his reply. “I would not have offered, otherwise,” he murmurs, though without the annoyance or affront Sansa might have expected from anyone else. It is because Jaime understands, she realises.

“Then I would be glad of your assistance, my lord,” she answers him sincerely, a touch shyly, and she can’t suppress the startled yelp that escapes her lips when he lifts her easily into his arms, rising to his feet in a single fluid movement that speaks of his strength.

And so he carries her from her chambers up to the ramparts, and she enjoys the sensation; it is a strange thing, to feel so weightless, her head resting on his shoulder, both arms flung around his neck, the tips of her boots dangling towards the ground. She’s so tired, she realises all of a sudden. Tired of always being alone, and now that she has the support of an ally and a friend, she doesn’t entirely know what to do. It’s quite an overwhelming feeling, and she feels herself begin to sob again, fingers clutching at the King of the West’s cloak, and he looks down at her in concern, taking in the tears that refuse to stop falling down her cheeks, the sheer vulnerability written, carved even into every line of her body, in the pallor of her cheeks, in the listless fall of her russet hair, the exhausted, languid manner in which her head rests back against his shoulder, baring her neck. He could almost be carrying a corpse.

“I don’t think I want to let you out of my sight,” he admits as he climbs the flight of stone steps up to the parapet, his grip on her tightening, and she breathes more easily for it because it is a reminder that she is no longer alone, that she does not have to do things alone again.

“I don’t think I want you to,” she replies eventually, when she’s managed to master herself a little. “But I’ll warn you now that that might well mean you shall have to endure the expression of what I think and feel,” she teases, making a concerted effort to turn their conversation to lighter ground, but not really succeeding. “I’m not afraid of emotion, and I won’t apologise for it.”

“Nor should you,” he agrees steadily. “That is what friends are for, are they not?”
Her smile, then, turned to the crimson gold of the rising sun, is a gloriously peaceful thing.

It is Arya who interrupts her midday meal, which she takes in her solar, the better to read and prepare various documents in anticipation of her occupations for the afternoon. “I heard you and Jon arguing this morning,” she says by way of greeting, shutting the door behind her, guessing correctly that Sansa does not want to be eavesdropped upon.

Sansa blinks, and the parchments she’s been studying fall to her desk with a dull thud. “Would you repeat what you just said?”

“I heard you and Jon arguing this morning.”

“How - ” she begins, before answering her own question. “The servants’ passage; of course.” She pins her little sister with an even gaze. “Why are you telling me this?”

Arya shrugs nonchalantly. “I like to make my own mind up; or had you forgotten, sweet sister?”

“No, no I hadn’t,” Sansa retorts sharply. “Well,” she sighs abruptly, “what conclusions did you draw?”

For the first time, Sansa sees Arya fidget, and it abruptly makes her look her real age instead of the polished assassin Sansa knows her sister has been forged into. “I - I don’t know. I think I can understand why you did what you did. I couldn’t before - but Jon’s playing the Dragon Queen, he doesn’t care for her at all.”

“You want me to reconcile with him,” Sansa realises.

“Well, yes, of course I do.”

Sansa laughs hollowly. “Have you thought about the implications of that? The Dragon Queen does
not strike me as someone who would take that kind of revelation sitting down. In any case, I’m
tired of always being the one to resolve the messes Jon always seems to get himself into. It is past
time he learnt to deal with the consequences of his actions himself.” She genuinely wants Jon to be
able to resolve conflicts through his own power, but she also can’t deny the small, childish part of
her that reminds her that it isn’t fair that she is the one who seems to be trailing after him with a
broom to sweep everything into dust.

Arya’s eyes widen. “You’re not going to bed him again?”

Sansa freezes, clenching her fists to hide the trembling of her fingers as she remembers that night.
It had been messy and imperfect and not particularly pleasurable, but she’d been so earnest, so
genuine in her desire to please him. She’d wanted to try, to the best of her ability, but Jon had found
her nothing less than the most abject disappointment. Even the thought of it brings the dizzying
anguish back to the forefront of her heart, and despite Jaime’s words of reassurance in the morning,
words she’s taken to cloaking herself with, using them like a shield, the doubt still slips around this
protection, still manages to wound her deeply. “No. I trusted him, I trusted him not to hurt me, I
trusted him to love me, and he has shattered that.”

“But—” Arya begins, and Sansa can see the thoughts in her little sister’s eyes before she voices
them, and they are not notions she will allow the other girl to entertain in the slightest.

“Just because I am a feminine woman, that does not make me biddable,” Sansa snarls. “Just
because I don’t know how to wield a sword and am only at best a tolerable archer, that does not
mean I will not defend myself. It does not give anyone leave to do with me as they will.”

Arya stares at her as if seeing her for the first time; and Sansa thinks suddenly that she might be.
Her little sister swallows and nods. “You’re not weak, Sansa, I see that now. The way you played
the field yesterday… I could not have done it. Brienne took me to a vantage point where I wouldn’t
be seen, but could see everything that went on. I never thought I’d say this, but your liking for
pretty things had some use.”

Sansa smirks at that. “We all have our own skills and strengths.”

“You’re serious about the idea of Northern independence, aren’t you?” Arya marvels.

“I am,” Sansa nods briefly. “What did you think of the Dragon Queen?”
Arya blinks. “You’re asking for my opinion?” The younger, dark haired girl looks so surprised by this that Sansa remembers that this strained relationship between the two of them has chafed at them both, and it makes things so raw for both of them.

“I am,” Sansa states softly.

“I thought Daenerys would be like Visenya, from the stories.”

“I learnt long ago that life is not a song, little sister.” She sighs, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. She casts desperately about for something with which to change the subject, something lighter upon which to dwell. “Oh yes, there’s something I thought you might be interested in. Did you, perchance, in your lengthy travels, ever meet someone called Gendry Baratheon?”

Sansa has the rare, distinct pleasure of seeing her sister’s whole being light up. “Gendry?” she breathes. “Gendry’s here?”

Sansa inclines her head in response, a smile twitching at her lips. “You’ll find him in the forges, I’d wager.”

It seems as though today is a day full of unexpected visits, for not an hour later, Brienne announces that not only is Jaime at her door but so too is Tyrion, and that they have come to speak to her together. Rather, she suspects, Tyrion wished to speak with her and Jaime is fulfilling his stated intent not to let her out of his sight, as much as is feasible with the heavy load of duties they both have.

Wordlessly, she waves both Lannister men in and she watches Tyrion with carefully concealed amusement as he watches Jaime saunter to her side and greet her with a playfully gallant bow, bringing her fingers to his lips, as has become his habit. The dwarf’s expression boggles slightly as she brings his good hand (gloved - even inside the castle; he is a Westerman, after all) to her lips in return, pressing a lingering, affectionate kiss to it. Jaime’s eyes light with a pleased, teasing glint as she does so, and though it is partially reserved, she senses the shadow of genuine affection and trust behind it, and she smiles radiantly. The younger Lannister cannot hide his shock when Jaime casually drapes himself across his chair, even going so far as to put his booted feet up on Sansa’s desk. She raises an eyebrow at the King of the West’s unrepentant grin, shooting him a mock glare.
that is belied by the wicked glint in her expressive eyes.

“What may I do for you, Lord Tyrion?” She asks once Jaime has ceased his tomfoolery and Tyrion has had a chance to make sense of the things his eyes are telling his mind.

“I admit to no little curiosity, your Grace, about how you came to be so close to my brother.” Tyrion says eventually.

“Are you asking as Jaime’s brother or as Hand to the Targaryen?” Sansa rebuts politely, a sharp, wolfish smile on her face.

Tyrion startles, nonplussed. “As both, I suppose.”

Sansa inclines her head in acknowledgement. “Jaime?” she queries lightly. Her ally gives an exaggerated sigh in response, which she correctly interprets as his tacit permission for her to tell the tale. “We were both held as political prisoners, we were both tortured, we’ve both had our illusions torn from us, we both believe that to rule, to truly rule, is to serve and not to dictate, and we’ve both been betrayed by our lovers.”

“Quite a few things in common, wouldn’t you say, little brother?” Jaime drawls, an edge of danger lurking in his pleasant, jovial tones.

“I - yes.” Tyrion’s fabled eloquence seems to have deserted him in his shock, but it soon returns, and with it the shrewd glint in his eyes. “You said you’d both been betrayed by your lovers.”

Sansa raises her eyebrows. “What of it?”

Tyrion Lannister’s eyes narrow in realisation. “Jon Snow was your lover before he was Daenerys’s. And here I thought incest was only something practised by-”

“Think very carefully before you finish that sentence, brother,” Jaime interjects harshly, coldly, making the contrast with his arrogant, casual posture all the more striking.

“My apologies,” Tyrion gulps. “My curiosity sometimes gets the better of me.” He looks between
Sansa and Jaime again, head tilted in consideration. “I can see how the two of you would come to understand each other, given the similarities in your circumstances, but how did you come to work together? Not many, and I doubt even yourselves, could have foreseen that.”

Jaime throws her a laughing glance before replying. “What was it we said to each other only a few days ago? That it helps that we’ve never had any interest in each other’s lands?”

“And then we fought a battle together and now have a common aim; namely the independence of our realms,” Sansa finishes.

Tyrion nods, considering this, before continuing, this time addressing his brother. “But the Lordship of the West, Jaime? Becoming King? You never had any interest in Casterly Rock.” The not like I did remains unspoken, but Sansa hears it as well as Jaime.

“And what, pray tell, little brother, do you suppose my options were?” Jaime snarls. “Remain under Cersei’s thumb? Let the West be ruled by a Targaryen? Remind me what I did to the last Targaryen who burned people alive? If you believe that I am going to apologise for acting as my honour dictates then you are sorely mistaken.”

Sansa sees that Jaime is fast reaching the end of his patience, and though she remembers from her time in King’s Landing Tyrion’s interest in Casterly Rock, and his many fruitless discussions with his father regarding his inheritance, she remembers also his desire for power that is akin to his father’s and his sister, and though she has no doubt, because Tyrion is in possession of a conscience, that he would exercise his functions with more scruples than they have done, Jaime she knows she can trust absolutely, and Jaime makes a far better King than his brother ever would, because he serves, first and foremost, instead of being fixated on the game of thrones. “Unless there is anything of substance you came to say, Tyrion, I am afraid I am going to have to request your departure. I have a trade settlement with the Dornish to draft.”

Tyrion hears the ice in her voice and nods. “Simple curiosity, your Majesty, which I now find sated.”

She waits until the door is shut behind the Dragon Queen’s Lord Hand before she plucks the wine decanter from its tray and pours both her and Jaime a glass.

“He’s jealous of you,” she muses between elegant sips of the fine vintage.
Jaime’s glass pauses on the way to his mouth. “Jealous?” he repeats, setting the glass aside.

“You’ve taken what he believes is his inheritance.”

“Cersei dismissed me from the Kingsguard some time ago; but that hardly matters. What matters is the Law of the West, and I am indisputably their legal King.”

“I’m your ally, Jaime. Not Tyrion’s.” Sansa says softly.

“I know,” Jaime replies heavily, shaking his head wearily. “Forgive me; it is simply that I am so used to being considered, including by Tyrion, as the least intelligent Lannister. He thinks his skills at reading people are superior to mine; they might have been, once, but no longer. He still thinks I am the same man I was when I helped him escape to Essos.”

Sansa smiles briefly, though without any humour. “Believe me, I understand you exactly.”

He grimaces at that, draining his goblet before changing the subject. “How long did you intend to host the Dragon Queen?”

“For as little time as I can get away with,” she quips, though there’s an undertone of steel in it she can see that her ally understands and agrees with. The faster Daenerys leaves, the better for all. “But I will host her for as long as it takes for a definitive treaty to be signed.”

“I suppose it’s back to the politicking, then?” Jaime grumbles, and she laughs at his annoyance, which she suspects, though exaggerated for her benefit, is not entirely feigned. She considers him, the dark, brooding expression on his face, and something within her aches. “Come riding with me this afternoon,” she says, and his head snaps up to look at her, bewildered. “We both need to clear our heads, and I can show you the Wolfswood. Lady Lyanna and Ser Addam are eminently capable of holding things here for a few hours.”

“And give our guests another show of pageantry?” He drawls, and she’s pleased to see the shadow lifting from his brows.

“But of course,” she smirks back at him, blue eyes twinkling, and then they both burst into real laughter, rich and carefree, her radiant smile meeting his brilliant grin, and he looks so guileless and young and handsome, without the tense set to his shoulders that indicates he carries what feels
like the weight of the entire world on his shoulders, and her stomach twists. She couldn’t stop the rosy flush that blooms on her cheeks if she tried.

Chapter End Notes

Do tell me what you thought!
JAIME LANNISTER III

Chapter Summary

Because though you love your family, your first love, much like Cersei’s first love, is power, power in whatever form you can take, and it will always be power. Oh, you might have a conscience, and Cersei most certainly does not, and is now more driven mad by grief than acting with much cunning, but the facts remain the same. Power. Recognition. Those are the forces that drive you, and those forces always will, and that is why you can’t answer me.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Welcome to this next chapter; I hope you all enjoy it. Thanks, as ever for all the comments and encouragement - they really do make a difference, and I really enjoy talking to you all about this story - so keep them coming!

trigger warnings: mentions of past rape.

Lots of stuff for you all in this chapter: MOMENTS. Banter. and an angsty finale - because where would we be without those?

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART FIVE

JAIME LANNISTER

“I look like a fop,” he protests half-heartedly to Ser Addam. He stares critically at his reflection, emerald eyes narrowed. He is to go riding with the Queen in the North and Ser Addam thought it would be just the time to show off the crown his people have made for him.
“It was a gift from the people of Lannisport,” Jaime’s old friend replies quietly, though keeping the laughter out of his tone, and Jaime harrumphs.

“Oh, I think it suits you rather well, King of the West,” an all too familiar voice comes from behind him, lilting and amused, and Jaime whirls around in shock. The Queen in the North is leaning casually against the doorjamb of his solar, a smirk playing on her lips. She is already dressed for riding, in a blue and white habit, her customary white cloak on her shoulders, her hair loose below her wreath of red weirwood leaves.

“It isn’t the lack of ornamentation; it’s the leaves. It makes me look like some kind of woodland creature - thing.” He frowns, considering the golden wreath on his head. The colour looks striking against his hair - the metal is a darker, burnished gold, and the metalwork is of the highest quality, but Jaime can’t shake the notion that it is something Loras Tyrell would wear. Hadn’t the boy been in the habit of weaving flowers into his locks? Granted, there are no actual flowers in the metal, only golden ivy, but even so.

“I thought you said you were secure in your masculinity,” the Lady of Winterfell continues, elegantly striding into the room towards him, halting opposite him, and she guilelessly reaches up with her slim hands to readjust the metal on his head. Their gazes lock and hold for a fraction too long, and Jaime steps away first, exhaling shakily as he goes to pick up his cloak, casually thrown across his chair, and swings it over his shoulders.

“Oh, I am,” he replies easily, once he’s mastered himself, and then realises he’s made a mistake when he hears her next sentence.

“Then prove it,” she rejoins, a wicked smirk on her face.

He turns around and laughs, a rueful grin on his face. He knows when he’s been bested. “By wearing this crown?”

She says nothing, but her smile acquires a hint of smugness when he sighs out his acceptance. If she had been anyone else, he would not have been happy, but he doesn’t mind because her playfulness with him is a good sign, one he can only rejoice in. “Very well, my lady,” he nods, offering her his good arm, but not before he’s bowed over her hand and kissed the tips of her gloved fingers. He doesn’t do it just because it is the gallant thing to do; or because, even though they might deny it aloud, they still both have not entirely been cured of their love for the old songs; but because he wants to; his affection and regard for her is genuine, and so too is the pleasure and admiration that warms him when, as has become her habit, she brings his hand to her lips in reciprocation, looking at him with her blue eyes that have somehow thawed to contain all the
nuances of the sea, instead of the frost, the ice, that glitters in her irises whenever she looks at anyone else.

He won’t deny that as much as her invitation was not something he’d expected, it is a most pleasant surprise, and he really is in dire need of a ride, of some sort of physical exertion to release his pent-up frustrations and anger. If he’d merely been frustrated instead of furious, he’d have gone to the sparring yard to exhaust himself; but his time in the Red Keep under Aerys the Mad cured him quickly of the notion that swinging a sword around in anger was ever wise. Galloping through the woods and the snow, across the fells, and in such pleasant company, will do him far more good, he knows, and he is earnestly looking forward to it. They both need time away from the castle, away from the demands upon their time and their persons, away from the politicking and the tense, tenuous relationships with the Dragon Queen’s faction.

When they reach the stables, waiting in the courtyard for their horses to be saddled and brought round, Jaime feels the Dragon Queen’s consort’s eyes boring into him. He ignores it, forcing back the sudden wave of rage. Jon Snow has no right to be glaring at him because Jaime is friendly with Sansa. Sansa hasn’t seem Jon yet, but she’s felt Jaime stiffen, turning her head inquisitively to look at him, a perplexed frown on her face.

“What is it?” she asks quietly, and Jaime leans to whisper in her ear.

“He’s watching. Laugh as though I’ve said something witty.”

Her eyes widen momentarily before she swallows, managing to collect herself, the mischievous twitch of her lips returning. “Then why don’t you say something witty?”

He shrugs his shoulders in response. “I don’t need to say something witty to make you laugh.”

Her mouth gapes at that, and she whacks him gently on the arm. “You are such a vain man, Jaime,” she trills.

“I did say I was quite confident in my masculinity, did I not?” he replies easily.

“You are a wicked, wicked man,” she gasps.

“But I am right, am I not, my lady?” he continues irreverently, grin widening as that teases a real
laugh from her, rich and clear, a radiant smile stealing over her face. She does not laugh for long; it is as fleeting as a ray of sun through the winter cloud, but that does not make it any less real.

And then she is solemn once more, blinking at the tears forming in her eyes, and he steps closer to her, concerned. But she only smiles back, a watery, sincere smile, and the depth of expression he sees inscribed in her face robs him momentarily of his breath. “Thank you, my lord,” she says, lifting his hand to her lips again, kissing his knuckles gently. “You have made me laugh more in the past few weeks than I think I have laughed in several years, and it is a most precious gift.”

“Sire!”

“Lady Kingmaker,” Jaime drawls, turning.

“Lord of the Sunset Court.”

Jaime snorts at that. “She-bear.”

Lyanna Mormont’s eyes narrow fractionally, though the fierce, pleased grin on her face remains. “Lion King.”

“Lady Bearling,” he continues, now thoroughly enjoying this game, as well as the utterly gobsmacked, awestruck expression on Sansa’s face as he does so.

“I was certain I’d have you at Kingslayer King, Sire.”

“You can do better than that, Lady Mormont.” Jaime drawls his reply, before sobering. “What may I do for you?”

“Sire, Your Majesty,” Lyanna Mormont addresses them both, “I merely wanted to say that your confrontation with Jon Snow this morning was not as private as you might have wished, and now all sorts of rumours are flying about, including about his parentage. It might be best to resume negotiations sooner than later.” Jaime watches his ally pale, and rub her temples wearily, and he echoes her sentiment. What an utter mess.
“Assemble everyone in the Great Hall in three hours time, including the Dragon Queen’s faction. Jaime, I assume that works for your people as well?”

Jaime inclines his head. “It does indeed.”

“And in the meantime?”

“Ask Arya what she can ascertain about the precise nature of these rumours, and control the spread of them, if that is possible at all.” Sansa finishes, tiredly. She is utterly sick of the whole situation, Jaime knows, and he does not blame her in the slightest.

Relief comes to them in the form of Pod leading their horses, caparisoned as ever, snorting and pulling at the reins. Neither Jaime nor Sansa have had much time recently, apart from their venture the previous day, to exercise the destriers, and it shows. The bay is prancing, almost tugging the leather reins out of Pod’s hands, arching his neck, and the grey-white is half rearing, cantering on the spot. He catches the grey-white’s reins and lays his left hand on the destrier’s neck, speaking softly into the horse’s ears as he does so, until the horse calms and stills.

Jaime then turns to Sansa, watches her mount nimbly into the saddle, and whilst she arranges her skirts to her liking with her left hand, he steps close to her leg, and gently grasps her ankle to guide it into the stirrup. She halts her movements to look down at him, eyes wide. He stills too, and meets her gaze evenly, seriously, waiting for her response, and he can’t deny that some part of him is gratified to see the colour steal high across her cheeks.

“Thank you, Jaime,” she says softly, and he, reassured, moves round to the horse’s other side to repeat the gesture, taking the slim foot with his hand, guiding it gently to rest on the metal. He’s entirely too aware of her watching his actions as he does so, and he looks up at her, a touch uncertainly. But she only reaches for his gloved hand and brings it to her lips and he knows all is well, even as he vaguely understands that he doesn’t believe he will ever be able to forget the sensation, even if he should ever want to.

“Where are you taking me?” Jaime asks curiously as the two horses canter easily side by side. Here, in the Wolfswood, the snows are not as deep as they are out on the fells, and though they reach the horses’ knees, the snow is light and powdery enough that it is no great hardship, unlike
the great drifts that are formed on open land. A wood in winter is a strange thing; hushed with silence, and in the silence there is a kind of wistfulness, a kind of melancholy, a curious sensation of a waiting; a hovering in time, a stasis broken only by the two horses and their riders, laughter echoing like bells through the trees, though there are here no birds to wake, and no game to startle, even as life shall return with the thaw that is yet to come.

All horses love the snow, and these warhorses are no exception; and they are being as frisky as yearlings, but their two riders simply find the humour in this. It has been so long since their hearts were this carefree; and it does both of them good to be able to laugh about the small things. Today, it is the childish antics of their destriers, bounding about in the snow.

“There’s a stream a bit further up,” Sansa replies, gesturing vaguely with her free hand. “It’s frozen, now, of course, but it is where my father and my brothers found the direwolves all those years ago.” He hears the touch of melancholy she can’t quite hide, and his heart sinks.

“Tell me about your direwolf,” he says as the horses ably pick their way between the trees; great, gnarled, ancient trees whose bark is dark against the pristine whiteness of the snow, trees whose evergreen leaves form great overhanging canopies that shield them from the low winter sun.

“My direwolf?” Sansa asks, bewildered. “What do you want to know about her?”

“Tell me a happy memory, my dear lady.”

“A happy memory…” she trails off uncertainly. “I am not sure that I…”

Jaime sighs. It is too soon, he thinks sadly. But perhaps there is something else. “You will remember, dear Lady,” he says softly. “One day, you will be able to remember those years, and recollect what happiness there was. For now, simply tell me of your direwolf.”

“A memory for a memory, then?”

“A fair bargain,” he acquiesces, sweeping an exaggerated bow from the saddle, and she rolls her eyes, scoffing lightly at his dramatics.

She sighs softly, looking at the snow, and eventually, quietly, begins her tale. “I remember the first time I saw her, the first time I held her. She was so small for a direwolf, but even then I was
only just able to carry her in my arms. And she was sweet, as sweet as her fur was soft. She was gentle, too, when I made mistakes as I attempted to train her. I didn’t really need to; it was as though she understood everything she said before I said it, as though she could read my mind. She wasn’t just an animal; I only needed to wrap my arms around her, and bury my head in her shoulder to feel whole. She was kind and trusting and she was the better part of me.” She turns her head to look him in the eyes. “She was the other half of my soul; the better half of my soul, and she is dead.”

“Yes,” Jaime agrees softly, sadly. “Your direwolf was taken from you, but you endured and you yet live. How many other Starks can say the same?”

She smiles at that, barely. It is only the merest twitch of the lips, but it is a smile nonetheless, and her eyes lose the flat, haunted look they acquire whenever the two of them speak of loss. “Thank you,” she murmurs gracefully, and Jaime inclines his head. “Your turn, now…” she continues pensively. “Tell me of your mother. What was she like?”

“My - my mother?” Jaime blinks, bewildered. That had not been one of the memories he’d been anticipating being asked about. “She was - my sister and I were young when she died; young enough to be bewildered and horrified by it; and just about old enough to understand and remember it. It was not a quick, peaceful death. She died screaming and she died slowly, slipping further and further into oblivion as the hours passed, and it utterly destroyed my father. I don’t believe he ever smiled properly ever again. So my memories of my mother are - blurred, a little; as though I’m remembering them by viewing them underwater. The sounds, the sights, it’s all a bit vague, a bit chaotic. I remember vividly, the strangest, most innocuous things. She used to comb her fingers through my hair, I recall. She was gentle, always so gentle with me, and I knew, without a sliver of a doubt, that she loved me, utterly, unconditionally. The last time she did that, before she gave birth to Tyrion, was the last time I remember being truly, innocently happy. Happiness, after that, was always more fleeting, sharper, somehow. She used to sing, too - she had the most wonderful voice, and she was always singing, always happy, I think. The way my father looked at her, too; she was everything to him.”

He breaks off at that, suddenly not being able to stand the compassion in Sansa’s eyes - why are they so expressive? they are too expressive, they give him too much. Far too much. He continues, because it occupies him instead of letting him meditate upon the nuances of her eyes. “It is something I have always wanted; with a desperation that has sometimes frightened me. To look at someone like that and be looked at in the same manner in return. And for the longest time, I thought, with Cersei -” his jaw tightens against the tears, trying to force himself to finish his sentence, but he finds he can’t, and he finds he doesn’t have to, because Sansa sees what he is trying to say and articulates it for him.

“That you had found it.”
Jaime nods wistfully. The bitterness, the anger has been bled out from him, and what is left is nothing more than a resigned sort of sorrow. “I know now that it is not something I have ever found.” Until - he cuts himself off mentally, surprised. Until now. With you. He allows himself to finish the thought, slowly, carefully, delicately. He allows himself, shyly, secretly, to relish it. But he knows it is too soon. Far too soon for her, and far too soon for him. Neither of them are ready. But it gives him a hope for the future; something to strive for beyond ensuring the prosperity of his people. One day.

“She’s with child,” he sighs, staring determinedly between his horse’s ears. He has no wish to see the revulsion, the disgust upon Sansa’s face, but to his surprise, there is none; there is only sorrow.

“Of course,” she breathes. “So many things make much more sense now.”

“It may have been nothing more than a ruse to keep me at her side, or it may be true; I have no way of knowing. But once this treaty with the Dragon Queen is finalised, I intend to go West and stay there. I have no intention of marching to King’s Landing and helping the Dragon Queen sack the city. Your hatred of Cersei is well-founded, Sansa, but I ask of you, I beg of you, do not ask me to march against her. Despite everything that has happened, she is still my sister, my twin, and it is beyond me.”

He sees her surprise at that; that a man such as he is willing to beg; but between begging and his own sanity even a proud man such as he will choose his sanity.

The Queen in the North shakes her head. “I have no intention of going further south than the Riverlands ever again. My armies will not fight Daenerys’s war. If she wants that fucking throne she can claim it herself. My intentions, now, I expect are very similar to yours. To rebuild, and concern ourselves with peace rather than war.”

“I see some things will never change,” Jaime says neutrally as he steps into his solar and sees Tyrion helping himself to the carafe of wine. Jaime reeks of horse, and he has been hoping for some time to himself before meeting with Daenerys Targaryen. His good mood upon returning to the castle from his ride with Sansa evaporates as soon as he sees his little brother is here for one of his famed conversations.
“Good wine, this,” the younger Lannister muses. “A gift from the Lady of Winterfell?” he continues shrewdly. Jaime’s eyes narrow in annoyance.

“As difficult as the concept may be for you to understand, little brother, it is customary for an army to travel with their own supplies instead of deciding to seize them from an independent third party, but of course when you serve a monarch with a penchant for incinerating supply trains, I gather attempts at requisitioning become something of a necessity,” Jaime retorts, not in the least inclined to indulge his younger brother’s mind games. The ghost of that loot train hangs between them, haunting Tyrion, as well it should. “The Queen in the North did not give me that. That wine is from my stores at Casterly Rock.”

“Jaime, I-”

“Why are you here?”

“Because Daenerys is going to be difficult at this meeting this afternoon. She was particularly enraged by what happened to her dragon, and also about the rumours about Jon Snow. It would be immensely helpful to me if you would be so kind as to answer my questions.” He hears in Tyrion’s voice the strain, the tightness of the vocal cords that indicates he’s spent the afternoon attempting (and failing, or else Tyrion would not be in these rooms at all) to reason with her.

“Immensely helpful to your ruler or immensely helpful for the safeguarding of your position as her Hand?” Jaime asks pointedly. If Tyrion believes Jaime will ever be so naive again as to blindly give Tyrion anything he asks for, Tyrion is a greater fool than Jaime could have ever imagined.

Tyrion gulps down another two mouthfuls of wine before replying. “Both, I would say.”

Jaime nods, taking off his cloak, his leather surcoat and then his tunic, hoping, despite the freezing temperatures, to wash some of the exertion from his body with the basin of water that stands near the fire, and he makes a mental note to commend Ser Addam for his thoughtfulness. “State your questions,” he says, dipping the rag in the warm water.

“What is the nature of your relationship with Sansa Stark?” Tyrion asks, and Jaime tenses.

“Why do you wish to know? Did we not sufficiently satisfy your curiosity earlier on?” Jaime slaps the rag to his shoulder in annoyance, his tones short.
“It would help to clarify the relationship between Jon Snow and Sansa Stark. My Queen is most eager to ascertain whether they are siblings or cousins, you understand,” Tyrion says, finishing his wine, and Jaime laughs hoarsely at that.

“The Queen in the North is the ally of the King in the West. Sansa Stark is my friend,” Jaime says tersely, resuming his rhythmic soaking of the rag, the glide of cloth and water over his arms and his torso. “As for Jon Snow and Sansa Stark, I am neither able nor willing to answer your question.”

“So you haven’t bedded her yet?” Tyrion smirks.

“You are being impertinent.” Jaime breathes deeply, trying to remain calm, though he can add another thing to the list of things that seem not to have changed: Tyrion is as uncouth and as needling as he ever has been. “There are ways other than political marriages to forge lasting alliances, Tyrion.”

“Yes, like becoming lovers.” Tyrion quips.

“Oh yes?” Jaime snarls. “And how is that working out for your Queen and Jon Snow?”

Tyrion winces at that, grimacing. “I take your point.” He sighs. “Jaime, please, give me something. Give me something to work with here.”

“And why in the Seven hells should I do that? The last time I did something for you; I saved your sorry little hide and you repaid that by killing our father in cold blood. On the privy.”

“He hated me!” Tyrion exclaims. “Because of things I could not control.”

“He was our father.” Jaime retorts dangerously. “No matter his mistakes, he was our father. I’m not blind; I know perfectly well what kind of man he was. But you should not have sunk to his level of hatred. You should have aspired to be better than him, not worse! Not carry out an act even he would have shrank away from.”

“He was ready to let me die!”
“Really?” Jaime replies dangerously. “After he started a war to get you back from Catelyn Stark? After he agreed immediately to the compromise I offered him - that you would take the black if I resigned the white? Tyrion, I did not even have to argue with him. He agreed before I’d even finished outlining my proposal. Are those the acts of a man so indifferent, so hateful towards his child, that he is willing to let him die, and die ignominiously, without a fight?”

“He did that out of love for you, Jaime, not me.”

“Then you should be grateful I love you, little brother.” Jaime replies harshly. He isn’t certain he wants to know the answer to his next question, but he supposes that this argument has been building for some time; they may as well finish it. “Let me ask you this, Tyrion: had our positions been reversed, would you have done the same?”

“Of course I would have!” His younger brother exclaims, hurt and angry, tears in his mismatched eyes. “How can you even think-

“And if Father had offered you Casterly Rock in exchange for my languishing in a cell, in exchange for your non-interference?” Jaime cuts him off coldly. “I understand you asked him that; or something very close to it whilst Robb Stark had me chained to a cage in which I pissed, ate and slept where I was sat.”

In the utter, astonished silence that follows in which Tyrion gapes at him in stunned horror, mouth opening and closing and opening again without a single sound passing his lips, Jaime feels something within him shatter as a vase flying into a thousand gleaming shards on stone.

“I - I” Tyrion stutters, his expression twisting hopelessly.

“You don’t know,” Jaime finishes quietly. He isn’t surprised, but he can’t deny the hurt he feels. Why is he cursed with loving his family so intensely when they do not? Well, his father did, his mother did - though they had vastly different ways of expressing it. Jaime will never forget, for example, the day the Maester, frustrated beyond measure at Jaime’s embarrassingly slow attempts at learning to read, had dragged him into his father’s study, and explained the situation. Instead of punishing him, as the Maester demanded, Tywin himself had taught him. He’d spent however long it took for Jaime to finish his passage without mistakes, whether that was one hour or four, day after day, month after month, year after year. But Jaime addresses this bitter question to his remaining living family; his siblings.

“And I’ll tell you why you don’t know the answer to that question. Your conscience is telling you your answer should be me; but in your heart, in those secretive little depths your heart is
whispering *I want the Rock. Take the Rock. I want the Rock*, and you don’t want to listen to your heart, but you can’t help yourself,” Jaime continues, forcing himself to even tones, to keeping his voice as dispassionate as it is possible for him to make it.

“Do you know why? Because though you love your family, your first love, much like Cersei’s first love, is *power*, power in whatever form you can take, and it will always *be* power. Oh, you might have a conscience, and Cersei most certainly does not, and is now more driven mad by grief than acting with much cunning, but the facts remain the same. Power. Recognition. Those are the forces that drive you, and those forces always will, and that is why you can’t answer me.”

“Cersei would have given you an answer,” Tyrion mutters once he has his voice back.

Jaime raises an incredulous eyebrow at that. “Really? And pray tell, what answer would she have given me?”

“Power, obviously.”

“Given a choice between power and me, yes,” Jaime drawls. “Obviously so. She made that choice multiple times and it was power every single time. But given the choice between power and her *children*?”

Tyrion’s mouth drops open once more, his face scrunched as he wrestles with the problem. “I… she would not have been able to give you one, I don’t believe.”

“Precisely,” Jaime nods. “And what, do you suppose Father would have answered?”

“I couldn’t say,” Tyrion shakes his head, though thoughtfully this time.

“I’ll tell you, Tyrion, because he answered me when I asked him at the beginning of this fucking war.” Jaime replies, and Tyrion frowns in consternation.

“He answered you?”

“Of course he did,” Jaime replies easily. “And if you think about it, he answered you as well, many
times over the years. You simply had to listen.”

The subject of listening to their Father’s lectures is still a sore one, Jaime sees, because Tyrion snappishly takes the bait. “And what was it you gleaned from these lectures? What was his reply when you asked him at the beginning of the war?”

Jaime smiles, a touch sadly. “Family,” he says softly. “Family is the only thing that matters; because family is the only thing that lives on. Those bonds of love are the only things that survive us.”

“That’s easy for a powerful man to say, Jaime,” Tyrion scoffs.

“Is it an easy thing to say for a man who’s wife has just been raped by the King he is sworn to serve?” Jaime continues mercilessly. “That power is more important than love? After all, power could have stopped the rape from happening. Possibly.” He shrugs with a nonchalance he does not mean. “Power might help in the aftermath of a rape, might help one survive. But love enables you to live after experiencing such horror.”

“I thought - I thought that was only a rumour?” Tyrion says, aghast, and finally, finally, Jaime sees a glimmer of the compassion Tyrion vaunts himself so much on having appear in his eyes.

“I saw the scars on Mother’s back myself.” Jaime says with all the finality of a swing of the executioner’s sword. “So you see, though you have a conscience and Cersei does not, the two of you are not so different after all, are you?” Jaime pats Tyrion’s shoulder. “Just something I suggest you think about,” he continues, opening his solar door.

“And now, if you’d leave me to dress for this meeting, Tyrion, I’d be much obliged.”

Chapter End Notes
thoughts?

the 'family' conversation is, of course inspired by that wonderful Tywin & Jaime scene in season 1 where Tywin is skinning that deer.
Chapter Summary

She presses a long kiss to his gloved knuckles - why is he always wearing gloves? sometimes she thinks she wants the comfort of a palm in a palm, skin touching skin, and the thought shocks her -

Chapter Notes

Hallo everyone, here's another chapter before the weekend! Probably won't have much time before Sunday, as I have family visiting, so here's something to tide you over: the much anticipated negotiations chapter!

Do enjoy; and let me know what you think of it.

Trigger warnings: mentions of past rape & torture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART SIX

SANSA STARK

Deciding to hold negotiations in Winterfell’s Great Hall whilst it is still being used as a field hospital is a tactical choice on Sansa’s part. Letting the Dragon Queen see her and Jaime’s injured men is a risk, of course, but Sansa also believes it will be an important reminder of precisely what they have already sacrificed and what they are willing to sacrifice in order to preserve their independence. She also hopes to avert, before any rumours have a chance to grow, any wild stories about exactly what takes place during said negotiations by holding them in the manner of the Northron conclave; that is, openly, and wherein any person may speak and be listened to. She does not expect this foreign Targaryen Queen to understand; and indeed she has heard from Arya the
extent of Daenerys’s bewilderment, stridently expressed to Lord Tyrion - but conclave is the way the North has always conducted business of state, because the Kings and Queens of Winter do not fear dissent from their bannermen. Indeed, it is a point of Northron honour to be able to co-operate, to able to resolve disagreements peacefully.

So when she walks into the Great Hall of her ancestral seat; despite knowing that these negotiations will not be easy, she is calm; her head held high, proudly wearing the red wreath that has become the symbol of her office, and takes her seat at the table standing in the middle of the hall. Due to the number of people she expects to be present at these talks, several of the wooden trestle tables have been pushed together. Jaime takes his seat beside hers, greeting her with a solemn nod.

The Dragon Queen has a habit of being late; Sansa does not let it bother her, taking the opportunity, instead, to finalise her plans with Jaime and the various lords. The stray thought that she really needs to appoint some form of formal council runs through her mind and she makes a mental note to give it some thought later on in the evening.

Her attention, however, is caught when Arya slips out of the shadows to discretely hand her a scrap of parchment; and Sansa pales as she unfurls it and reads it. Jaime sees her reaction and tilts his head in curiosity. Her throat is too tight for her to speak, so she simply passes him the parchment and watches his jaw clench.

He shakes his head bitterly. “I promise you, Sansa, that they will not succeed in this,” he whispers fiercely, eyes as sharp as gems. “You will always have your choice.”

She is touched by the sentiment, by the fierceness of his loyalty, but she smiles sadly. “Don’t make promises you won’t be able to keep.”

“And I refuse to accept defeat in this, my lady,” he replies stubbornly. “I will fight alongside you, and if the day should come that you stumble, I will fight for you until you regain your footing. You are no longer alone, my lady,” he continues solemnly, earnestly, vehemently, and she trembles with the force of his words. Suddenly overwhelmed, she ducks her head, eyes squeezed shut against the pricking of tears, and she reaches blindly for his good hand, which he gives her without hesitation. As his grip, larger and stronger than hers, closes gently but firmly around her slender digits, she almost shudders in relief, compulsively bringing his hand to her mouth in what has become a familiar, comforting gesture. She presses a long kiss to his gloved knuckles - why is he always wearing gloves? sometimes she thinks she wants the comfort of a palm in a palm, skin touching skin, and the thought shocks her - letting her long hair brush against his leather covered arm, and she feels him sigh in response, carefully brushing the locks away from her face with his golden hand. She stills, the sensation of cool metal against her skin one that is new to her; but not, by any means unpleasant, and she smiles slightly as she lifts her head to meet his eyes.
His expression is strangely intent, solemn, and there is something hidden in the depths of his gaze that Sansa cannot decipher. Impulsively, she brings her free hand up to hold his golden one against her cheek, and his green eyes widen. And then she turns her head to press another kiss to the cool metal palm, and his whole arm trembles. She sees him swallow unsteadily, almost harshly, and he stares at her, all his protective layers stripped from him, and suddenly she sees the bright little boy with his mother’s heart he once was, long ago; the deepest part of him that he has kept carefully hidden all these years, and her chest aches. She wants to comfort him, to bring him some measure of peace, but she isn’t entirely certain how, so she presses another delicate kiss to the metal palm.

“Well, Jaime, you realise you could simply have answered my questions earlier on!” Tyrion exclaims in a jovial voice that Sansa senses is at least partially feigned. Sansa might have expected Jaime to wrench his hands from hers - he is a notoriously private man, she has come to understand - but instead he merely shrugs, and brings both her hands to his lips before casually turning in his seat to face his younger brother. Sansa disentangles her fingers reluctantly from his.

“Please, sit,” Sansa says, gesturing smoothly at the empty seats waiting for the Dragon Queen’s party. She has not brought many advisors, Sansa realises. Only Jon, Ser Jorah Mormont (who is studiously avoiding Lyanna’s utterly incensed glare), Lord Tyrion and her handmaiden and announcer. “I trust the terms you wish to present this afternoon will be more palatable to our tastes?” she questions pointedly, arching an eyebrow.

“That is our intent,” Tyrion answers neutrally.

Sansa leans back nonchalantly in her chair, though inwardly bracing herself - if there is any truth whatsoever to the parchment Arya has just passed her, then -

“Have at it, then.” Jaime waves his left hand in a careless gesture, and both of them watch with sharp, wary eyes, as Tyrion unfurls a scroll, and begins to read from it.

“The Mother of Dragons, Daenerys Targaryen, will agree to the complete and perpetual independence of the North, the West, the Vale and the Riverlands, if the Queen in the North, Sansa Stark, accepts the hand in marriage of a suitor acceptable to Daenerys Targaryen.”

In the silent, stunned, still moment before chaos erupts following Tyrion’s announcement, Sansa feels herself turn from porcelain and steel and ivory to the very Northron ice itself. The wrath of the North is unlike anything else; it begins as a quiet, soft, gentle touch, that is almost a caress in its very insidiousness, a pricking of the skin, before it numbs everything in its path, sinks slowly, almost lovingly, into the veins, into the very bones of a man and once one realises what has happened, it is far too late and the limb is black and blue and dead.
Sansa lifts a slim hand for silence and her lords as well as Jaime’s settle instantly. “How kind of the Mother of Dragons to offer us this… boon,” she replies icily. “Might I ask who appears on this list of approved suitors?” She continues sardonically.

“Jon Snow, Ser Jorah Mormont, Tyrion Lannister and Daario Naharis - the Lord of Meereen,” Daenerys answers, a touch smugly, and Sansa, more than the cold fury swirling, a snowstorm in her veins, feels Jaime beside her go rigid with radiated anger, though his face remains impassive, and she longs to slip her small hand into his, but she cannot.

“Tell me, Dragon Queen, why should I even contemplate agreeing to such terms?” Sansa retorts, purposely letting a smidgen of condescension leech into her tones, as she mockingly enumerates the qualities of the men proposed. “I appear to have a choice between a turncloak, a second turncloak, a whoring, drunken opportunist, or another whoring, drunken opportunist. Why would I even consider letting those men set foot on my lands, much less bed me, the Queen in the North, of the Riverlands and the Vale?”

“Because I’ll raze Winterfell to the ground if you don’t. Cross me, and I will rain such fire and blood down on your heads that you will never have seen before,” Daenerys replies determinedly, a glint in her violet eyes that tells Sansa she believes she’s won this confrontation.

But Sansa, instead of panicking or capitulating, as she suspects Tyrion and Daenerys have banked on, only leans back casually into her chair, considering the people opposite her carefully. Where once her and Jaime’s lords might have erupted into vociferous protests, they somehow sense that Sansa has an answer to this, and so they remain silent, almost vibrating with tense anticipation.

“Your demands are so extreme for one reason and one reason alone,” she counters evenly, and it takes all of her self-control to answer this outrageous series of demands with the plan she has prepared instead of protesting loudly like a child. “I’m a threat to you. Jaime is a threat to you. So why, when you are so clearly frightened of me, would I acquiesce to such ridiculous terms? You could, of course, attempt to burn Winterfell to the ground,” she concedes. “But my armies and Jaime’s armies would retaliate and wipe your armies from the map. You would also run the very real risk of the scorpions bringing down another one or both of your dragons.”

Her first point made, Jaime now takes up the thread of Sansa’s arguments. “But even if the scorpions failed and you managed to raze this fortress which has stood for over eight thousand years, which has stood against the army of the Dead, the Night King, and an undead dragon, to the ground; even if you managed, which would be highly unlikely, given our respective numbers, that you managed to slaughter every single man, woman and child here, that would not stop word from spreading South. And every keep from here to King’s Landing itself will hear the tale of Winterfell, and they will know that you are a power-hungry pyromaniac of a tyrant, and having already suffered greatly under more than one mad monarch, they will prefer to resist and fight and die rather than submit to your rule. And so, you will eventually come to King’s Landing, and you will be forced to fight your way into the capital, to burn it, and yes, you will, in all likelihood emerge as the victor against my sister, but you will be nothing more than the Queen of the Ashes, and what is the point of that?”
“Your people cannot love you if they are dead because you burned them for the crime of not agreeing with you,” Sansa finishes tartly.

“I am giving you a choice,” Daenerys insists, softening the smugness in her tone, and assuming an air of superior worldliness. “Which, I understand, is more than you were given the first two times you wed.”

Something within Sansa snaps at this jibe, and though she is, now inclined to do something which might loosely be called improvising, she’s always been able to think quickly on her feet, and she has confidence in her ability to do so now. And in the back of her mind, too, are the comforting assurances of Jaime’s unconditional support, which help to steel her mind for what she is about to do. Where rational discourse has failed, perhaps shame will suffice. “Well,” she says abruptly, standing up, “I suppose you will want to inspect your merchandise,” she continues matter-of-factly.

She feels Jaime’s glance snap to her in horrified concern, but she focuses resolutely in the confused hush that follows her words upon methodically loosening the fastenings of her sleeves, grateful that she has no need to wear a cloak, making this somewhat easier. With every tie that she loosens at her wrists and at her back, she feels herself retreat further into her mind, until her dress is loose enough to drop from her shoulders, leaving her entirely naked. When she speaks, she hears herself as though from the other side of a wall, somehow muffled though every word easily remains distinct.

“Shall I describe what you are seeing, your Grace?” she snarls. “This is not Essos, Daenerys Targaryen. In Westeros, it is not customary for women to fall in love with their rapists. Joffrey Baratheon attempted to claim me for his possession, and when I refused, he had his Kingsguard beat me with the flats of their swords. Tywin Lannister arranged for me to marry Tyrion Lannister, and so I became Lannister property in truth, and the beatings continued. Every single time my brother Robb Stark, the King in the North and the Riverlands, won a battle - which was every single one, you must understand - I was gifted with some new beating, with some new scar. And my husband at the time did absolutely nothing to stop it. And then I escaped King’s Landing, only for Petyr Baelish to sell me to another monster; Ramsey Bolton. Oh, he raped me.” She turns around slowly, letting the truth of her words sink into her audience. “But the darker stripes on my legs are where Ramsey flayed the skin from me.”

She turns her head to look Daenerys Targaryen straight in the eyes, and the shorter woman is quailing at the ferocity in Sansa’s words and demeanour, though she tries to hide it. “The North is not for sale. The Vale is not for sale. The Riverlands are not for sale. I am not for sale. I am not some thing to submit to you merely because you have two dragons. My responsibility is to my people and my people alone. I owe you, Daenerys Targaryen, absolutely nothing. You stay in Winterfell, you eat and drink from my stores, you pitch your tents on my land at my pleasure.” Her Lords and Jaime’s begin to drum their satisfaction at such a rejoinder, banging their fists upon the
wooden tables.

“And if you think, Dragon Queen, that the West will countenance such an insult to her Northron allies, you are quite mistaken,” Jaime declares vehemently, and only then does Sansa meet his gaze. His eyes are fixed on hers, despite her nakedness, and they are full of fury and compassion, though she knows, somehow, instinctively, that the hatred and anger are not directed at her.

Tyrion and Daenerys share a glance Sansa is unable to read before Tyrion hastily puts forward another proposal, one Sansa does not doubt has been planned, and one she has an inkling she will not like, though she grudgingly admires the strategy behind it. The idea, of course, is that, presented with two equally unsavoury options, she will, perforce, pick one, and either way, the Dragon Queen gets what she wants. Sansa, however, has absolutely no intention of dancing to the Targaryen tune.

“Your Graces, perhaps these terms will be more palatable to you. You may marry whomever you wish; the only condition is that your first-born child, whether male or female, be fostered in the South and become the heir to the Iron Throne.”

The rage that builds in her veins at this surprises even Sansa, but luckily she is frozen rather than explosive in her rage, so this goes unnoticed by the other side.

“I want to be honest with you all,” Daenerys Targaryen declares grandly, with the countenance of someone doing Sansa an immense favour. “I am barren; your blood would therefore sit on the Iron Throne, Sansa.”

“I need nothing from you in order to marry. I answer only to my people.” Sansa snarls, suppressing the wild urge to say that she will never let anyone do anything to any children she might have; she is a direwolf, and direwolves bide their time.

“Then what do your people say?” Daenerys smirks triumphantly.

Sansa fights back the panic as her own lords turn to look at her; though they keep their gazes respectfully trained upon her face instead of raking down her body, and Sansa knows there is only one last thing left to do.

“Well, my lords?” she states quietly, though her voice carries in the hush of the hall. “What say you? I am, as ever, your servant.” This is a gamble, she knows. But if it fails, she knows her Lords
would only ever ask her to marry either Jon or Ser Jorah, and that she knows she can survive. She has, after all, survived worse. She thinks she might even prefer Ser Jorah over Jon; because then she knows she will, at least, not have to endure the knowledge that Jon much prefers bedding Daenerys, and does so, frequently.

And then the Lords can contain their fury no longer.

“Never!” Lord Royce shouts.

“You would seek to shame us thus, Dragon Queen?” Lord Manderly thunders. “The Queen in the North is not for sale, least of all to one of your lackeys.”

Lyanna Mormont’s reply, is as typically blunt as cutting as ever. “You are a disgraceful woman, your Grace,” she snarls. “After being sold yourself, you would ask it of another lady, and for your own ends! You lack all honour, and the North will never treat with you.”

But once again, Sansa only has to lift her hand for silence, and it falls. This time it is she who does not care to keep the notes of triumph from her voice. “My people have spoken, Daenerys Targaryen. They will never sell me. And if you think that a direwolf gives up her children to be raised by someone else you are utterly deluded. Let me tell you here, now, in open court, that such a demand on your part will never be met.”

And then she takes the opportunity to guide these discussions to where she wants them to be. “So let me explain what is going to happen now. You have stated your proposals; you will now leave me, my allies and my conclave to, at this hour tomorrow, present you with some proposals of our own. Then, the day after that, I will provide you with the minimum amount of victuals from my stores and you will depart my lands. You will be escorted to my borders, and should you ever sail into my waters or those of my allies, should you ever set foot on my lands or those of my allies, should you ever fly over my lands or those of my allies, I will consider it an act of war, and I shall have satisfaction for it. Do I make myself understood?”

“You do, your Grace,” Tyrion says shakily, nodding, and Sansa catches the way his gaze falls upon her breasts more than it does her face, though he tries to keep his eyes averted, and tight coils of fury begin to knead her stomach.

“Excellent,” Jaime bites out furiously. “Now get out of this hall.”
There is a sort of disbelieving rage that hovers thickly in the hall as soon as the Dragon Queen’s faction have left; and Sansa knows that these demands, along with the high-handed manner of their presentation, has left the lords reeling, but Sansa knows the only way she will receive the peace, the quiet, the solitude, she so desperately desires, is if she first presents her plan to her lords and to her allies.

So, still naked, she calls once more for silence. “My lords, I expect our proposals tomorrow will still be the same as they are today; the Dragon Queen’s acceptance of the full and uncontested and unconditional independence of our lands, and that we categorically reject any of their proposals concerning marriage and eventual children. That we will sign a treaty of alliance only if we are treated as equals; and that we expect them gone from Winterfell two days hence. However, today’s… discussions, if we may call them that, have thrown light upon one important subject that we had not yet considered. Until I marry, the lands which I rule may be held hostage. Am I wrong?” She pauses, seeing the disgruntled acceptance of her words upon her lords’ faces, the uneasy shifting in their stances. They don’t like it any more than she does, but it is the truth.

“So,” she continues, “here is what I propose - I marry a man of my choosing; I will notify you when I have made my choice; but we pre-date the ceremony to, let us say, one week ago, so there can be no accusations whatsoever of foul play, and it gives our side and the Dragon Queen’s a graceful way to extricate ourselves from the tangle caused by these horrendously high-handed demands.”

“You are more gracious than they deserve, your Majesty,” one lord calls, to ripples of laughter.

“Yes, well,” she shrugs lightly, elegantly. “Politeness costs me absolutely nothing.” She scans the hall carefully, taking the measure of the room. “I take it none of you have any objections? Then if you would see yourselves out, I’d be grateful.”

Her lords, to murmured assent, do as she asks, saluting her in the Northern manner, fists over their hearts, before striding from the room, as Jaime dismisses his own lords in turn.

Only once everyone else has left does she allow her mask to fall, and to begin pulling her dress back on with shaking fingers. Jaime looks up at her movements, before sighing deeply, looking back down at the table.
“What are you thinking?” she asks softly, considering him, suddenly realising that he looks as exhausted as she does. He leans back in his chair, tipping his head back, glancing over at her once he’s certain she’s dressed.

“I’m thinking that you are the bravest person I’ve ever met,” he laughs tiredly, a release of tension more than anything else.

“I’m not so excessively brave,” she replies quietly. “I only did what had to be done.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Sansa,” he snorts, before continuing more solemnly. “I also think you’ve already made your decision about who to marry.” He looks at her carefully. Indeed, she knows, there is only one man to choose. “Am I wrong?”

She sighs, collapsing into her chair next to his in a most unladylike fashion. “No,” she answers. “You’re not wrong at all.” She turns towards him then. “But only if you agree to it too. I wouldn’t dream of - I don’t want to be presumptuous.”

“You’re not being presumptuous,” he disagrees quietly, taking one of her hands in his good hand, entwining their fingers, and she notes with a mental huff that he is still wearing his gloves, even as his gesture goes a long way towards alleviating her fears. Because what she wants is all well and good, and she knows that they are friends and allies and confidants and that perhaps they’ve started looking at each other in a more intimate manner - but she would never want to inflict something like this on him. She never wants to inflict herself on him. To be some sort of - burden, or duty.

“Breathe, Sansa.” Jaime says, eyes flicking briefly to hers. “Breathe; I can see your thoughts running away with you again. It’s alright; I promise you, it’s alright.”

“I keep - I keep thinking,” she says wildly, “I don’t want to impose on you - on anyone - but most of all on you. I don’t want to be some burden, or duty, something to be appeased every so often.”

“You’re not,” Jaime replies vehemently. “You never could be.”

“But this is so - so new, to both of us,” she whispers, ducking her head.

“It is,” Jaime agrees readily. “Which is why we will take our time.” He sighs again. “A wedding might be mandated for the stability and independence of our realms, but there is nothing within
that which stipulates any sort of personal timeline."

“But I - I’ve been married; twice, to men I had no desire to marry,” Sansa protests, desperately attempting to get him to understand what it is, precisely, that she is saying. “I could never ask the same thing of you.”

“And you aren’t,” he returns evenly, and Sansa can see him collect himself before he continues. “And do you know why?”

She shakes her head mutely.

“You are not asking anything of me that I am not willing to give, and that is because I believe I would have courted you anyway, in time, Sansa Stark.”

This pronouncement is met with no small amount of shock on Sansa’s part - not because, as she is coming to realise, such sentiments would be unreciprocated; indeed, nothing could be further from the truth, but because she genuinely doesn’t understand why Jaime is so different in his considerations to other men. After all, even Jon, who Sansa had considered the best of men - good and true and honourable - raked her heart and trust over hot coals, and did so so quickly, so casually that a part of Sansa wonders, despite all of the man’s protestations, what, precisely she meant to him. Why is he willing to overlook what no other man has? It is a riddle Sansa desperately wants answered, but it is an answer she is uncertain she has the courage to hear. She shakes her head. “I don’t understand,” she says, feeling like the stupid little girl she has always been accused of being.

He lifts both of his hands, the live and the metal, to her cheeks, cradling them gently. “You don’t think I’m frightened, Sansa? I’m terrified. I never wanted power; I never wanted to be King.” He scoffs, laughing humourlessly. “Seven hells, I once gave up the Iron Throne to Robert Baratheon precisely because I had no interest in it. My childhood might have been geared towards becoming Lord of the Rock and the West, but the fear - of making mistakes, of not being good enough - that has never gone away. But somehow, you inspire me - to kindness, to courage.”

“That comes from within, Jaime.” Sansa disagrees softly. “Your courage is what made you change, and for the better.”

He groans out an embarrassed laugh, before swallowing unsteadily. “I suppose, what I am attempting to tell you, is that, whatever your endeavours, you have in me a willing partner, and that will never change.”
Her eyes widen. “Even marriage? Even to a woman who has been rejected?” She has difficulty forming the words; they feel slippery in her mouth, almost insubstantial, and as bitter as ash.

“I’ve said it before and I will say it again,” he replies fiercely. “I will say it however many times it takes for you to believe me. The men who rejected you are fucking imbeciles, and they do not deserve to polish your boots.”

Chapter End Notes

Any thoughts?
Crimson and white, silver and gold. Complimentary and opposite, their body language speaking of an entirely real intimacy and friendship, heads tilted close to one another even as they stride on, their postures proud and unyielding, their bodies angled slightly towards the other. Intimacy, confidence, secrets, strategies, friendship, affection, attraction.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I hope you had a good weekend - here's a nice long instalment for you all. Thank you all so much for your comments and encouragement, they really do make an absolutely incredible difference! Do keep those comments coming :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART SEVEN

She trembles at his words, eyes wide, and he feels her distress as a punch to his stomach, even as incandescent rage lances through him. She is entirely wrong to have such a low opinion of herself, and he utterly means what he says. He will say it again and again until she believes it; and what he keeps locked in his heart is that he will say it to her every day of their lives. Jaime is no stranger to violence as a knight of the realm, but this sudden desire to tear out the throats and hearts of the men who have done this to her takes him aback slightly. He can’t precisely fathom how he has come to feel so strongly for her in so short a period of time, but, self-aware as he is, he simply accepts it, revelling in the sensation.
Her breathing eases slightly, and the glint of mischief returns to her expression, though her voice remains solemn. “If presumptuousness isn’t where you draw the line, where do you draw it?”

He does not have to think about his answer even though he is surprised by her question; the words fall from his lips like water. “Mistrust. Mistrust and disloyalty,” he replies quietly, melancholy weighing heavily on him. She nuzzles into his hands, bringing her palms up to cover his, and he marvels at how easily, how quickly they comfort each other; the natural equality of the way they treat each other. Through the leather he feels the warmth of her hand on his, and he fancies, too, that he can feel with his golden hand the way this simple touch makes his skin prickle. “And you?”

Her lips flicker in a sad smile. “I draw the line in exactly the same place. I don’t want to be lied to; I am not a child to be coddled. If I am old enough to marry then I am old enough to understand the facts of a situation and to make my own decisions.”

He smiles slightly, drawling, “Well, considering I’ve never coddled anyone in my life, I wouldn’t even know where to begin…”

A slow, shaky smile spreads across her face at that, hesitant but true, and his heart stutters in his chest. “I also… I don’t share,” she whispers, before continuing more forcefully. “I will not.”

His lips quirk humourlessly. “Neither do I.”

“I’m glad we’re agreed,” she replies, bringing her hands to his. He lifts them reluctantly from her cheeks, thinking she means to break the contact, but she merely wishes to see his hands, cradling them both within hers. Her thumb brushes over his palm, and he feels the caress even through his glove and he shivers.

“We should discuss this further in a more private setting,” she murmurs, looking down at their hands, entwined together, resting on the table. Jaime agrees, and they both rise, only realising the issue when they both attempt to move out from their chairs, and they release each other, private smiles playing at the corners of their mouths; an intimate amusement.

Freed from the entanglement of the chairs, he once again offers her his hands, and he steps closer to her, in order to lift her dainty hands to his lips and press a gentle kiss to them; but it appears that she has the same idea, and so they find themselves much closer than, either of them, Jaime thinks vaguely, probably anticipated. Thus, they end up toe to toe, their forearms pressing together, and it should be awkward, but it isn’t, because they both laugh.
Mirth shining in his eyes, amusement he can see reflected in hers, he inclines his head to her, and this time as he presses a kiss to her knuckles, he keeps his gaze upon her; he therefore has the distinct pleasure of seeing her tremble most exquisitely at his gesture. She reciprocates; and he has not her strength - he closes his eyes. “My lady,” he whispers hoarsely.

She only smiles. “Lead on, my lord.”

They are traversing one of Winterfell’s many courtyards when they are hailed by a most unwelcome intruder; Jaime knows he and Sansa need to begin work on their marriage contract as quickly as possible. They need something coherent to present to their lords, something that the people of all four kingdoms can be happy with. Biting back a growl of annoyance, he halts, Sansa beside him doing the same, and together they wait.

“Daenerys,” Sansa says evenly as the shorter silver-haired woman approaches. There are no platitudes, no false gestures of respect, though all three of them remain coldly polite.

“Yes?” Jaime questions haughtily, summoning every single piece of the notorious Lannister arrogance in his reply.

“I was hoping you might be able to clarify something for me, Sansa,” Daenerys Targaryen continues, her gaze flicking tightly over Jaime and Sansa’s forms, noting with a thin mouth how closely the Queen in the North and the King of the West are standing, Sansa’s hand nestled in the crook of Jaime’s elbow.

“Indeed?” Sansa raises an eyebrow. “Pray continue.”

“Is Jon your brother or your cousin?”

The question hangs between the three for a moment, and Jaime doesn’t know how to feel or what to say. He’s stunned that the Targaryen would simply demand answers to such a thing in such a forthright manner. Then again, he doesn’t believe Daenerys Targaryen would recognise subtlety if it hit her over the head with a warhammer. Sansa at his side goes rigid, though her expression remains utterly impassive, utterly unfathomable; as blank as the stone statues of her ancestors.
down in Winterfell’s crypts.

“I simply want to know whether I am asking you to commit incest with your half-brother or not.”

“Don’t pretend you concern yourself with that,” Sansa scoffs with no little asperity. “You yourself are born of incest between a brother and a sister, and if Jon is not my brother then he is my cousin and your nephew. And yet the prospect cannot bother you overly much if you have not thrown him from your bed.”

“Jon spoke so highly of you to me,” Daenerys continues smoothly, and Jaime feels Sansa’s fingers twist the material of his surcoat, her hand trembling - with rage or anguish he cannot say - and her shoulder pressing more closely against his. He presses his shoulder back, telling her wordlessly that she has his support. “That you were close. This situation must be difficult for you.” Her tone is supercilious - with condescension or with knowing Jaime cannot tell, but he decides to end this now, before Daenerys is able to make any more digs at Sansa.

“Jon Snow is the true-born son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. Should he ever choose to pursue it, he has a far better claim to the Iron Throne than you do. Your beloved golden brother was not so golden after all, was he now?” Jaime states coldly, stepping closer to Sansa still, so their legs are touching, and he feels her tense posture loosen slightly, and they share a quick glance, green locked on blue, and he sees in that moment her mind working quickly to ascertain the thread of his argument and pick it up.

“Considering your actions in Westeros,” Sansa says nonchalantly, “I would suggest you analyse your position very carefully, when you think about who the threats to your rule are.”

“If you married Jon, Sansa, you could bring peace to the Seven Kingdoms through this alliance.” Daenerys says.

“If you think I would marry my cousin; the man who was ready to sell the North to you, you are a fool. The North, the Vale, the Riverlands, the West - no matter whom I choose to marry - we will never bow to you.” Sansa snaps.

“Good evening,” Jaime says coldly, walking away with Sansa as he does so.

Jaime and Sansa sweep away, and Jaime can well imagine the picture they must make to those who cross their path. Their clothes splendid without being overly ostentatious; the result when quality
of fabric is chosen instead of excessive ornamentation. Jaime’s cloak billowing out behind him with every step he takes, and the pleasing contrast this creates with the lady beside him. Crimson and white, silver and gold. Complimentary and opposite, their body language speaking of an entirely real intimacy and friendship, heads tilted close to one another even as they stride on, their postures proud and unyielding, their bodies angled slightly towards the other. Intimacy, confidence, secrets, strategies, friendship, affection, attraction.

Indeed, the smallfolk and lords alike salute them both as they pass, walking as swiftly as they can whilst still conveying the appearance of calm to Jaime’s solar, this time. There is less likelihood of them being disturbed there; Sansa holds something of an open door policy. Her solar has also become the de-facto conclave chamber, but these negotiations, due to their rather more sensitive nature rather than either of the two of them anticipating many great difficulties, require somewhere more secluded.

Jaime does however bar the door behind them, replying swiftly to Sansa’s quizzical glance that he has no wish for anyone, much less Tyrion to interrupt them. He then watches with slight bemusement as Sansa proceeds survey his solar with a practiced eye, swiftly locking the door to the servants’ passage, but not before fluently explaining to the Lannister guards outside Jaime’s door that neither of them are to be disturbed by anyone.

Jaime offers her wine, and is relieved when she declines gracefully, replying that she would rather keep a clear head, as there is no little minutiae to trawl through. He is not in the mood for drinking, and had she accepted a goblet, he would have had to partake as well out of politeness; it is not the done thing in the West, certainly, to let one’s guest drink on their own. He sees that she is in no mood to discuss the altercation with Daenerys, determinedly focusing her attention on keeping herself together, and resolves to distract her as best he can.

“So,” he begins as they take their seats side by side at the desk, pulling a sheaf of parchment and quill and inkpot towards them. “Shall we start working out this contract?” He glances at her with a slightly embarrassed expression. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to write; I’m… my handwriting is…” he trails off uncomfortably, looking sourly at his golden hand.

“Of course,” she agrees immediately, making no comments about his hands, and Jaime finds himself inordinately grateful. He can’t help but think - is this what marrying her will be like? Working together like this? Though he does know he will have to engage a scribe, for official correspondence at the very least. This contract is too delicate to be entrusted to anyone else during the drafting process.

“The first thing,” he frowns thoughtfully, “I think, is that we agree to remain sole rulers of each of our realms.”
Sansa nods. “We would help each other if required, but neither of us would have jurisdiction over the other realm. I would however say that we dispense with tariff barriers within our realms, to encourage trade.”

“A good notion,” Jaime agrees. “What about laws? That is potentially more difficult; each of the four realms has its own proud traditions and laws, which would make it difficult for us to govern but-

“Legal assimilation and integration presents its own political challenges aside from the obvious logistical ones,” Sansa finishes his thought, nodding.

“Exactly,” Jaime continues, relieved that she understands what he is saying. He’s always been more of a practical man; scholarly endeavours have never been his strong point, but perhaps this planning will be more pragmatic than mired in philosophy than he might fear. “Perhaps we can agree to leave the laws as they are for now? I certainly intend to appoint a Master of Laws - I imagine you want to do the same for each of your three realms?”

“I do.”

“If we ask our Masters of Law to study the issue,” he continues, warming to his theme, “they can advise us on the best course of action.”

“But I do believe cultural exchanges would help us ensure greater stability. I would never go so far as assimilation - but the system we worked out for our military signalling -

“You want to use the same principle for dealing with our disparate peoples,” Jaime surmises, pausing to think, to turn the idea over in his mind. “Something akin to the fostering system, but combined with some sort of rotation between the four realms?”

“Co-operation ensures understanding, which ensures peace.” Sansa says. “That is what I have always believed, and it has served the North well through the winter.” He looks over at her, taking in the sight of her explaining her ideas animately, the way she brushes her hair back from her face in her haste to write them down as swiftly as possible. The turn of their minds is alike; their different areas of expertise enabling them to apply the same concepts to multiple ideas. It should frighten him, how well they work together, but it only serves to make him stupidly optimistic.

She notices the broad smile on his face and regards him quizzically, tapping the feathery tip of the
quill on her bottom lip. “Why are you smiling?” She asks, confused.

“Because I’m hopeful,” he replies lightly. It isn’t the way he’d imagined voicing such a profound truth, but he’s found all too often that moments of levity must be seized upon because they are all too rare.

“Hopeful?” She questions, tilting her head.

“I am,” he replies, feeling what is quite frankly a ridiculous grin spreading across his face. “Aren’t you? We work well together.”

She huffs at that, but the way her jaw is working tells him she is biting back a smile. She is more cautious than he is, he knows, perhaps also more reluctant to believe in the success of her initiatives when so many of them have been torn from her. “I suppose I’ll have to add ridiculous optimist to your list of traits then.”

“You’ve written a list of my character traits?” He can’t help himself - he leans forward, smirking, mischief written into every line of his face. “Do tell? Is it very long?”

She splutters out a shocked laugh, accidentally flicking her quill at him. A spot of ink lands on his nose. “Vain, insufferable man,” she chokes out between giggles.

He’s feeling bold, so he waggles his eyebrows at her. “You wouldn’t have me any other way,” he asserts confidently, though he can’t entirely hide the note of uncertainty under all the bravado. Perceptive as she is, she catches it, of course, and she gently wipes the ink from his nose.

“Of course not,” she smirks. “I offered you marriage, if you recall?”

“You did,” he concedes ruefully. “But - if - if I ever overstep the mark, you must tell me. It’s the only way this is going to work.” He searches her eyes, suddenly feeling foolish. Sansa is not one to hold her tongue, necessarily. It is only that - he is trying - and tripping over his own tongue as he does so, to explain to her that he wants her to know, to understand, that she has the same measure of control that he does in this relationship. Not for the first time, he curses the fact that words are not his forte, not like his father, not like Tyrion, not like Cersei.

“Jaime, Jaime,” Sansa whispers sweetly, and the sound of her voice anchors him, prevents him
from becoming lost in the maelstrom of his thoughts. “I trust you. I trust you.” His breathing eases slightly. “I trust you,” she repeats solemnly, her eyes glimmering with some emotion he can’t entirely place, reaching out to cup his cheeks, and he sighs into her gentle, tender touch. “You have the most generous heart, Jaime. And I know I’m not the only one who has suffered, so don’t pretend I am,” she remonstrates softly, thumbs sliding over his cheekbones; a soothing caress, and suddenly he can’t remember the last person to touch him with kindness, with tenderness, and the thought makes his eyes prick with tears. “You don’t have to pretend you’re not hurting, Jaime. Not with me.”

He shudders at that, closing his eyes. “You fell me with your kindness, Sansa,” he murmurs. He attempts to collect himself. He does not know what to do with such unabashed tenderness and sympathy. “I don’t want to be a second choice. I can’t share. I hate it when I’m spoken to before I’ve shaved in the morning,” he continues, aware that he is rambling, that he is making no sense whatsoever, but Sansa Stark has a singular manner of loosening his tongue like no-one else he has ever encountered. “I want to be an equal,” he says eventually, quietly, in the manner of someone confessing some great secret of which they are profoundly ashamed. “As a person, I mean.” He clarifies quickly, unable to stand the emotion he sees in Sansa’s eyes. It is far too much. “I’ve never much cared for titles; but I want to know that I - am on an equal footing. That I am not being used or - please understand me, Sansa; I’m not saying that you’ve hurt me or anything of the sort. In fact you’re the only person who never has. But I played the secret courtly lover for twenty years and I will never do it again. I refuse to.”

He meets Sansa’s gaze then, afraid of what he will see in them. Judgement? Disappointment? Anger? But he sees nothing of the sort. What he does see causes his heart to plummet to his boots. “Why are you crying?” he manages to choke out. “I’ve offended you, I’ve-

She shakes her head fiercely. “I’m only crying because I’m - sad seems such a trite way of describing it - heartbroken for you, Jaime.” He sees her swallow unsteadily. “I only wish that you had not been hurt and used in such a horrendous manner. I’m going to make you the same vow you made me: whatever your endeavours, you will have in me a willing partner.”

“Thank you,” he sighs out, acutely aware that the words seem a most woeful understatement, but the extent of the relief he feels is difficult to describe, difficult, even, for him to fully comprehend. “I’m not alone anymore,” he marvels, accidentally saying the words out loud.

“You’re not alone anymore, and neither am I,” she agrees, still somewhat shakily. They look at each other, desperately trying to collect, to master themselves, distantly aware that they still have this contract to finish.

Jaime stares at the piece of parchment, reading what they have come up with so far, and in between admiring Sansa’s faultless penmanship, tries to think of what they might not yet have discussed.
“Children,” he says eventually, slightly hoarsely, with more emotion than he acknowledges. He’s never had children, not truly, but he will with Sansa, eventually. When both of them are ready. Children he will be able to acknowledge as his own. The notion is daunting, but it also warms something within him; something that has ever felt cold as ice, ever since his mother died.

“What do you mean?”

“If we plan to keep our realms separate, what about our successors? How do we manage our children’s inheritance?”

Sansa grits her teeth in frustration. “That is a very good point; one I had not thought of.”

“I think we can agree that we will raise them ourselves and not pawn them off to anyone, and especially not Daenerys Targaryen,” he says dryly, even though it isn’t really that funny, but if he doesn’t laugh incredulously about it he will either weep or attempt to punch a wall, so instead he chooses to laugh. That teases a slight smile from Sansa.

“Indeed,” she inclines her head. “How about… our firstborn daughter inherits from me, and our firstborn son inherits from you?”

“Agreed,” Jaime nods, acquiescing easily. He changes the subject somewhat abruptly. “Where will we rule from? Do we have a floating court, principally between Winterfell and Casterly Rock?”

“That could work.”

The rest, they haggle good-naturedly. Where they shall hold their court at which times of year. When to hold their wedding - they agree upon the next dawn; a time of day, that aside from being a rather safer time of day than almost anything else (the whole plan hinges upon holding the ceremony secretly), has also come to hold such great significance for them both. The form of it, too. Jaime knows Sansa’s Lords will demand a wedding in front of the Old Gods, but there are some ancient traditions of the West that Jaime particularly appreciates, and would like to incorporate if he can. When he explains to Sansa what they are, her blue eyes widen in astonishment, but a pretty flush spreads across her cheeks, he is able to see, before she ducks her head shyly, acquiescing with a throaty whisper of “I’d like that,” that makes his stomach somersault. There will be no exchange of cloaks; aside from being a Southern tradition, it also implies things that would make this delicate political situation much more unstable. Sansa also brings up the point that their Lords are likely to protest the vows in their current forms, because
though they are two private persons, Sansa and Jaime are also monarchs in their own right, and independence must be preserved.

Jaime japes how he never expected a wedding to contain so much paperwork, and Sansa narrows her eyes at him and threatens to upend the inkwell upon his arrogant golden head. Because he doesn’t learn, it seems, Jaime dares her to do it, grinning broadly and consequently spends the rest of the meeting squinting at the parchment, attempting to make out his wife-to-be’s writing whilst blinking ink away from his lashes, whilst Sansa only looks at him smugly, her quill scribbling away on the parchment, her cerulean eyes twinkling with mischief.

Their paperwork finished, Jaime’s face and hair scrubbed clean of black ink, he and Sansa call the Lords to the Queen in the North’s solar, and Sansa lays the piece of parchment down on her desk. “My lords, earlier this afternoon, I proposed marriage to the King of the West.”

“And I have accepted the Queen in the North’s proposal,” Jaime announces, halting the onset of murmuring.

“Here is the settlement we have drawn up; I shall leave it here for your perusal,” she says.

“We have attempted to make it as even as possible,” Jaime continues. “But any suggestions would be most welcome. Should you agree to this settlement, the Queen in the North and I intend to wed tomorrow morn at dawn, in the Godswood.”

“It goes without saying that your discussions upon the subject do not leave this chamber,” Sansa orders. Safety is not yet certain, her position and people not yet safeguarded, not until the ceremony itself is concluded, and this tension makes her a touch sharper than she would normally be, Jaime realises, so he slips his hand into hers, and grips it gently. He feels her fingers tighten around his in response, and he relaxes slightly. “We will leave you to your discussions. Lyanna, the King of the West and I shall be in his solar, if you would be so kind as to retrieve us when you have finished your deliberations,” she continues swiftly, and Sansa and Jaime both make their exit.
“What a day,” Jaime breathes out tiredly, leaning back in his chair, his booted feet upon the table in front of him. He glances over at the Queen in the North. “How are you feeling?”

She smiles wanly. “Exhausted. Certainly not what I had imagined doing today; though I really should have seen this coming, I suppose.” She sighs, shaking her head. “Tyrion was being so secretive whenever I crossed his path, looking at me strangely. I was a little disturbed by it at the time, but I didn’t make the connection. I didn’t realise he was attempting to assess the likelihood of my accepting their propositions.”

Jaime frowns, suddenly alert. “What do you mean, the way Tyrion was looking at you?”

Sansa toys with the hem of her sleeve; a nervous habit, he realises acidly, and when she replies, her voice is tight with both humiliation and strain. “Like I was nothing more than another piece within his calculations…” she shakes her head in confused bewilderment, and Jaime clenches his fists, forcing himself to remain seated. “And then, in the hall… he wasn’t looking at my face,” she forces out, and Jaime trembles. What the fuck, little brother? “Oh, I notices he was trying, but his gaze kept… being unavoidably drawn to other parts of me,” she drawls sardonically, before standing furiously, and beginning to pace the floor with tight, sharp steps, her whole body rigid, shaking with indignation. “I am not some piece of meat to be slobbered over like a mongrel with a bone,” she continues, snarling. “What gives him the right? I am a woman, a lady, daughter of kings and now a queen in my own right, and he - Daenerys and Jon too, I noticed - in my own home, in front of my own lords and my allies?” She looks at him in helpless despair. “I don’t understand, Jaime. What must I do? What more must I give for this to stop? My Lords and yours, once they realised what I was doing, found it easy enough to avert their gazes.”

Jaime does stand then, shoving his fury at her anguish away, and gently places his hands on her shoulders. “I don’t know,” he sighs out. “I don’t know what to tell you, and short of threatening to eviscerate them all I don’t know how to make it better. But I will always stand between you and them; my sword will always be between you and them.”

“You’ve never looked at me like that - like them,” she smiles tremulously, almost wonderingly. “Not now, not even back in King’s Landing.”

“I’ve always respected you,” he replies simply. “I’ve always admired you, your strength, your courage, your intelligence. You have survived things I very much doubt anyone else could have.”

“No,” she disagrees quietly, a small smile playing about her mouth, her head tilted to one side as she considers him, one hand coming up to cradle his cheek, the other gripping his forearm. “You’ve survived exactly the same things as I have. You were tortured at my brother’s hands
because he was too caught up his dreams of glory and revenge to negotiate a prisoner exchange, if not a peace. My cage might have appeared more gilded than yours, but it was a cage all the same, and whilst I languished in it, my family showed me exactly how valuable I was to them by leaving me there to suffer and die whilst yours did everything they could to get you back.”

“Sansa,” Jaime sighs, looking at her sadly. “Somehow, it is always the ones closest to us who hurt us the most; because we can never anticipate it.” He shakes his head, attempting to clear his mind of such morbid thoughts. “But we both survived,” he repeats more firmly. “And that scum,” he spits out, “are not worth our consideration. They can’t hurt us, not after everything we’ve endured. Your Lords admire you for your actions this afternoon, you realise?”

“He steps closer to her, willing her to believe. “Truth,” he retorts firmly, and that tugs a tiny smile from her, and Jaime is encouraged. “I would like to hold you. May I?” he continues. He may not be good with words, but he’s always found comfort in physical touch and affection before.

She blinks, startled, before declaring simply, “Yes.” And so Jaime slowly draws his golden hand around her shoulder and down her spine, and slides his live hand over her collarbone, feeling her shiver as he thumbs lightly up her neck and jawline, coming to rest his hand at the back of her head, and as he steps closer to her still so that their bodies are pulled flush against each other, and Jaime exhales unsteadily at the sensation, swallowing convulsively as she rests her head in the hollow of his neck. He revels in the sensation, in the way she sinks into him in relief, in the way her hair flows through his fingers like silk.

His golden hand traces her slim waist, and she chokes out a laugh and he raises his eyebrows, perplexed. “Sansa?” he says, and she lifts her head to look him in the eye. She’s biting her lip, trembling, eyes wide. He scans her face, moving his golden hand again, and she gasps. “Are you ticklish?” he asks mischievously.

“No,” she denies, but he can read her face well now.

“You are!” He laughs, delighted by this discovery. He lifts his left hand from her hair and waggles it playfully in front of her. “Shall we find out exactly how ticklish?” he drawls deviously.

She bites back a smile. “Only if you can catch me,” she smirks, stepping back out of his grasp, and he laughs at that. He catches her gaze from the other side of the table, and for a moment they are both still, smiling widely at each other, before she dashes elegantly away, skirts flying, and he strides after her, and they indulge themselves in this childish, fanciful game for a while, giggling
breathlessly, Jaime coming within a hairsbreadth of her skirts as she pirouettes away before he eventually plucks her into his embrace as she attempts to dart past him.

He lifts her into the air, no small feat with one metal hand, but she helps him by placing both of her hands on his shoulders, and he spins her around, his heart light as she collapses against him, helpless with laughter, eyes bright. Suddenly they find themselves far more closely entwined, noses practically touching, both struggling to catch their breaths. She is at her most beautiful when she is like this, radiant with mirth, playful and spirited, Jaime thinks vaguely.

“Would you kiss me?” she murmurs a touch abruptly, a fierce blush on her cheeks. And though she does not say the words aloud, he sees them written in her expression, as clear as day: *I don’t want the first time we kiss to be in front of anyone, it’s for us, not for them.*

A pleased, leonine grin spreads across his face. “I would be most happy to oblige my lady,” he drawls, before continuing more solemnly as he raises his left hand to lightly trace her jawline with his fingertips, relishing her shiver, his fingers spreading to tangle in her hair, cupping the back of her head, “this is something to be savoured, always,” he says intently, tenderly kissing first her forehead, then, as her eyes flutter shut, then the tip of her nose, then her right cheek and her left. Her skin is so soft, and he growls at this revelation, touching his forehead to hers, nudging the tip of her nose with his. She arches under his touch, and he marvels at her responsiveness, bringing his mouth so, so, close to hers, so close he can almost taste her, but not quite.

He draws her closer to him and she mewls. “Stop teasing me, Jaime,” she says, and he smirks.

“Of course,” he replies, and then he at last brings his lips to hers, and she melts instantly. She is so responsive; a touch shy, a touch uncertain, but he is patient, and his patience pays off as her confidence grows, and the results, as he knew they would be, are nothing short of gloriously passionate. He teases her, plays around, but she responds in kind, capturing his bottom lip between her pretty teeth, nipping lightly, and she swallows his laugh. He pulls away to breathe, to admire the dark sunset-blue of her eyes, glittering with desire, the pink smile of her sweet mouth, and he can’t resist asking her if she is feeling better, waggling his eyebrows.

“Vain, arrogant, incorrigible man!” she huffs out, smiling radiantly. “You know I am.” At some point, her hands have travelled up to become entangled in his hair, and she tugs lightly at his scalp, pulling his head back to hers, and he complies willingly.

“Wife,” he whispers, hardly aware of the word leaving his lips, but her reaction is everything he could have imagined.
“Husband,” she declares in the same reverent tones, eyes shining, and she offers up her mouth eagerly for another kiss, and this time Jaime gathers her to him without reserve, her mewls and sighs music to his ears. He slows the kiss to something teasing and yet deeply intimate, and indulges them both languorously.

A dull, distant thud accompanied by an expletive-laden voice; one that he unfortunately recognises all too well, jolts him out of the pleasurable haze he has sunk all too willingly into. Jaime whirls suddenly around, angrily breaking the kiss, taking Sansa with him, holding her to him, her head to his shoulder.

“What the fuck, Tyrion?” Jaime snarls, glaring at the dwarf, realising with a sinking heart that he’d forgotten to bar his door as he and Sansa returned. “You cannot simply walk into someone else’s rooms like this, whenever you so please!”

“The two of you are married?” Tyrion asks incredulously, gaping at them.

“Yes, we are, Tyrion,” Sansa replies icily, turning in Jaime’s arms so her back is to his chest, and she leans back against him as he tightens his embrace. “And before you ask, our Lords are fully aware.”

“And we enjoy our privacy.” Jaime snaps, incensed.

“When did this happen?”

“After the battle,” Sansa replies nonchalantly, elegantly shrugging her shoulders. Jaime marvels at her quick thinking; he would not have been able to minimise if not avert the damage entirely as she is now doing.

“Well, the two of you seem equally well suited in your childishness,” Tyrion remarks, a touch bitterly, and Jaime stiffens. The first time either he or Sansa have truly been able to be utterly carefree in such a long time, and they have been spied upon?


“I wish you every happiness, Sansa, truly,” Tyrion continues, mockery lacing his tone. “It is now quite clear that you have found the only man who does not consider your frigidity an obstacle.”
Sansa trembles in his arms and Jaime orders Tyrion to leave, now having truly reached the end of his patience, but the younger Lannister, it seems, never knows (or cares) when to stop, and cannot resist a final parting shot.

“First Casterly Rock, and now Sansa? Well, Jaime, you certainly have developed the most unbrotherly habit of stealing what was once mine.”

“I might have been forced to share your chambers, Tyrion, but I was never yours. Think and use that famed mind you claim to possess! The West was never going to be given to you.” Sansa retorts coldly. Jaime sees her smile, and she is truly the heiress of the ancient and legendary Kings of Winter in that moment. “Jaime is also a far better King of the West than you ever would be. Now. Get. Out.”

Chapter End Notes

thoughts? thoughts? thoughts?
Chapter Summary

“Sansa, we need to end this, and we need to end this quickly,” Jaime says, and she nods her agreement, uncurling herself from her casual position in her chair to stand fluidly.

“Summon all the lords to the courtyard. We do this in front of that rotting beast the scorpions brought down, and we do this now.”

Chapter Notes

Welcome to Part VIII! I know I said at the beginning this would only be a little story with three-four chapters... oops? Having said that, we are reaching the final part of the story arc; there's probably only two more chapters, plus the epilogue to go (that's how I've plotted it out at least). Thank you, as always for your continued encouragement and comments, they really do make a difference, so keep them coming!

Trigger warnings: mentions of past rape / abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART EIGHT

SANSA STARK
She is already awake when Brienne knocks on her bedchamber door to wake her. Outside, it is still dark, and Sansa has not really slept, but she is too wound up to be tired. She doesn’t know entirely how she feels; her kiss with Jaime the day before (she still exactly doesn’t know how she was bold enough to ask that of him) has sent images and sensations whirling through her body and her mind that are entirely new; but she knows enough of herself to realise that what she is feeling is that trembling, almost sickening mix of nerves and anticipation; not fear. They have agreed to take their time; he will not bed her until they are both ready, and she already knows that lack of desire will not be a problem. She wants to measure up to the faith he has in her, she thinks as she dresses herself with quivering hands. Somewhere within her, the hopeful little girl she once was still exists, and she wants to please him, as a wife, as a lover. She doesn’t think she will be able to stand it if he comes to regret their union in the future.

There has been no time to create clothes for the wedding, so she simply wears the same white and grey dress she wore when she welcomed the King of the West to Winterfell, and her white furred cloak embroidered with direwolves and falcons and trout over it; and her wreath of weirwood leaves upon her head.

Sansa and Brienne use the servants’ passages to go down to the Godswood; she has housed the Targaryen faction in a different part of the keep, but she will take no chances. After her and Jaime’s Lords approved the settlement, they’d discussed how to keep the ceremony as secret as possible, and the Lords had agreed to trickle into the Godswood in a staggered fashion. Jaime and Sansa are normally up and about at this time of day anyway, but a gathering of the Lords of the West, North, Vale and the Riverlands might well cause some consternation.

She can’t help the memories of her ill-fated wedding to Ramsey Bolton intruding; but that had been held after dark, at nightfall, and Theon had been the one to stand in for her honoured father and give her away; there is no-one to give her away now. She is not some thing to be disposed of, and she actually rather likes the idea that she and Jaime have settled upon. It is an old tradition of the High West, he’d explained to her; when the Lannisters still ruled as Kings of the Rock, a tradition largely fallen out of favour as it is not one of the rites of the Seven. Jaime will wait for her at the edges of the Godswood, and they will walk to the heart tree together.

He is there, waiting for her as he had said he would be, Ser Addam standing beside him with a torch, and the view she has of Jaime, the soft expression in his eyes, makes her heart lurch. She might not love him, not yet, but she abruptly realises that it would be a very easy thing to do. His expression is slightly dazed as she approaches, as though he cannot quite believe what he is seeing, and she remembers that he’d told her that he had never expected to marry; that it had not been an experience he ever thought he would have, and he can’t help but be moved by the shy, veiled look of boyish anticipation and awe on his face. It doesn’t help that he is entirely too dashing, wearing the crown he’d grumbled exaggeratedly to Ser Addam about in order to get her to laugh, and the embroidered crimson cloak she made for him.

He salutes her with an inclination of the head, and a quiet, half-choked, “You look lovely,” before lifting her hand to his lips in what has become their habitual, private greeting.
She reciprocates, her eyes shutting as she allows herself to enjoy the sensation of her hand in his, pressing a gentle kiss to his gloved hand which trembles at her tender touch, and then begins to tremble in earnest as she slowly uncurls his fingers and presses another kiss to his skin, this time to his leather-covered palm. “Sansa,” he sighs out raggedly, and she looks up at him through her lashes, and it is her turn to tremble at the solemn, intent gaze that meets her. She reels inwardly; this is too much - she needs to collect herself.

“Likewise,” she says softly, and he blinks, before laughing, and she suddenly thinks that perhaps that wasn’t the right thing to say after all, not if she wants to regain some measure of equilibrium.

“Is lovely another character trait you’re adding to that list of yours, then?” he asks, a wicked glint in his emerald eyes, and she bursts into peals of laughter.

“Would you like me to?” she retorts playfully, giggling.

A slow smile curves his lips, as he pretends to consider her question. “Perhaps,” he drawls, before offering her his arm. “Shall we?”

She acquiesces with a nod, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow, and thinks vaguely how good a thing she is not so much shorter than he that their strides are not evenly matched; proof of how scattered her thoughts are; but she collects herself as she sees her Lords and Jaime’s holding torches, standing solemnly beside the pools of black water beside the great white and red tree. In the dark water the flames flicker like little stars, and because the night sky above their heads is clear she has difficulty distinguishing the reality from the reflection; the two are so alike. Shafts of yellow moonlight fall, dappled by the leaves, onto the snow, shifting with the rising of the sun to deeper golds and oranges and crimsons. It is so beautiful; so still, and she realises in that moment that she could not wish for a more auspicious start to the ceremony; it is a far cry from the extravagance she had idly dreamed of in her childhood, fed what she now understands to have been twisted dreams by her mother; he mother would have told her it was her duty to let Ramsey Bolton rape and cut and flay her night after night instead of encouraging her to feed him to his own hounds as she ended up doing, finding the strength within herself to do so, to look him in the eye as he died, slowly, bleeding and screaming as she once did.

Jaime’s solid presence at her side brings her back from the brink; back from the prison of her thoughts and memories as he has done so many times before in recent weeks. He is her anchor in this new world. The strength she feels in his arm underneath her hand is something to tether her, to hold her, and she takes great comfort from it; that she has such a man at her side.

Lady Lyanna and Ser Addam will officiate the ceremony, witnessed by all their Lords, and
recorded by both Maester Wolkan and Samwell Tarly. Sansa knows, as she sees Brienne go to stand next to Arya at the edge of one of the pools, considering Sam’s connection to Jon, that asking him to scribe the record of the ceremony, and then back-date it, is a risk, but she is not oblivious to the tensions between the two men caused by Daenerys Targaryen, and she reasons that two masters taking record are better than only the one.

Sansa looks at the weeping face carved into the heart tree, and ceases to be nervous. This is entirely her choice; her own plan, and she will carry it through to the end, so her whole bearing is steady as Lyanna begins the ceremony.

“Who comes before this tree by torchlight, before the Gods of Old to be wed?”

“Sansa of House Stark, Queen in the North,” she says clearly, her voice calm.

“Jaime of House Lannister, King of the West,” the man beside her speaks in turn, equally steadily.

“Do you come here this dawn of your own free will?” Ser Addam asks solemnly. It is similar to the question asked in the North; but it is one of Jaime’s requests, a relic of the old ceremonies of the West, rarely used, but Sansa is glad. It fills her with a sense of rightness; of empowerment. This is her decision; fully considered and weighed. It is Jaime’s too; equally considered; and there is comfort in knowing that this is something they have both considered the ramifications of, something they have both chosen and accepted, something they both want.

“I do,” Jaime replies confidently, and Sansa repeats the words after him.

“Sansa of House Stark, Queen in the North, will you take this man?” Lyanna asks, and only now does Sansa turn from her position at Jaime’s side to look him in the eyes, he hands resting loosely in his. There is a light in his gaze that was not there before, and that gives her the confidence to reply in the affirmative.

“I, Sansa of House Stark, Queen in the North, take this man, Jaime of House Lannister the King of the West, in full and free and conscious choice, to be my lawful husband.” It is a spur of the moment decision, her choice to use the longer of the two formulaic replies, instead of the simple I will, motivated as much by the desire to make certain that there are no loopholes, as much as it is to reassure Jaime that he is not a second choice. His eyes widen, brightening with a sudden sheen of tears, and he compulsively brings both of her hands to his lips in a long, almost desperate sign of affection.
Ser Addam’s next question gives Jaime some time to collect himself, and she squeezes his fingers gently. “Jaime of House Lannister, King of the West, do you take this woman?”

She meets Jaime’s eyes, almost serenely, and sees him swallow unsteadily, and her heart aches. He is overcome, but he exhales and squares his shoulders and declares, as boldly as she has ever seen him, “I, Jaime of House Lannister, King of the West, take this woman, Sansa of House Stark the Queen in the North, in full and free and conscious choice, to be my lawful wife.”

She smiles radiantly at him then, not entirely knowing why, only knowing that she wants to support and care for him and show him affection, this man who has become her steadfast friend and ally and now her husband, and he sways on his feet, almost stumbling in his shock. Only Ser Addam speaking makes him refocus his attention, a touch sheepishly.

“Now comes the time, in front of the Old Gods and in the manner of the High West, as a sign of your vows, to exchange these rings.”

Ser Addam hands Jaime a ring, a dainty golden band with a white moonstone set in the centre, and with a hand that only she sees tremble, turns back to her, cradling her left hand gently with his golden hand, slowly sliding the jewel onto the third finger of her left hand. The slow intimacy of the gesture, the way he slides the pad of a gloved finger across her palm, makes her tilt her head back in trembling exaltation.

And then it is her turn, and Lyanna hands her a silver ring set with tiny rubies, and she realises with a shaky laugh that his left hand is still gloved. She glances up at Jaime’s face and sees her amusement reflected back at her in the depths of his green eyes. Swallowing unsteadily, she sets herself to the task of divesting him of his black leather glove, vaguely, in the back of her mind, understanding that she is finally going to have the pleasure of feeling the warmth of his skin against hers, that she will be able to map and trace the calluses on his fingers, and she laughs silently at herself. She takes the silver ring between her thumb and forefinger and slides it slowly onto the third finger of his hand, both feeling and hearing the tremulous intake of breath as she does so, smiling briefly now that she has completed her task. They match and mirror each other once again, and she raises her gaze to his once more, and instantly has all the air stolen from her lungs. The way he is looking at her in this moment, emerald eyes glimmering with so much emotion that it is far too much for her to bear, the way the changing, dappled torchlight and rising sunlight play upon the darker metal of his golden crown and upon the shining blond of his hair… no-one has ever gazed upon her in such a way before, not even Jon when he professed to love her.

She takes his left hand in hers and admires the way their rings, their fingers and the size of their hands complement each other, and she gently, but firmly - at long last - entwines her fingers with his, palm to palm, holding each other in a firm grasp, and she wants to sigh at the sheer bliss of such a touch.
But the ceremony is not yet over, because Lyanna offers them both a small, nondescript dagger, and it is with the greatest reluctance that Sansa detaches her hand from Jaime’s. Jaime grasps the dagger, blade first, hilt pointing up to the sky, and Sansa closes her left hand around Jaime’s, around the sharp blade itself, feeling its cool bite against her skin. She meets Jaime’s eyes again, and is anchored there, loosing any sense of time passing, vaguely noticing with a sudden inhale that Lyanna suddenly grasps the dagger’s hilt and wrenches it upwards in a single, fluid and silent movement so the blade cuts both palms to bleeding, and Sansa watches curiously as the dark crimson of the blood drips over their entangled fingers, permanently staining their new rings. She hardly feels the light sting of the shallow cut, so mesmerised is she by this incontrovertible proof that is suddenly before her; now, there really is no turning back, and the notion brings her a curious sense of calm.

This is her path; and she will walk it and she has no intention of looking back.

The spoken part of the ceremony is now over, so they both, in a somewhat awkward, ungainly manner, sink to their knees and bow their heads, and the silence, though contemplative, grows somewhat heavier. Sansa has not prayed for a long time, but she prays now; she prays for the safety and prosperity of her people and her realm, and lastly for her family, both old and new. She tugs lightly on Jaime’s hand, and he turns his head towards her, brow furrowing in curiosity.

She brings her right hand up to his jaw, tenderly stroking his cheekbone with her thumb, a slight, private smile on her face. “Husband,” she murmurs, and he chuckles unsteadily in reply, the heady knowledge of the last time they addressed each other thus hanging between them.

“Wife,” he replies in a reverent whisper, bringing up his right metal hand to cradle her jaw with infinite gentleness, and then he slowly brings his forehead to rest against hers, and there they both stay, eyes shut, enjoying this tender intimacy, as their Lords stand around them in the torchlight and sunlight, in the hushed stillness of the wood where the spring pools are as still as glass, and a light snow begins to fall, snowflakes settling like diamonds in their hair.

“Whatever our endeavours,” Jaime says, raising his goblet in a private toast. They have retreated to his solar; they have decided to keep their separate chambers for the movement, as Jaime suddenly moving into Sansa’s chambers would create a hole in the ruse they are creating for the Dragon Queen’s faction; namely that they have been married for more time than they actually have. For once, Sansa’s reputation for frigidity and Jaime’s for privacy will work in their favour; no-one will think that their relatively innocent expressions of affection up until this point were at all feigned for
the benefit of their audience (not that they have been feigned, but neither Jaime nor Sansa have been acting with the abandon of newlyweds). Though Sansa suspects that Jaime will at some point wish to be more obvious; she can see it is difficult for him to change the habits of a lifetime of discretion have ingrained in him; and so this slow pace suits them both.

“Whatever our endeavours,” Sansa replies softly with an arch smile, touching her goblet to his before taking a small sip of the rich, full-bodied vintage. She settles more fully into her seat, considering the man opposite her who is now her husband. “And now it is back to the politicking, unfortunately,” she sighs, and then laughs more heartily at Jaime’s exasperated groan at her words.

“Let me enjoy this small moment of peace with you, will you?”

She inclines her head in a nod when they are disturbed by an insistent banging on the solar door. It is barred; they have both learned their lesson, and Jaime shoots it a furious glare.

“What is it?” he calls, angrily setting his goblet down on the table, striding over to the door, unbarring it, and abruptly wrenching it open to glare at poor Podrick and Ser Addam and the Lady Lyanna hovering anxiously on the threshold. The two men’s expressions indicate their news is nothing good, Lyanna’s set in fierce disapproval, and something cold settles uncomfortably in Sansa’s stomach. Jaime hastily waves their guests into the room, barring the door. “Speak your piece,” he says wearily, hands resting on his hips. “What has happened?”

“Yara and Theon Greyjoy’s bid to depose Euron failed; they are now both dead. Daenerys, as a result, is on the warpath, and her dragons are… unsettled,” Ser Addam explains uncomfortably.

“Daenerys needs to leave before her dragons kill something.” Lyanna states bluntly, and Sansa shares an unsettled glance with Jaime. She watches as her new husband abruptly gulps down his wine, before forcefully slamming the metal down on the table.

“Sansa, we need to end this, and we need to end this quickly,” Jaime says, and she nods her agreement, uncurling herself from her casual position in her chair to stand fluidly.

“Summon all the lords to the courtyard. We do this in front of that rotting beast the scorpions brought down, and we do this now.”
“Why do you disturb Winterfell’s peace thus?” Sansa questions coldly on Jaime’s arm, striding into the courtyard where have assembled all the lords and the Dragon Queen’s faction. The enormous rotting hulk of the undead dragon sits, an ungainly boulder, in a corner, and Sansa already sees how it has unsettled the Targaryen faction.

“Whilst I waste my time in this frozen hell, Cersei is desecrating my throne and my allies are dying!” Daenerys retorts.

“Allies you left to fight by themselves,” Jaime points out sardonically, and Daenerys whirls around to storm towards him, and Sansa sees Jaime visibly restrain himself from laughing outright in the Dragon Queen’s face and knows she has to step in quickly.

“Leave, then. No-one here will stop you,” Sansa replies evenly, steel in every word.

“Sansa, please. Do we not have a chance for alliance, for peace, here?” Jon interjects, eyes as beseeching as a puppy’s and Sansa scoffs bitterly, even as Jaime presses a gentle hand to the small of her back. She leans against the caress, taking strength, as always, from his presence and support, from the warmth that sinks from his hand into her skin, spreading through her body.

“I said yesterday that you would have your answer to your proposals today,” Sansa continues. “We may as well deliver our replies now.” She casts a sly look at Jaime as she says this. “I’m afraid that I must decline your offers of marriage as well as your offer to foster any eventual children. Please understand that I say this not out of a desire to obstruct any treaty we may come to agree upon, but I must refuse, because I am already married.”

There is a moment of incredulous silence before Jon bursts out, “Sansa, if this is about Ramsey, he’s dead, you’re a widow and free to marry again!”

Sansa hears Jaime grit his teeth beside her, and shifts closer to him, before replying bitingly. “It isn’t about Ramsey, Jon.” She raises her eyebrows in a mock-rueful gesture. “No, I remarried after the battle against the dead.”

“To whom?” Daenerys snarls, seeing her plans being thwarted in front of her eyes.
Sansa’s lips twitch in a slight smile, and she angles her body further towards Jaime’s. “To the only man who is my equal; the King of the West,” she says, her smile widening as she looks at her husband, before turning back to address the Dragon Queen, avoiding Tyrion’s gaze (she admits to no little curiosity as to the reason why Tyrion has kept his mouth shut, and she resolves to ask him about it if he gets the opportunity). “You must forgive me, Daenerys, but after my first two marriages being political ones, I wanted to keep this one, a marriage of true affection, between myself and my husband. We are private people, you see.”

Jon is looking at her in aghast astonishment; but she has absolutely no sympathy for him. He made his bed; now he needs must lie in it. Deanery’s lips are pressed thinly together in obvious displeasure, and in Tyrion’s gaze she reads reluctant admiration, and he inclines his head to her in acknowledgement of a game well-played.

“Then why -” Daenerys hesitates, before deciding to voice the question she so desperately wants answered. “Why did you not say so before?”

“Because,” Jaime interjects, “Quite frankly, it was none of your business. We also wanted to see… how might I put this politely - what your negotiating style is like, Dragon Queen.”

“No.” Jon shakes his head. “Of all people, you choose to marry him!”

Sansa steps forward, incensed. “Yes. I chose him. And I would choose him again in a heartbeat.” There is an expression of such horror and abject betrayal in her cousin and once-lover’s eyes that she is so furious she can hardly breathe, and only Jaime’s voice, gentle in her ear, brings her back to herself, to him, and she grasps tightly at his arm. “I choose him, and only him.”

“You were merely giving us enough rope to hang ourselves with!” Jon cries angrily, but Sansa only smiles calmly and steps back into Jaime’s embrace, sighing as his hands, both the flesh and the metal, come to rest lightly at her waist.

“And you fell for it,” Jaime retorts calmly. “So, Daenerys, go and fight Cersei if it pleases you; we will be mightily glad to see you to your fleet at White Harbor. But make no mistake - set foot or horse or dragon or ship on these lands again, and there will be war. We will not interfere with the Southern Throne; do with it as it pleases you, but you will leave with your armies and your dragons and you will leave today.”
Jaime waits until they are alone in his solar before turning to Sansa with an exhilarated smile on his face, and he gathers her gently, exuberantly, to him. “My brilliant wife,” he laughs, lifting her by the waist and spinning her around. “My brilliant, clever, kind, beautiful wife!” he exclaims, and she laughs with him at his praise, at his evident admiration of her, her hands gripping at his shoulders, his leather surcoat, feeling the heavy, comforting weight of his golden hand, cool even through the woollen fabrics of her cloak and dress, at her back, his other hand at her waist. “You are a marvel, truly!” he says as he sets her down, though he embraces her still, and Sansa is quite content to remain in the circle of his arms.

“I am so glad you’re on my side,” he continues, and she laughs at that too.

“Flatterer,” she returns, grinning as he shakes his head, becoming more solemn.

“Truth,” he replies seriously, lifting his hands from her waist so he can cradle her head, thumbs brushing the soft skin of her cheeks, his left hand tangling in her russet hair, and she sighs at his touch, eyes fluttering shut. “Truth, and nothing but the truth.” She looses herself awhile in his touch, in the feel of him standing so close to her, in the warmth radiated by his body, in his presence, steadfast and reassuring, and when she opens her eyes again with a serene smile, she tilts her face to his in wordless invitation, smiling more widely, more gloriously, as he hesitates, softly touching his nose to hers.

“Please,” she murmurs, and his green eyes darken and glitter with mischievous intent, and he gathers her more fully to him, so the length entire of their bodies touch, the broad musculature of his shoulders and chest apparent even through his surcoat and she is dizzy and giddy with exhilaration and anticipation, and then she knows only him as he covers her mouth with his in a gloriously languorous, intimate and decadent kiss, that steals whatever little coherence and sanity remains to her.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first time I’ve written a wedding scene, ever, so do tell me what you thought of it!
Chapter Summary

He has difficulty making out the scrawl at first; it is so tiny, but he eventually parses his way through it. The first half is written in the common tongue, in a hand far more assured than the second; the second is written in tiny, desperate, pained lettering; and it is written in what he realises with a sickening lurch is blood, and it is written in a language only two other people in the world know.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Thank you as always for your support and comments, it means a great deal. This is a slightly shorter chapter; but with the way it ends I didn't see how I could wrangle it.

trigger warnings: angst - MAJOR angst all round really, miscarriage

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART NINE

JAIME LANNISTER

In the few short, chaotic hours before the Dragon Queen and her people leave Winterfell for good, Jaime is rather surprised to be cornered by his younger brother as he is coming off the training grounds, having sparred to his heart’s content with Brienne. His wife’s sworn shield looks at him
worriedly as Tyrion waddles over, but Jaime discretely shakes his head, and Brienne steps away, presumably to resume her duties at Sansa’s side, who must be in her solar at this time of day, either reading the latest reports or speaking to her lords.

“Tyrion,” Jaime says neutrally, sheathing his sword.

“Jaime,” the dwarf returns cautiously, before his face scrunches up with an emotion the King of the West can’t place. “Are you happy?” The question, posed without the slightest hint of malice, all but floors him. Jaime had not thought; not after everything, not with Tyrion’s evident lust for power, not with the fact that they have now found themselves on opposite sides of the board; Jaime had not thought Tyrion would ask him such a thing sincerely, with a look in his mismatched eyes that tells the elder Lannister his little brother cares about him.

“I am,” Jaime responds thickly, swallow past the sudden lump in his throat. He thinks about his wife, about the trust and faith the Lords of the West and his soldiers have in him, and the words fall from his lips without him having to think about it. “Very much so. I’ve found my place.” It is an instinctive answer, for all that it articulates sentiments Jaime realises he has felt but not allowed himself to examine or fully feel. He is now more settled than he has ever been in his life; gone is the reckless restlessness that characterised him previously. He did not think he would ever enjoy discussing food stores and soldiers training programmes and trade deals; but he finds he has come to enjoy it. It remains practical; it is not philosophy; he leaves the grand theorising, the extravagant rhetorical declarations to the likes of the Dragon Queen and his little brother. Sansa, though her command of rhetoric is most impressive, as is her intuitive knowledge of theatre, his wife is also a seriously competent administrator who has no interest in abstract philosophy. She, too, has learnt by doing, by observing, not reading.

“Good,” Tyrion nods jerkily. “Good,” he repeats, chin wobbling slightly, and Jaime sighs, readjusting his cloak. The Night King might have been defeated, but winter’s grip is yet slow to fade; the air still carries a chill. “I - I don’t think I have, yet,” Tyrion chuckles sadly, self-deprecatingly. “I thought I had, but I was wrong. And yet I have made my bed; now I must lie in it, though it is not necessarily the most comfortable bed there is.”

“Father was Hand to a Targaryen for twenty years,” Jaime replies, voice softening. He’s never been able to remain indifferent to the slight of his little brother’s tears. “As Hand to another Targaryen in the South, you have an opportunity to reshape that realm. You simply have to take it, and you will find your place, little brother.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Because everyone does, sooner or later.”
“But your place has always been clear,” Tyrion protests, and Jaime feels the old anger rise up in him. If Tyrion would only take his blindfold off-

“And, what, pray tell - what place was that? The Kingslayer? Cersei’s secret lover? The good-for-nothing cripple?” Jaime growls quietly. “If there’s one thing I’ve learnt is that what happens to us doesn’t really matter; not really. What does matter, and what enables us to find our places, is how we decide to deal with the events of our lives. I had a long time to think on my journey north, Tyrion, and I think you have quite a few things to meditate upon and contemplate whilst you sail South.” He reaches out to place his left hand upon his younger sibling’s shoulder. “You’re doing as you have always done; allowing other people to define who and what you are. Don’t. Down that path lies only self-loathing.”

The two brothers stare at each other for a moment before Tyrion swallows abruptly. “Goodbye, then.”

“Goodbye, little brother,” Jaime replies softly as the younger Lannister waddles slowly away back to the Targaryen Queen’s chambers. Despite it all, I will miss you, Tyrion, because I can’t stop loving my family even if I try. Why am I so cursed? Isn’t that quite simply the funniest jape you’ve ever heard? Jaime Lannister, the Kingslayer who fathered three bastards on his sister, and somehow ended up King of the West and married to the Queen in the North, fears nothing; can be felled by nothing except his own rebellious heart - his own heart with the annoying, frustrating, self-destructive tendency to love fiercely, including those he should not.

In the days and weeks that follow the Dragon Queen’s departure, Jaime and Sansa settle into a rhythm of sorts. They will stay in Winterfell for a while yet; at least until the situation in the South calms down; one way or another, and Jaime appreciates these days of quiet more than he can properly articulate; they are principally taken up with correspondence from Casterly Rock, meetings with his Lords and his soldiers, and then riding out with Sansa in the afternoons, sparring before the evening meal and then eating with his wife, whether in Sansa’s solar privately or with some of their lords.

He learns more about his new wife as time goes by; and he enjoys teasing and courting her more than he could ever imagined. He does not count the day a success unless he has made her laugh more than once, and he knows himself to be falling more deeply for her every single moment he is in her presence. Strangely, this does not frighten him or bother him nearly as much as he might have feared, because Sansa makes it quite clear to him that he is her equal, and because she is
open, though still restrained in her affection. That she does not hide the friendship, respect and attraction she feels for him, and that he does not need to dissemble in return, lifts a weight from his chest he had not even known was there. The toll of hiding his relationship with Cersei because she loved power more than she loved him; had eroded him, his endurance and his heart, more than he had realised was the case. He does not wish to think about the South; as much as he knows the current state of affairs cannot last indefinitely, for the time being, he is quite happy to ignore that the South exists at all.

However, the South does not ignore the rest of the world, and as he breaks his fast with Sansa one morning a few weeks after the Dragon Queen’s departure, Samwell Tarly apologetically interrupts their meal.

Sansa waves him off, unconcerned, and Jaime turns to her as he plucks grapes and hunks of bread from the platter in front of him. “Have you thought about building a proper conclave chamber? With our court travelling from here to the Rock and back, they’ll be more Lords about the place than in the past.”

She looks thoughtfully at him, the raven’s message still furled up in her left hand - she has not yet broken the seal - and replies in her considered manner, thinking aloud. “I agree with you, in principle, but where would I get the materials from? After the war, the winter - neither of which are precisely over yet; I cannot seem to be building some sort of folly to my position as ruler with resources that could be better employed for the safety and prosperity of my people.”

Jaime is somewhat reluctant to voice the next part of his suggestion, but he trusts Sansa, and so he does not hesitate for long. “The First Keep - you could repurpose the part of the structure that is still safe, and use the stones from where it has crumbled to build the new parts.” He traces the rim of the platter, his hand only stilling when hers comes to rest gently upon his, and he sighs, entangling their fingers.

At her request, he no longer wears his gloves indoors. When he’d half-heartedly made to protest, saying he was a Westerman and therefore needed the extra warmth, she’d blushed so prettily and so violently he hadn’t been able to resist saying that perhaps she might wish to warm his hand instead with hers, and that had turned her skin as crimson as her russet hair. He’s noticed her fascination with his hands; with both the flesh and the metal, and he can admit to himself to returning it. She might be tall for a lady, but her hands are still so dainty and slim compared to his, and the sight of their tangled fingers always does something rather viscerally pleasurable to him.

She knows what he is thinking; she very rarely does not. One of the distinct advantages of the affinity they share, compounded by the fact that they are both making concerted efforts to come to know and understand each other, means that though their faces might be impassive to others; they are very rarely so to each other.
“If this is about Bran, don’t worry,” she replies quietly, her voice tinged with sorrow but never with accusation or anger, and that startles him into meeting her blue-eyed gaze. A tiny smile appears on her lips, and she squeezes his hand in reassurance. “That is in the past.”

“How - how can you ever forgive me for what I did?” He chokes out. Apart from their first discussion about it on Winterfell’s high moors, they haven’t touched the subject since; partially out of a lack of time with all the difficulties which surrounded Daenerys Targaryen’s presence in the castle, and partially because neither of them have been willing to re-address such an unpleasant subject.

“Because Bran did,” Sansa answers, to his great astonishment. She sees his gaping mouth and extends an elegant finger to lift his chin and shut his jaw. He is so stunned by her words that he lets her. “He told me so himself.” She shakes her head. “Had he not fallen, he would never have become the Three-Eyed Raven. He said some things are meant to happen and cannot be changed, but he told me, he said, because he wanted me to be happy.”

Jaime’s eyes narrow in realisation. “You think he saw something before his death - about us?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“And - ” Jaime swallows unsteadily (he will never admit it but he dreads deeply her answer to the question he is about to ask) “and are you happy?”

She brings the hand at his chin to his jaw, and he shudders at her caress, at the way she thumbs his cheekbone. “You know I am,” she replies quietly, sincerely, with a touch of endearing shyness about her, and he inhales sharply at the flood of emotion this releases in him, and with a whisper of her name tumbling from trembling lips he is undone by her; he is entirely at her mercy, and oh, how willingly he offers his throat up for the slaughter.

She rises and leads him by the hand and he follows her, dazed by the realisation crashing through him. He follows her to a low bench strewn with cushions; a far more comfortable arrangement than the chairs at the table, and lowers himself next to her, guided by her hand into looking straight at her. Hers is a very beautiful face; that much has always been true, but it has never been twisted or marred by cruelty or malice. Instead he sees only compassion, and that is what gives him the courage to meet her gaze.

“Bran forgave you,” she says solemnly. “I forgive you.”
“But why?” he wonders hoarsely.

“Because you feel guilt; you repent and you work for your redemption,” she answers quietly, seriously. “And also because the original act itself was not an act of malice on your part; you did it for love.” He can’t entirely understand what he is hearing; he cannot fathom it, precisely. The only thing he truly comprehends is that in her extraordinary compassion, she is - not counting the debt paid by any means, no - she is doing something more incredible altogether: she is letting the debt go.

“A Lannister always pays his debts,” he rasps. “This is not a debt I can ever repay fully, I do not think. But you have my word; until my last breath.”

“I would be far more concerned if you did not feel guilt, Jaime. But you are a better man than you were then; you are a good man, and I am your wife.” She leans closer to rest her forehead against his. “No debts, Jaime. Not between us.” The familiar gesture calms him, soothes him, but he is overwhelmed by what he feels, and he realises that there is nothing he can do to prevent his mouth from articulating his next thought.

“I’ve fallen in love with you, Sansa Stark,” he murmurs, voice rough with tears, and he feels her lurch backwards with shock, and he opens his eyes to look at her. She is pale, trembling, one arm wrapped around her body as though to keep herself together, and entirely frozen, and though he knows he hasn’t exactly picked the most opportune moment for his declaration, he can’t help the twinge of dismay - the bone-aching fear he suddenly feels. She has agreed to friendship, to partnership, and eventually to passion; but she has not agreed to love in this marriage.

“I - ”

He shakes his head gently. “You don’t have to say it back. You don’t even have to say anything. I simply wanted you to know. You are far kinder to me than I deserve, and I have fallen in love with you because of it.”

He can see the thoughts flying through her head, and the most prominent one is why do you love me but she steps away and suggests they read the raven’s message, and he lets her take refuge in their safer, more easily defined roles as rulers. She had not been expecting such a declaration, much less one so abrupt; that much is quite clear, and as uncomfortable as it will make him, he knows she needs time to understand what he has just told her. So he sits heavily on the bench and watches as she rises from the bench and unfurls the scroll.
The blank wax seal breaks with a short snap and the tiny scroll crinkles as it opens, and then Jaime frowns in confusion, as instead of reading it aloud as is her wont, she scans it quickly and then stumbles, face pale, before retching into the fire.

“Sansa?” He leaps to his feet and takes the scroll from her trembling hand, and then, an iron fist squeezing his heart, he begins to read.

Jaime remembers, a few days ago, accidentally stumbling upon Sansa speaking to her younger sister about Jon, up on the battlements one dawn.

“I’m sorry you had to make that choice, Arya,” Sansa had said, and Jaime remembers the younger girl, whose silent, swift movements are usually so unsettling, actually stumble, reaching out in the nick of time to steady herself against the parapet, and an open, a most incredibly open expression on her face, that makes her abruptly look so much like the young child she is meant to be instead of the assassin she has become.

The dark haired girl had shaken her head in total and complete incomprehension. “Why are you apologising, Sansa? He made his choice; you had nothing to do with it.”

Jaime had seen Sansa stiffen at the reminder, and his chest had begun to despair at the subtle expression of her pain. He had wondered then, if she would be able to move past such an intimate betrayal as the one Jon had inflicted upon her. He hoped; for her sake. He had known what it was to carry that pain, that weeping wound which refused to scar and scab over on the heart.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa had replied, “because you are my sister and you are in pain. It is not something I have ever wished for you. I’m your elder sister; I’m meant to protect you - but then what do I know about protecting siblings? All the ones I’ve tried to protect are dead.” She’d turned to face Arya then, and Jaime had been astonished by the self-loathing writ all over her solemn face. “Perhaps you would be better off with Jon.”

“I’m a Stark of Winterfell,” the younger had snarled viciously. “My place is here, in the North, with my sister. At the Queen in the North’s side.”
“You don’t blame me then?”

“No.” Jaime remembers the force with which Arya had replied; enough to send Sansa stepping back, enough to send Jaime stepping away from her rage, instinctively. “He made his decision, and it was Daenerys. But that doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“No,” Sansa had returned sorrowfully, putting a careful arm around the shorter Stark’s shoulders. “No it does not.”

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He has difficulty making out the scrawl at first; it is so tiny, but he eventually parses his way through it. The first half is written in the common tongue, in a hand far more assured than the second; the second is written in tiny, desperate, pained lettering; and it is written in what he realises with a sickening lurch is blood, and it is written in a language only two other people in the world know.

“Cersei wrote it in her own blood - the second part,” he chokes out, and Sansa shoots him a distressed glance. “It’s difficult to make out, but I - Seven Hells - I - I cannot -

My dear little dove,

Well, you’ve learned to play the game at last, have you not? I should have had you killed whilst I had the chance. You’ve heard the rumours by now, even in that frozen waste you call home. I’m with child, and it’s Jaime’s child - well, it would have been, anyway, before he decided to forsake me, for you, a younger, untainted version of me. I always suspected, you know? The way he went on and on about how you were his last chance for honour - well, what’s done is done and cannot be undone. Perhaps that is why I hated you so much from the moment I first saw you; because you were then everything I once was, though with a much softer heart, like my fucking idiot of a twin brother, and I suppose I wanted to destroy that as my own dreams had been destroyed.

The maesters told me this morning that I have a day to live at most; it seems the Dragon Queen is just as ruthless as the rest of that fucking family was. I’ve been poisoned; some shit Dothraki herb with no known cure, at least on this side of the world. Well, I expect you’re pleased. My mother died in the childbed, you know? Birthing Tyrion, the little monster. I suppose, after all my railing against him it is the height of irony that I should die the same way.
I have no illusions left; they all shattered when that fat, whoring drunk of a husband of mine, Robert Baratheon, whispered your aunt Lyanna’s name in my ear on our wedding night. I go to my death; I have only hours left - already the bleeding has started; so have the cramps. It will be messy and I will die screaming.

_Cersei Lannister, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms_

And then, below - in the dark ink Jaime knows to be his sister’s blood, in the secret language they shared -

_Jaime, I will admit this to no-one else but you; I’m frightened. I remember so clearly how Mother died, and I know that I will scream as she did and I will bleed as she did and I will die as she did. There is already so much blood it drips from the sheets themselves to pool on the floor. I won’t last long. I don’t even know whether I’ll have the strength to get the child out of me before I die; not that it would survive anyway - it is too soon; far too soon._

_Do you remember how, one afternoon, when we were children I went to see a witch? Maggy the Frog, she was called, and she told me I would marry the King, have three golden children, that I would see them all die before me, and that the valonqar would kill me. For my whole life I thought it was Tyrion._

_I now know it was you. The poison won’t kill me; it’s only enough to induce miscarriage, but to induce it fatally._

_It hurts, Jaime, it hurts so much and I wish you were here with me as you were for the others, it hurts hurts hurts _

_Jaime I regret_

_nothing_

_Jaime hurts_

_love_
Please, do let me know what you thought! I never thought I would ever end up writing Cersei angst, but I have. Twice. Hmm.
Chapter Summary

“I just want to hold you,” comes the almost drowsy reply, before his mind understands what she has just said, and he goes so entirely still Sansa worries momentarily that she’s made a mistake. “Please - would you mind repeating what you just said? I don’t think I heard you correctly. I can’t have,” he says carefully.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Welcome to this next chapter! Thanks as always for your comments and encouragement.

It's not going to be the last chapter, after all; there are a couple more left - I've now plotted out the final arc, and it's more intricate than I had planned, so...

Trigger warnings: discussions of miscarriage and torture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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SanSA STARK

She can only watch, her heart shattering, as Jaime stumbles back onto the cushioned bench, gasping, struggling for breath, shoulders heaving, green eyes impossibly wide, impossibly
vulnerable with shock, and she wants to comfort him, to help him, to be a good friend to him, to be a good wife, but she doesn’t know how, and the panic claws its way up her throat. He is breathing raggedly, hoarse, hacking, trembling sobs tearing their way through him as his entire frame crumples in on itself, as though he is nothing more than a marionette whose strings have been suddenly and brutally cut.

She has never truly seen Jaime Lannister cry before; she has seen the glint of them in his eyes and she has seen him blink them away, forcefully swallowing them back down his throat, but she has never seen him so incredibly raw; she has never seen grief like this and suddenly she can remain still no longer.

She strides over to him, shoving her own discomfort at Cersei’s missive aside, and curls her body into his, both arms around his waist, her head tucked into his shoulder, the way she has often found herself doing at night; though their bed remains chaste for the time being, they have both found comfort in being held; it helps to chase the nightmares away, at least for a little while, and the sense of safety she feels as a result is not one Sansa ever thought she would experience ever again. He is stiff, tense, trembling in her gentle embrace at first, but he gradually sags wearily into her, his arms coming around her ribcage to hold her, and he turns his head to weep silently into her tangled hair. She begins to drift soothing caresses through his golden hair, across his shoulders and his back, and she begins a wordless hum, an old northern lullaby from her childhood, the one she remembers singing to her little brother Rickon.

He lifts his head, startled by the melody, and looks at her with devastated, red-rimmed eyes, his bewilderment written across his whole face, and she gives him a tiny, melancholy smile in response. “When I learned that Robb and my mother had been killed, I wasn’t allowed to mourn. So I… locked it away, in a tiny little box and tried not to think about it. I was dead, numb, during the day; I played the part of the pretty little puppet hostage, and I played it well. But I had no control over my thoughts at night; and I would either wake screaming or with tears streaming down my cheeks.”

“I don’t understand,” her husband chokes out, voice tight.

“Cersei was your family; despite everything, she was your sister, your twin, and your lover for a very long time,” she replies softly. “You’re allowed to mourn her, Jaime, and I have no intention of leaving you alone to mourn her and the child.”

“But you hated her,” Jaime responds, brow furrowed in incomprehension.

“I did; and I am glad she can no longer hurt either of us,” Sansa replies evenly. “But you are in pain, Jaime. You’re my friend, my ally, my husband, and you’re in pain. I’m concerned with you, Jaime. Not Cersei, not anyone else.” She brings her right hand up to his jaw, and he releases a
shuddering sigh at the contact, emerald eyes fluttering closed. “Let me take care of you, husband,” she entreats softly.

“How - ” he shakes his head in utter stupefaction - “how - you are the most generous person I’ve ever met… I… I don’t understand, but please - know this - I am awed and humbled by it - and Cersei always did have that singular talent of being able to spot anyone’s vulnerabilities.” He laughs cynically, bitterly, and looks at her seriously then. “I meant what I said to you, my lady. I have fallen in love with you, Sansa Stark, and I have fallen in love with you for yourself. Not because you might be some echo of Cersei. You could not be more unlike one another.” Her heart stops at that; she wants to believe him. She wants so desperately to believe him. Rationally, she knows, of course, that Jaime has never lied to her; that he has never been anything less than entirely truthful with her; but Cersei’s words cut as deep as swords, and oh, how she bleeds.

“Jaime,” she murmurs, moving her fingers through his hair, tugging lightly at his scalp as she does so and he relaxes, becomes utterly pliant under her tender ministrations. He has confessed so much to her, she realises, and anything more - asking him more about his relationship with Cersei; his children - will push him too far. So she swallows down her own anguish, for she must talk instead, and there is something she can share with him that will, perhaps, enable him to understand why - despite the relief she feels at hearing of Cersei Lannister’s death; it is not something for her to rejoice in, nor is her focus on anyone but Jaime.

But first, she stands; Jaime’s solar, though a private chamber, is still open to Jaime’s closest advisors and servants, as well as her own. He will not want anyone to see him like this, not when he is so ripped to shreds by such overwhelming grief, and so she leads him gently, taking him by the hand, from the solar to his bedchamber, and he follows her, as unresisting as a lamb. It is that image of him that makes her fully conscious of how shocked he is; it is utterly wrong for him, for Jaime Lannister, to be so pliable. She could do anything to him at this moment and he would be too disorientated to resist; and she realises just how much he trusts her. She swallows, suddenly feeling nervous. Is she capable of being this man’s sole focus, personally? She has always known Jaime Lannister is an intense man; incapable of doing anything by halves, and she is uncertain of being able to hold her own. She bars the doors after guiding him to sit on the bed, he does so tentatively, almost as though he is asleep, eyes terrifyingly blank, and she kneels to take off his boots, after stripping him of his surcoat.

She kicks off her own slippers and climbs atop the furs to lay beside him, and draws him into her arms, and breaths an inward sigh of relief when she feels him reciprocate, and she wearily lays her head down on his chest, her ear to his heart, and only when she is nuzzled into his side does she begin to speak.

“Miscarriage is not something I would wish on my worst enemy,” she says softly, and she feels him jolt at her words.
“You’re speaking from personal experience,” he surmises through clenched teeth, his grip on her tightening protectively.

“I am,” she ducks her head into his chest so her hair fans out over his shoulder; she does not think she can bear to look at his face as she tells this story. The impotent, helpless rage and the anguish she knows she will see writ large in his countenance will break her. “It was when I was still naive enough to believe that Ramsey might not hurt me if I could just give him what I thought he wanted, so the moment I was absolutely certain I was with child, I told him.” She sighs, voice carefully neutral. “I hoped, foolishly, that being with child might perhaps grant me some sort of respite, that my biggest concern would be finding a way to keep Ramsey from hurting the child once it was born. Instead, that was when he began flaying my legs in earnest. I woke up a few days later, my sheets soaked with blood.” Her voice shakes, and he shifts slightly to look at her, raising his golden hand to her cheek, and the cool caress on her jaw anchors her to the present, to this bed piled with soft furs, to the warmth of the man beside her. “I didn’t understand what was happening at first,” she continues, in a voice that is almost devoid of any inflection whatsoever. “I thought Ramsey might have decided to beat or cut me in my sleep; and then I felt the pain. If Cersei as she died felt only a shadow of what I felt in those long, bloody, delirious days then I am sorry for her. I can’t hate her now; I find myself, rather curiously, feeling absolutely nothing at all. I only mourn for you; for your sadness, and for your innocent child.”

Jaime splutters and gasps at that, frowning, shaking his head in utter and complete confusion. “You are - you are - how can you be so generous? You don’t do it to assume some form of superiority over others; I know you don’t.” A slight, wondering smile touches his lips, though his eyes remain infinitely sad. They are growing puffy and red with anguish, and the look in them is almost too discerning; too sharp. Jaime Lannister is private in his grief; he does not scream or rage - he only weeps silently, and thinks to bear this agony alone. She will not let him, she vows. She is his ally, his friend and his wife, and his burdens are hers too.

He shifts onto his right side, and traces her eyebrows, the slope of her nose, the soft curves of her cheeks, with a light fingertip, and she sighs. “No, your kindness, your compassion, your generosity is entirely genuine, entirely without guile.” He pauses a moment before continuing, his eyes slightly losing their tinge of grief, softening as he looks at her. “And you wonder why I love you… the more pertinent question is this: how on earth could I not? How on earth could anyone not? You’ve even managed to charm my lords entirely, and our families fought a war against each other. Your own lords and smallfolk virtually trip over themselves to carry out your rule. They love you. I love you. Anyone who does not is more than blind; he is both blind and in possession of bad taste.”

She trills a light laugh at that last statement, and watches tenderly as some spark of life returns to her husband’s eyes. “You enchant me with that laugh of yours, you realise?” he says softly.

“I should be making you laugh, not the other way around,” she replies with a touch of shame. She isn’t a good wife; how can she be, when after the news they have just received, he is the one to comfort her?
“Stop it,” Jaime replies more forcefully. “Your thoughts are running away with you again.”

“I - I want to be a good wife to you; I’m meant to be comforting you, and I’m-

“Stop.” Jaime cuts her off firmly, in a voice that is both simultaneously authoritative and infinitely tender. “There is no better medicine in this world than the glorious sound of your laughter. There is no sweeter sight than your radiant smile, than your hair tumbling down your back. There is no more delicious taste than that of your lips.”

Her blue eyes widen and a violent blush spreads across her entire body, almost brutally (she can feel her skin heating even under her gown). “Flatterer,” she breathes eventually, when she has enough of her breath back to be able to form words at least somewhat coherently.

“Truth,” he retorts, smirking, and Sansa smiles, embarrassed, sheepish, pleased, and she is moved to reply to his sensual declaration in the only way she knows how; the only way she can think of to reassure him of her support, of her devotion.

“Jaime, you are my ally, my friend, my husband. Whatever you want of me, whatever you need of me, you have it. You need only name it.” Compared to his gallant words, hers seem ungainly in response, but they are entirely sincere.

“Anything?” Jaime repeats hoarsely, though with a touch of his habitual teasing, drawling tones. “You realise that is quite a dangerous vow to make to a man.”

“You are the only man, the only person I would trust not to take advantage of such a vow,” she replies honestly, and she sees him swallow unsteadily in response, disbelief written all over his face.

“I do not deserve you, Sansa, but I am selfish enough to want you for myself.”

“You do deserve me, Jaime.” She reassures him. “I thought we’d agreed to take our own advice,” she reminds him, a touch impishly, and he chuckles at that. The emotion she feels at hearing the sound stuns her to her core. Suddenly she feels too much; that she has made him laugh, even if only a little, when he is in such pain, that she has managed to comfort him, to help him if only in a very small way. She does not have the words, except that her heart suddenly feels too large for her chest. Making him laugh is a task she will gladly devote herself to as his wife, she realises
suddenly. It is a task she wants, most ardently, to devote herself to.

“I want to comfort you. I want to take care of you. I want to make you laugh,” she says earnestly, catching his gaze with her own, and his emerald eyes are suddenly so expressive that she cannot breathe. “Will you let me? Will you let me take care of you, husband?”

“Come here, sweet, sweet wife,” Jaime whispers hoarsely in response, opening his arms to her, and she goes to him, laying down against him so that they are once more entangled together.

She settles her head on his shoulder, her hand idly playing at the clasps on his embroidered crimson tunic, as she tries to make sense of the feelings crashing through her. The depth of the friendship between them; how quickly it grew - it should frighten her. It never has. He has made it quite clear the regard and respect he holds her in; the respect he has for her heart, her mind and her body. She has been attracted to him from the moment of their meeting on Winterfell’s moor; that has never been in question. She has only vague memories of him during his first visit to Winterfell, and of course, after that, her brother had held him prisoner for so long that by the time he returned to King’s Landing she was far too focused on simple, sheer survival that attraction held no part to the few times they were in each other’s presence. She trusts him utterly, and without reservation. She doesn’t need to worry about whether or not she might ever be able to give him her heart, for the very simple reason that it is already his.

She stills, and blinks, utterly dumbfounded.

Her heart has moved faster than her mind, and is only now catching up, but that doesn’t change the truth of the statement. She loves him, wholly, irrevocably, completely. She frowns, attempting to understand, and slowly does she realise that her confusion stems from the fact that the love she felt for Jon was entirely different. She’d trusted Jon, but only because he was family. He did nothing to actually earn and then keep her trust; she’d given it freely because she’d thought he was the only family member left to her. Not like Jaime. Jaime who had proven himself to be trustworthy, who had proved that he respected her, by listening to her; not like Jon who only pretended to listen and then proceeded to do the opposite. It isn’t that she expected or wanted Jon to follow her every statement; but, as Jaime does, she’d expected Jon to acknowledge when she had a point.

She’d been lonely, too, during that time at Castle Black, Sansa realises now. Starved for affection, she’d latched onto the only source of it there was, and as a result proceeded to convince herself that she was far more in love with Jon than she now realises she actually was. That does not diminish the pain of his betrayal; but his betrayal of her and of the North definitively killed whatever intimate affection she had for him.

It is nothing, she realises, with no little shock, to what she feels for Jaime. What was it she had said to Jon before the Dragon Queen’s party left - that she would choose Jaime again in a heartbeat?
Really, that should have been an indication, she thinks, almost mewling with pleasure as Jaime’s
good hand begins to card through her hair, thumb brushing lightly at her forehead, as he did on that
fateful day in the Godswood.

_I love Jaime. I love him. I love him. I love him,_ she thinks giddily to herself, smiling, wanting to
wrap herself in the knowledge like a favourite cloak. “Whatever you want of me, Jaime, I will give
it to you,” she murmurs, almost deliriously. “If you wish to speak, I will listen. If you wish simply
to hold me, well, I am quite happy here in the arms of the man I love.”

“I just want to hold you,” comes the almost drowsy reply, before his mind understands what she
has just said, and he goes so entirely still Sansa worries momentarily that she’s made a mistake.
“Please - would you mind repeating what you just said? I don’t think I heard you correctly. I can’t
have,” he says carefully.

She sits up to look at him properly, reaching out with both hands to trace the planes of his
handsome face, and she smiles at him, replying a touch shyly. “I said, if you wish simply to hold
me, well, I am quite happy here in the arms of the man I love.”

His lovely green eyes are suddenly bright with tears, and Sansa swallows. The expression on his
face… gods, she wishes fervently to prove herself worthy of it. “Truly?” he breathes, sitting up to
cradle her face with his hands.

“Truly,” she replies, smiling brilliantly, laughing through the tears that are suddenly spilling down
her cheeks. “I didn’t realise it until just now,” she continues somewhat sheepishly, “but I do. I
realised when you laughed, that I wanted to make you laugh. You fell me with your laugh.”

“But - but why?”

“I suppose I could always go through my list, but that would take too long,” she returns lightly,
laughing at his gobsmacked expression before continuing more solemnly, “because you respect
me, mind, body and heart. Because you trust me.”

“Not for my dashing good looks?”

“Do you want to hear my list or not?” she returns archly, eyes twinkling with delight as he seizes
on her course of conversation and teases her in return, as she hoped he would.
“Tell me,” he says rakishly, as he gathers her more closely to him, so that she is all but sitting on his lap. She flushes, but cannot truly bring herself to be scandalised - she is enjoying parrying his witticisms too much. “How long is this list of yours, exactly?”

“How long would you like it to be, precisely?” she smirks. “Would you like me to include your qualities as well, or just note down your traits? How about those things that make you utterly, incorrigibly vexing?”

He laughs at that, a rich, full sound, and he is nothing short of glorious in his mirth, his golden head thrown back, his green eyes flashing, and Sansa’s heart stutters. “Oh, you darling minx,” he rasps out between chuckles, impressed, and she laughs too, unable to help herself from being a little smug, and somehow, she ends up lying across the furs, Jaime leaning over her, breathing harshly through his nose with the effort of bracing himself on his elbows so as not to crush her, combined with the breath-robbing effects of mirth.

His gaze shifts suddenly to something more solemn, more intent, and she reaches for him instinctively, her hands grasping his shoulders, and he slowly, so slowly touches his nose to hers; a silent question. “You don’t have to ask, Jaime,” she murmurs breathlessly.

His eyes darken. “Oh, but I do,” he returns.

“Then please,” she says, shifting restlessly, why, exactly, she does not know; she only knows that she feels too much to be able to remain still. “Please kiss me, Jaime.”

“Give me the satisfaction of hearing you say the words again,” he replies, proud, even as his tones strain.

“Which words?” she replies archly.

“You know precisely which ones, sweet wife.” His answer is a growl, a growl so rumbling and powerful it renders her all but delirious. She toys, ever so briefly, with the idea of teasing him a bit more, but a half-hidden flash of desperation in his emerald eyes reminds her that this is not a time for japing around; not about that.

So she brings her hands from his shoulders, slides them up to cradle his face, and he sighs into her caress almost brokenly. “I love you, Jaime Lannister. I love you. I love you,” she murmurs, and then, with her last scrap of coherence, realises that he has been restraining himself when they’ve
kissed in the past.

Before she has time to feel cheated by this sudden knowledge, his weight is on hers, his mouth is on hers, and she knows only him; his passion, his tenderness, his wit. Him. And she surrenders herself to him. She is beyond thought, beyond herself, even. There is only the delicious, delirium-inducing taste of him, against her mouth, imprinting itself on her very skin, sinking into her bones, weaving some sort of intricate magic in her blood, her cold blood that melts only for him. She is no longer pain; she is no longer ice, but as fluid as water, tangling in him. The cool metal of his golden hand warms her to life, turns her to flesh from snow and stone and she can only respond ardently, guilelessly to his passionate touch. She does not realise she is whimpering, mewling sweetly, not until his deep, pleased laugh tickles her neck, and she shivers, before tugging with her fingers, slim, dainty fingers that have tangled in his golden hair, tugging his mouth back up to hers. He obliges with an amused sound that is somewhere between a laugh and a growl, and she - it is too much. She is dizzy, her mind whirling, spinning, as his hands trail lightly over her body, leaving prickles of lightning in his wake.

He deepens the kiss, and she is helpless at the exquisite power of his invasion. She can only follow where he leads, and her legs shift without her noticing; she realises only with a sudden gasp that his powerful thighs are between hers, and then he moves against her -

And suddenly she feels cold, because he has wrenched himself away from her, landing, collapsing heavily onto the furs at her side, and she turns her head to look at him, blinking slowly, disappointed, bewildered. His golden hair is ruffled, sticking up at odd angles, his mouth is swollen and his eyes are dark, and his shoulders are heaving as he breathes, sharply, harshly, quickly.

“Jaime?” she frowns, confused, her voice small. Has she not pleased him? Was she not meant to-

“Not like this,” he answers her question hoarsely, and the strain in his voice makes her focus on him properly.

“What do you mean?”

He sighs, rubbing at his eyes, in weariness and no little frustration. “It wouldn’t be fair to either of us, not when I’m in this state.”

She stills. “I don’t understand.” Is a wife not meant to comfort her husband?
He rolls towards her, meeting her gaze with solemnity, though the darkness, the heat in them is still there, and she knows, somehow, that he is restraining himself, and the knowledge reassures her. He feels, and the intensity of what he feels is something thrilling to her, if also daunting, but the knowledge that he is also capable of and seems to want patience eases a knot within her that she had not known existed. “I don’t - I want to do this properly.”

“Properly?”

A hint of a smirk touches his face. “The first time I take you to bed, the first time I strip you of your gown and kiss every single inch of you, the first time I make love to you - it is something that is meant to be savoured. I intend to give you the time you deserve. I intend to be… most thorough.” His eyes light with a wicked sort of mischief and she shivers, she trembles, she is utterly undone by him and he is only speaking to her, his voice washing over her in languorous, rich tones.

“Would it not comfort you?” she asks.

He sighs, a laughing groan escaping him. “You will be the death of me, sweet wife. You offer this to me so bravely, so trustingly… it would be a disservice to you.”

“Then tell me what I can do, Jaime,” she entreats him. “Do not shut me out, please. Don’t push me away. Don’t reject me.” She is still trembling, still raw, from the abrupt loss of his lips on hers, of his consuming embrace.

“You think I’m rejecting you?” he repeats incredulously, and she ducks her head, embarrassed, and then she gasps, startled, as he gathers her into his embrace, and she can’t help the way her body softens immediately into his, and he rolls them so she is once more on her back and he is once more above her, and though she trembles with exhilaration, she knows the look in her eyes is vulnerable, stripped bare, and that he can see into her very soul. “I love you, Sansa Stark, and I want you.” He touches his nose to hers and she raises her chin; a blatant invitation, and one she hopes he will take.

He lowers his body to hers and kisses her fiercely, and her body opens to his instinctively, her legs on either side of his, her hands gripping at his shoulders. She kisses him back, desperately, relinquishing her control to him, because she trusts him, and she feels him relent and indulge them both, passionately, forcefully. “I want you,” he repeats, almost violently, as he breaks the kiss, panting harshly, and the vulnerability, the strain, the sheer need in his tone makes her dizzy, makes her tremble. “And I want to give you the attention you deserve.”

“Then tell me how I can ease your heart, Jaime, please,” she asks again, and he sighs.
When he speaks, his voice is low with anguish, with raw vulnerability, and he is almost a little boy in his earnest entreaty. “Only let me hold you, dear lady. I feel, with you… the most incredible sense of peace that I have ever felt.”

For how long they remain entangled together upon the furs, drifting between sleep and alertness, Sansa does not precisely know, but these quiet moments with him, whether up on the ramparts watching the sunrise, or in these private places, are something she treasures. She is all too aware of how quickly, how violently, they can be ripped from her, from them both, and so she intends to make the most of them.

Jaime had wept silently into her hair until he could weep no more, and she had been able to do nothing but hold him in return, her own heart aching, breaking for him.

“I mourn that an innocent child had to pay for mine and Cersei’s lust,” he murmurs quietly then, startling Sansa from her thoughts, and she tightens her hold on him. She won’t interrupt him, not now that he is speaking at last. “For the longest time, I could not regret loving her. I regretted the consequences, but I could not regret loving her. But now, I…” he trails off, uncertainly, unable to articulate any further.

“It’s alright, Jaime,” she replies. “Sometimes we fall in love with the wrong people.”

“But she was a monster, in the end… what does that say about me, that I was able to love a monster?”

“You’re forgetting who you’re talking to, Jaime,” she returns quietly, unwilling to disturb the stillness of the room by raising her voice. “I once thought myself in love with Joffrey, or had you forgotten?” She can sense that he does not know how to answer her, so she continues, wanting to reassure him. “And that you were able to love a monster only indicates how generous your own heart is; that you were able to love someone like that.”

“I have never been kind… but Cersei knew, she knew precisely how to manipulate me. And, oh, she played me most masterfully,” Jaime says bitterly. “She always knew that I wanted children of my own, and that I wanted to be able to acknowledge the truth of our relationship to the world, so
she promised me that. And I, fool that I am, fell for it.” He shakes his head. “She never had any intention of doing so.” He laughs, and the desolation in the sound makes Sansa want to weep.

“I mourn the girl I grew up with, my playmate, my sister, the girl I fell in love with, but I do not mourn the bitter, twisted creature she became,” Jaime continues, enunciating the words in such a way that Sansa knows he is thinking as he speaks. “How can I? The mad thing she became was so alien to me; so alien to the girl, the woman I loved. But I thought - this is my bed, and so I must lie in it, however distasteful it may be - because I might have a shot at curbing some of her worst tendencies. But then I realised that Cersei has not, ever, once in her life listened to me, so why should she begin now? And then came the summit, and I pledged to ride North… I’ve never told you what happened in that final confrontation with her, have I?”

Sansa shakes her head against his shoulder, and feels him exhale wearily in response. “She accused me of treason, she revealed that she had conspired with Euron Greyjoy, without telling me, the commander of her armies… and then she ordered Ser Robert Strong to take my head…” she inhales sharply at that, and a wave of incandescent fury crashes through her. What did Cersei do to Jaime? What did she do to Sansa’s husband? “I heard the rasp of the steel against the scabbard, and I thought, this is how it ends, at the hands of my own lover, but I walked away…” He pauses. “Even then, I did not believe she would actually - but she nodded, she gave the order, and still I could not believe what my own eyes, my own ears were telling me… now I am not so certain.”

“Jaime,” Sansa breathes, her mind in turmoil. The words are tumbling from her tongue before she entirely knows what they are. “I will protect you,” she vows fiercely, solemnly, and instead of laughing at her, mocking her, dismissing her pledge as any other man would have done, he turns his head to look at her with such a wary, disbelieving, hopeful look in his eyes that she can scarcely stand it. It tears her heart to shreds to see him look at her in such a way, because the only thing she can think of, is what awful things have been done to him for him to look at her as though she is the very sun itself. “I love you, and I will protect you, husband mine, always. I love you, and I can never be ashamed of it. I will declare it openly to any who care to listen every day of my life, because I am proud to have married you, Jaime Lannister, King of the West, my friend, my ally, my love. I will give you as many children as you want and we will love them and raise them and be happy. Ask anything of me, and it is yours. Anything, and I will give it to you, gladly, because I love you and I am not ashamed.”
His breath leaves him in a punctured gasp; he adores her, he adores her, he adores her. He chokes on his words, lips twisting, shaking his head, brows furrowed in consternation. He cannot speak; he is beyond words. Any eloquence he possesses is wholly beyond him. That Sansa asks the question means something to him he doesn’t know how to express; he only knows that it is profound; something so profound it is the heart of him.

Hi everyone, welcome to this next chapter! Thank you all as always for your comments and encouragement, they mean a lot, so please do keep them coming!

Enjoy!

PART ELEVEN

In the days that follow Cersei’s letter, Jaime tries to concentrate upon the running of his kingdom and his alliance with the North. They receive a welcome surprise in the form of the wilding Tormund, strangely accompanied by the Hound. Both warriors survived the Night King’s advance.
by carving themselves a cave of ice from the shards of the Wall, the rest of their company not being so lucky. Jaime has the distinct amusement of seeing Brienne’s gobsmacked, bewildered face when Tormund winks at her, and he pats the wench’s shoulder in sardonic comfort before sauntering off. The Maid of Tarth deserves happiness, he thinks genuinely, though the more mischievous part of him owns to being highly eager to watch this strange courtship unfold.

Arya Stark’s mutinous scowl when she sees the Hound makes him smirk; though he frowns when he catches the man staring at his wife. He asks Sansa about it during their evening meal in his solar, and something in her face shifts. She is uncomfortable, and he hurries to apologise, but she waves his words away. He tried to help me in King’s Landing, Sansa explains to him, between dainty forkfuls of honey-roast ham. He refused to beat me if Joffrey ordered it of him; and he barked at me often, though he never bit me. There was one night, though - the night of the Blackwater; he came to my room, and I was too naive to know why. He’d looked at me with pity before, but that night he looked at me with lust, maddened with fear and with wine. He offered me to take me from the city; I refused, and he left. And our paths never crossed again; it’s just a bit... odd; a bit strange, a bit unsettling. She sees the expression on his face and smiles softly. You don’t need to worry, Jaime. Hundreds of men look at me the way he does; you look at me with respect. He never hurt me; and I know it is not something he is capable of, but he did frighten me in the beginning; not because of his face, but because his words were so harsh. He sees her struggle to articulate further, struggle to reassure him; but he is not worried. Though the Hound might look lustfully at her, Sansa looks at him the way she looks at her people; with kindness, with compassion, but nothing more than that. I was not worried, not for a single moment, he assures her. I only wished to make certain you were alright.

Every keep in the North, the Vale, the Riverlands and the West are sent the schematics for the scorpions; so that each keep can build one and train archers in their use. Following the news that the Iron Born are once again a threat, he and Sansa spend the better part of two days hammering out a viable defence strategy; to Jaime’s amazement, it centres on the North building a naval presence on their Western shores, at Flint’s Finger in Blazewater Bay, something not seen for centuries, and he is made aware of a closely guarded Northron secret. The Northerners use sleds pulled by wolf-dogs to carry provisions over great distances; but Jaime had not been aware that for every ship in the fleet at White Harbor, the Manderlys also built sleds to transport the ships overland without having to sail south and round the continent.

Trade, too, with Casterly Rock as well as patrolling the coast will be much easier with at least part of the Northron fleet sailing in the same waters, he knows. It also protects them from a seaward attack from Daenerys in the South; they cannot predict what she will do, and it unsettles them all, and Jaime attempts, to the best of his ability, to fight the sudden wave of numbness, of extreme fatigue he feels whenever he thinks of Cersei. Conceiving a world in which he lived on and she did not had always seemed utterly impossible (she’d always said they’d entered the world together and that they would leave it together); beyond the scope of his imagination, even. He is far from entirely successful, and Jaime knows Sansa notices - of course she does, and she tries to comfort him, making him laugh, her hand on his forearm, or even, whenever she feels particularly bold, slung casually around his waist, and he revels in her open affection which manages to fight the shades away, at least for a little while.
So he is confused when she does not appear one day for the midday meal, and asks Lady Lyanna if she has not, perchance, seen his wife, when he passes the little Lady of Bear Island in Winterfell’s halls. She directs him to the Godswood with a glint in her eyes he can’t entirely read, and it makes him tense his shoulders.

He’s grown to like the Godswood, ever since he married the woman he has fallen in love with in one; grown to like the thick, heavy hush that hangs upon these ancient trees, the way the light dapples through the leaves, the black stillness of the spring ponds, even the snow upon the ground, he, a man of the West, whom the mere thought of winter makes shiver in distaste. But Sansa is responsible for this change in his tastes. He’s quite decided that there is nothing more beautiful than his wife standing or riding in the snow, face upturned to the sky with a peaceful, close-lipped, private smile, in order that she might better feel the softly falling snow settle upon her skin; ephemeral diamonds, stars twined in the russet hair that falls in waves down to the small of her back. It is his wife’s natural habitat, and it is no burden for him to bear it for her sake; he does it gladly. Her smile has the magical property, he has come to find, of banishing any discomfort he might feel due to the weather, or indeed his heart or his mind.

He hears the mellifluous tones that belong to his wife and the more menacing ones of her sister before he sees them, and he unconsciously slows his gait, not wishing to disturb them if they are having a private conversation.

“An old wound,” he hears the younger Stark explain, almost carelessly. “I was stabbed. In Braavos. Because I refused to kill the woman they wanted me to; they killed her anyway after she healed me and I escaped. It’s alright, Sansa, really,” Arya Stark continues over her sister’s protests. “I never wanted children anyway.”

“Even so,” he hears his wife say softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Because whether or not you wanted children was always your choice to make. I’m sorry you had it taken away from you in such a way.”

“I can take care of myself, Sansa.” The words are a long-suffering sigh, but he can just about detect the underlying affection to them, and as Arya continues, he can hear her mouth widening to a wolfish smirk. “I’ll leave you to your frolicking, then.”

Jaime can’t resist - the notion of his wife frolicking in the Godswood in winter is too amusing to pass by, so he continues on, taking care to make more noise than he normally would to warn them.
of his approach.

“What’s this I hear about frolicking?” he calls out, jovially, and is met with Sansa’s rich laugh in response, Arya rounding the corner, hair slicked back. She pats his elbow as she passes, that infernal smirk on her face, but she remains silent as he stares after her in amazement.

He’s glad he had the sense to warn them of his presence because the sight he is met with at the foot of the heart tree makes his jaw drop in astonishment. “Are you entirely mad, Sansa?” he chokes out once he has regained his faculties. He can see only her head, russet hair dark and wet against her skull, her blue eyes the only points of colour against the white snow and black water she is swimming in, her white dress, cloak, and slippers in a pile by the water’s edge.

She only smiles mysteriously, impishly. “Winterfell is built on hot springs,” she replies laughingly, swimming closer to him, and he can’t help the instinctive protest that leaves his lips as she proceeds to rest her elbows in the snow, propping her chin up with her hands to look at him. “This is one of them.” Her voice is as sweet and clear as the ringing of bells, and as caressing as the warm western wind. She is playful here, and he has a sudden mental vision of his wife as a young girl, spinning joyfully in the snow, arms outstretched, countenance radiant with her smile, as she gambols around with her little direwolf; her secret escape when the pressures of her mother and her septa became too great. Her ability to find moments of joy in the simplest, everyday things is a quality he suspects she has always possessed, and one of the protective mechanisms that she used to sustain her through her trials.

“It’s midwinter.” Jaime replies, still stunned. If he thinks too much about the splendidly glorious sight in front of him, if he turns his mind to the prolonged contemplation of this vision of his siren of a wife, he will be permanently struck speechless, he wagers. It is a picture to meditate upon in the privacy of his bedchamber, after nightfall and the castle has bedded down.

She shrugs elegantly and he swallows convulsively at her movement. The way the water trickles down her collarbones entrances him, and he stares intently, fighting to restrain himself as a drop slides down her jaw next to her ear, catching for a moment upon her earlobe before dripping a fluid path ever so slowly down the curve of her neck, disappearing into the pool below her clavicle. His fingers twitch, his mouth dry. “Three weeks ago,” she continues, and his attention is suddenly diverted from the sweep of her shoulders to her lips as she speaks. “This was frozen. Now it’s warm enough to swim in. Spring will come again, and with it life and peace and prosperity.” She smiles again, and his chest aches at her beauty. “Will you join me?”

He is struck dumb by her invitation, at the playful huskiness in her voice, the mischievous glint in her eye, but some of his recklessness seems to have returned (or perhaps it is that she lightens his heart and fights the darkness away, because somehow she sees the darkness in him and is not repelled, but in her generosity accepts it anyway), and he lowers himself to the shore to sit and pull off his boots and socks and roll up his breeches to his knees. “I’ll dip my feet in; nothing more,” he
acquiesces. “I am a Westerman after all, and I’m like to freeze to death if I have to undress entirely.” He doesn’t finish the thought, of course; that if he strips off completely and joins her in the spring, as tempting as the thought is - and it is so tempting so as to be excruciating - it will lead them down a path she is not yet ready for; and he would never be able to forgive himself.

She laughs at that, but dips her head in agreement. “I had not thought of that.”

He lets his feet drop into the water and slumps with a guttural sigh, his whole body relaxing at the warmth he now feels coursing through him. He looks at her through half lidded eyes, smiling lazily. “This is very nice, my lady,” he murmurs, in a voice slurred with pleasure and drowsy contentment.

Her grin widens, and she comes closer, close enough for him to reach out and drag a fingertip down her cheek, her neck, her shoulder, down, down, down… and he grits his teeth. He should not. He must not. He is a man, not a green boy, and he is eminently capable of controlling himself.

“I’m glad,” she says, before she catches the look on his face and her brow furrows in confusion. “Jaime?” Her voice tenses ever so slightly with uncertainty, with the notion that she has misjudged the situation, that she has made a mistake, and her doubt makes his heart hurt. No, this perfect creature is not at fault. It is he, at this moment, who is having difficulty keeping his emotions under control.

He exhales a ragged laugh in reply, releasing some of the tension, shaking his head. “You will be the death of me, lovely wife.”

“I don’t understand.”

He gives her a lopsided smirk as he drags his fingertips down her arm, all the way to the palm of her hand, raising it to his lips to kiss first her knuckles, then every fingertip, then the centre of her palm, then the sensitive inside of her wrist. He feels her tremble, shiver, the hitch in her breath, the mewl she can’t entirely suppress. He sees her eyes flutter shut, the way her neck arches as her head tips back. And he - oh, he is not as unmoved as he pretends; no, he is entirely too moved, and that is the problem. He cannot stop thinking about her, wanting her. She has sunk into his every thought, his every gesture. It is she who makes his heart beat, who ignites the blood in his veins, and he is too far gone, too languid with sentiment, too jubilant with the sheer exhilaration of her, to resist. “Now do you understand?” he murmurs, his warm breath ghosting over her wrist, pressing another kiss to her pulse, feeling it stutter. He cannot help himself, and lingers still. Her whole arm trembles in his gentle hold, and she shivers again as his tongue pokes out to taste her scent, her skin, and he presses yet another scorching kiss to her palm, smiling unrepentantly.
“But I wasn’t even touching you!” She exclaims in disbeliefing wonder, entirely unaware of her own appeal, a situation Jaime longs to rectify.

He meets her wide sea-blue eyes with his own intent green ones. “You do not need to, my love,” he admits, and he has the distinct pleasure of seeing her eyes widen in pleased embarrassment, a pretty flush painting her from her cheeks, down her neck, and, he is quite certain, to her body in the water too. “You are lovely,” he breathes reverently. He is not entirely certain how the gods have seen fit to bless him with such a wife, but he vows he will never take her for granted, and to make her happy.

She laughs again, mirth and joy glimmering in her eyes, and sinks below the water, her hair fanning out gloriously, and the realisation, once more, of her beauty, hits him squarely in the chest, robs him of his breath. She breaks the surface of the water and uses both hands to slick her hair back and wipe the moisture from her eyes, causing her torso to arch forward, and Jaime gulps. He will not think about ravishing her in her own Godswood in the middle of winter, and he casts about desperately for a change of subject.

“I thought I saw Ghost around your sister earlier today.”

Her countenance is drawn with both melancholy and harsh fury as she replies, as it always is whenever her brother-cousin is mentioned. “Direwolves don’t belong in the South. Arya said that when Jon bonded with Rhaegal, it weakened his bond with Ghost; Jon choosing his Targaryen heritage definitively severed it. With Arya’s Nymeria roving about, Ghost is the direwolf in Winterfell now.”

“So it isn’t some means of spying on us?” He can’t help but ask the question.

She shakes her head decisively. “No.”

“He’s an idiot for abandoning you.” He cannot relinquish this anger so easily; as much as he realises that they would not be married and happy together had that been the case, that does not change his fury towards the man. He hurt Sansa; and that is more important, more important even than his own happiness. This revelation, this notion is a novel one; and he knows that if she asked it of him, he would step aside, because her happiness matters more to him than his own. He would fight for her, of course, but he will always respect her wishes, and if she had asked him to merely be her ally, her friend, then that is what he would have done. He would have hoped, secretly, for her heart to turn to his, but he has never sought and would never seek to force his own heart upon her. It is freely offered; whether or not to take it is her choice and hers alone.
She swims closer to him, reaching for his hands, reading his thoughts on his face as easily as if he had spoken them aloud. He gives her his hands - both flesh and metal - without question, and sighs blissfully as she presses light, butterfly kisses of her own to his hands, his fingertips, his palms. I love you, he thinks, I love you more than my own life. “I’m happy. I’m happy with you, Jaime Lannister. I love you. I want you. I don’t need to think about the past anymore.”

Because he is only mortal, only human, he is only able to concentrate upon one facet of her ardent, sincere, quietly voiced declaration. “You want me?”

She blushed, but she holds his gaze. “I do. I’m ready, I think.” He is utterly incapable of describing the effect her words have on him, save that everything seems suddenly heightened; the colours of the Godswood, the white of the snow, the black of the water, the dark red of the weirwood tree leaves, the glimmering blue of Sansa’s eyes. His heart is beating a thundering pulse in his ears, his chest, and he inhales shakily.

“You’re certain?” He rasps hoarsely.

“I am.” A secretive smile plays upon her lips; an innocent shyness, a coyness that is nothing less than endearing. “But only if you are ready too, Jaime.”

His breath leaves him in a punctured gasp; he adores her, he adores her, he adores her. He chokes on his words, lips twisting, shaking his head, brows furrowed in consternation. He cannot speak; he is beyond words. Any eloquence he possesses is wholly beyond him. Never, not once in his life, has he been asked whether or not he’s wanted to bed his lover. It was simply assumed that he was happy to do so. That Sansa asks the question means something to him he doesn’t know how to express; he only knows that it is profound; something so profound it is the heart of him.

“I believe I am, Sansa,” he replies quietly. “I love you, I adore you, I want you; there can never be another.” He collects himself with no little difficulty and continues, stating more evenly, though with a rakish smirk and wink, his tones drawling. “I will make arrangements.”

She wrinkles her nose in a manner that is most endearing and distracting. “Arrangements?” She queries, perplexed.

“Indeed. You didn’t think I would take you perfunctorily in a hot spring, did you?” He waggles his eyebrows, grinning at the blush that graces her fair skin at his words, his tones becoming deeper, more mischievous, more intent. “I said before that I intend to take my time with you when I make love to you… that I intend to be most thorough. That will not change, my lady.” She trembles at his bold speech, lips parting on a sigh, long eyelashes fluttering, colour pinking her cheekbones.
“You are to be savoured. Every inch of you deserves to know the worship of my lips; to know the pleasure that can be brought by touch. The glide of my thigh on yours, the tangle of my hand in your hair… I intend to make you forget everything except my own name.”

“Jaime…” she whispers brokenly, her head falling forwards so her forehead rests against his bare calf, and her touch brands and soothes him all at once. He lifts his left hand to slide his fingers across her temple and into her hair, the long, slippery strands heavy with water. Her sweet, ragged exhalas raise goosflesh on his skin, despite the curling, misty warmth of the spring. Her wet skin sliding against his sets an exquisite, simmering fire to his blood. He wants to gather her body to him and claim her mouth with his, to claim her, he wants to loose himself in the feel of her, wet and *writhing* against him, mewling and whimpering. But she is in a pool, and he is not about to jump in fully clothed; or strip off, or else things will be over before they are able to begin. So he settles for the use of his voice instead.

“I intend to bring you such rapture, such joy that you will feel more alive than you have ever been,” he continues, and she clutches at him, fingers digging into his leg, a helpless, strangled whimper of a moan. “Desire…” he drawls, “desire begins here.” He drags his thumb softly against her temple to hold it there, to draw soothing, maddening circles into her skin. “In the mind. The imagination creates fragmented pictures, hopes, and your own mind seduces you, fuels your desire, your pleasure. A voice in your ear, a mouth blowing at your neck, a wandering hand, trailing up a soft, bare thigh, gliding over your ribcage to feel the weight of your breast, a calloused fingertip thumbing your pink nipple… and then, later, fingers sinking into your lovely, pert arse to align your body up, sweeping the arched curve of your spine…”

“Jaime… I…” She looks up at him hopelessly, her eyes dark and wide and liquid, and though she is the one in the water, he is the one drowning, drowning in her deep blue gaze. She is reeling at his seduction, entirely undone by it, struggling to breathe, and the shaky motion of her shoulders lifts the pretty curve of her breasts to his sight, doing something quite astonishingly visceral to him - his stomach tightens and twists with anticipation, and he finds, somewhat vaguely, that he is unable to stand, even should he wish it - and he cannot help the slight smugness that he feels, especially after having been rejected so coldly by Cersei after the loss of his hand. Sansa makes him feel whole again, makes him feel *capable* again, and it is a gift he will never be able to thank her for enough; it is a gift that brings him to the brink of tears whenever he thinks of it.

“Shall I tell you where I’ll begin?” he continues, almost mercilessly, once he has collected himself enough for some semblance of coherence, and he feels her shake, almost violently against his hand in response. “I’ll carry you in my arms as I did the day I carried you up to the ramparts into my bedchamber, but our destination won’t be the bed, at least not immediately. No, we’ll eat first, sup upon the finest morsels Winterfell has to offer, though I dare say you are the finest of them all, and I’ll enjoy my dessert. And only when we have sated one hunger shall we set about sating the rest, something I imagine will keep us most gloriously occupied for quite some time. I intend to drive you quite mad with pleasure, my darling,” he grins rakishly, winking at her.

“Too much… this is too much… you are already driving me mad…enough, please, enough…”
“And that is why we will take our time, my love,” he replies tenderly, if a little wickedly, and he has the pleasure of seeing her breath hitch and quicken again. He swallows dryly, convulsively, fighting a shudder of his own. She is so responsive; the furthest thing from frigid he can conjure, but he knows now is the time to back off - he has teased her enough. For now. Though does it really count as teasing if he intends to finish what he has begun?

Chapter End Notes

thoughts?
“You said you would make me forget everything except your own name.”

“You did.” She can hear the smile in his voice.

“And I know you to be a man of your word,” she replies into his ear, and she feels him still, though he trembles with restrained passion. “Show me how it is meant to be, between a man and a woman, between a husband and wife, between two lovers.”

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry for the lateness of this chapter; I had a slightly more involved weekend than I’d anticipated. (Also this chapter ended up being about four times the length I’d originally thought it would be), so here’s a nice lengthy instalment for you all. The following chapter should be up by the end of the week absolute latest.

Thanks as always for your comments and encouragements; they really do help a great deal so please do keep them coming!

Enjoy, and happy halloween to you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWELVE

SANSA STARK

She has absolutely no idea how she manages to get out of the hot spring in her Godswood and
make her way back to Winterfell proper, only that she does. She is reeling; her heart accelerating like a bolting horse in her chest, her mind spinning with the images her husband’s words have conjured, and she does not know whether to laugh hysterically, swoon, or throw her slipper after him for seducing her in such a manner before leaving her, in his words, to enjoy the pool a while longer. She also has absolutely no idea how she is meant to exist in such a state of trembling, heightened anticipation, entirely unable to concentrate on the despatches that come in during the course of the afternoon, and both Arya and Lady Lyanna look at her strangely as they discuss (or attempt to, in Sansa’s case) preliminary plans to train all the women of the North, the Vale and the Riverlands (and the West too, should the King agree) to fight.

Any mention of Jaime causes her to flush with the mere memory of his voice, deep, languid, teasing, with a hint of a powerful growl. She shifts restlessly in her chair, and ends up dismissing Arya and Lyanna after an hour and a half, as dusk falls, lengthening the shadows in the room. Once she is alone, the door bolted, once she has called for a bath, she slumps onto her desk with a groan, her forehead resting against the wood.

Her handmaidens do not linger; they are well acquainted with her penchant for washing herself; she no longer lets anyone touch her - except, now, Jaime, and she performs her ablutions quickly; washing her hair, scrubbing gently at her skin, but when she catches sight of the scars on her calves where Ramsey flayed her she begins to tremble. What if she isn’t able to please Jaime? She wants to, desperately. What if he is disgusted by her scars? Despite having stripped in Winterfell’s hall, she’d noticed that he’d kept his gaze resolutely averted.

There is a knock on her door and she bids them enter, though not before sinking down into the tub, knees to her chest, so only her head is visible. It is Brienne, and she appears quite flummoxed, carrying in her arms a red and white embroidered robe.

“I was told to give this to you, your Majesty,” Sansa’s sworn shield says.

“Oh?” Sansa raises an eyebrow. “And who is this from?”

“The King of the West.”

Sansa laughs at that, resting her head on the back of the tub. “Leave it on the chair, if you would, please.” Really, she should have seen this coming; it is such a Jaime thing to do. Grand, theatrical gestures. He really is a secret romantic, and it chases away some of her fear, lightens her heart; however much he professes cynicism, he has not left the old songs behind entirely, in the same way that she has not. “Thank you, Brienne.”
She pads over to the chair once Brienne has left, wrapping first the towels around her body to dry herself, examining and admiring Jaime’s gift as she does so. He’s chosen well, she admits to herself. It suits her, and though the fabric is light, she can see the quality of the silk, and can only revel in the way it slides against her skin. Here, where a crackling fire roars merrily in the fireplace, she has no need of her furs to warm herself. She sits down in front of it, letting the heat warm her body, and dry her hair, as she slips into a languid, easy frame of mind, lounging on the furs in the way she used to do as a young girl when she was alone; on her stomach, leaning on her elbows, face cradled in her hands, feet swinging idly back and forth, listening to the crackling of the flames.

She used to craft stories; to write poetry in her head, she remembers. To compose songs of her own; she has not done so for some time, not since Lady was slaughtered, but now, she thinks, perhaps she can begin again. She wants her court to be a place of light and laughter, where her people dance and make merry. She wants the song, still. Except now she has the power and the resources to craft the song into being. Her court will be a place of learning and art, too, she thinks, as well as a place of law and in which people know how to defend themselves. She realises, too, that it is a weapon she can use against the Dragon Queen. Most of her personal spies are either minstrels or servants, so they are able to travel very easily from keep to keep, spreading as well as gathering information. She makes a mental note to come up with a coherent strategy, and then lets her mind wander further afield.

She begins to hum; not a tune, only a random series of notes, but then she starts to think of wolves howling in the dark and snow falling upon the high fells and riding through the Wolfswood and Jaime’s wicked teasing, of the sun rising, and the notes in her mind begin to sing, begin to arrange themselves into something coherent, and before she realises it, she is humming a melody of her own creation.

“That is not a tune I’ve heard before,” Jaime says, stepping through the servants’ door, and she ducks her head, smiling secretively.

“No,” she replies, tilting her head to look at her husband. He is dressed informally; in a shirt and breeches and boots, and she drinks in the sight of him as he comes to sit next to her on the furs by the fire. “It is my own composition.”

She shifts onto her back, leaning her head against his thigh, and sighs, somewhat morosely. “When I was a little girl,” she explains, “whenever minstrels came to Winterfell, I would listen to them, entranced. I learned to play the lute and the high harp; I wrote my own verses and composed my own tunes. I have not really had the inclination to do so again, not since my direwolf was taken from me; not until very recently.” His left hand begins to card through her hair, and she arches her head back to gaze at him, languidly, almost dreamily, and the intense look he gives her in response makes her shiver in delight, a slow, lazy smile spreading across her face.
“Jaime,” she whispers.

“Sansa,” he responds quietly, feelingly, and suddenly she is overwhelmed by him; by his proximity, his tenderness, his evident regard. Her eyes flutter shut as he lightly traces her features; the arc of her eyebrows, her nose, the softness of her cheeks, the line of her jaw, the whorl of her ear to graze down her neck and sweep across her collarbones. She whimpers and catches his hand. He stills, but she only presses his warm palm more firmly to her skin. She murmurs his name again and suddenly she can stand it no longer.

She sits up; her palm still pressing his hand to her skin, and raises her other hand to thumb his cheekbone. He shudders into her caress, and she leans forward to touch her nose to his in a silent question. He is still for a moment, and then he gathers her to him, and his lips hover over hers teasingly. She is now in his lap, knees either side of his, her torso pressed firmly against his; and the sensation of the heat and muscle of him makes her dizzy. His right arm he uses to pull her to him, and his eyes flash mischievously before he takes the breath from her entirely.

She can only respond passionately, ardently to him, and if she is a bit uncertain, still, about what she is doing, he is patient, coaxing, teasing, and entirely too consuming. She follows most willingly where he leads; he is fierce and tender, dominant and giving all at once, and she loses herself to him. She mewls when he leaves her lips to plant gentle kisses down the line of her jaw, before growling into her ear in such a way that leaves her melting into him, even as he becomes more daring, biting lightly at the sensitive skin below her ear. Her hands come up to tangle in his golden hair and hold his head to her, and his pleased chuckle, low and rumbling, his unrepentant smile against her neck, makes her stutter out his name.

“Wife,” he replies, his voice an octave lower than it normally is, and she hugs him to her, revelling in the feel of him, in the beat of his heart thundering in time with hers. “We should eat,” he says quietly, after a pause. “Our meal will be ready by now, and you,” he continues, lifting his head to look at her, and her stomach twists at the wicked glint in his dark emerald eyes, “Will need your strength.”

She nods shakily, and can only cling to him, her arms around his neck, as he arranges her in his arms, carrying her with one arm around her back and shoulders, the other slipping under her knees, as he stands fluidly, and she smiles shyly into his shirt, fingers twisting in the linen at the back of his neck, as he carries her through the servants’ passages to his own bedchamber.

Her gaze falls upon the bed; piled with furs and pillows, and she blushes, her attention diverted when Jaime turns to set her back on her feet; her body drags against his and she feels as well as hears his sharp intake of breath, and she smirks briefly. He goes to throw on his own robe, carelessly draped over a chair and then extends his left hand to her. She takes it with a shy smile, breathing deeply when his larger fingers tangle with hers.
“I don’t have your tolerance for the cold,” he says lightly and she laughs, following him to where cushions are piled near the fire; trays of food and drink set next to them. She settles herself on a cushion, her legs tucked neatly under her, making certain the ties of her robe have not come undone, and she watches as he bolts all the doors, striding easily, throwing her a smirk and a wink that makes her blush. He pours them both goblets of red wine from a pewter carafe, and looks at her so intently over the rim that she shivers as she takes the cup from him, trailing her fingers over his, and noting with satisfaction that his arm trembles at her actions.

“Whatever our endeavours, sweet wife,” he says, bringing his goblet to hers in a private toast, and she echoes him with a murmur.

“You know, my meeting with Arya and Lyanna Mormont this afternoon was the least productive one I’ve ever had?” Sansa says, swallowing a small mouthful of the sweet, heady wine. It settles soothingly in her belly and eases her nerves.

“Oh?” her husband replies nonchalantly. “And why might that be?” He continues, affecting ignorance, but an amused twist of his lips belies him.

“You know perfectly well why, Jaime!” She huffs out laughingly.

“That was rather the idea, you realise?” he smirks, drinking from his goblet. “Desire does begin in the mind, after all.” He pauses, before continuing more solemnly. “I didn’t want you to fear tonight,” he says, and her heart swells with tenderness for this man, this glorious man who has been at her side and respects her and loves her and wants to care for her to the best of his ability.

“Jaime,” she breathes, compulsively, desperately bringing his golden metal hand to her lips, pressing a first kiss to the knuckles, and then a more lingering one to his palm. “I love you.” When she meets his eyes again, the green has darkened to the colour of the sea during a storm. She swallows unsteadily, and he, reading the emotion on her countenance, swiftly steers them back to safer waters.

“We will take our time, my lady,” he says tenderly, the fierce light in his eyes softening. His lips twitch. “We have all the time in the world, my love. Let us savour it just as we will savour this meal.”

When she speaks she hardly recognises her own voice; it has lowered to something husky, something as sensual as the feel of the silk robe she wears sliding over her skin. “What have we
been given?” Her husband’s green eyes widen, and she sees him visibly restrain himself; school his breathing to something more relaxed.

He leans to pull the platters closer to them so they are now in front of them both, and she admires what she can see of the play of muscles of his back as he does so, swallowing. He gives a satisfied hum, meeting her gaze with a playful smirk. “All of our favourites, it would seem. Where would you like to begin?” His smirk widens. “Of course, the great advantage of eating like this is that we can prolong the experience most exquisitely. Everything has already been perfectly cut into little morsels.” She flushes, remembering the context in which he last said the word *morsel*. He catches the change in her expression, of course, and he smiles, a touch ruefully. “Do you want to know the truth?”

She frowns her utter confusion. “The truth?”

The amusement has returned to his eyes, a lighter expression than it was before. “About this afternoon.”

“What about this afternoon?” she replies, still confused.

“I didn’t get any work done either, after I left the Godswood.” He glances wryly at her, and she gapes, astonished.

“But you - you -”

He laughs, and once she gets over her shock, she joins in, and the tension between them mellows a little, the twisting knot of anticipation in her stomach loosening enough that she is now able to contemplate the food with some semblance of equanimity and actually bring herself to eat it.

“Good,” she smirks. “It would have been unfair otherwise.”

He lifts his goblet to her at that, and then both of them turn their attention properly to the food. It is simple fare, but well prepared and tasty. Little game meatballs in an onion and tomato and red wine sauce, small enough to eat in one go, with slices of crusty bread to dip into the sauce, little pots of sliced roasted vegetables, roasted chestnuts, sweet and piping hot and already peeled, sliced winter apples from the glasshouses drizzled with honey, and lemoncakes and the almond-stuffed apricots Sansa has learned are Jaime’s favourites. They eat heartily, laughing and teasing each other light-heartedy.
The tension between them makes the very air seem heady, and Sansa is abruptly reminded of it every single time she shifts on her cushions and feels the silk of her robe against her skin, when she leans forward to pluck another morsel of food from the tray, and she feels her husband’s gaze drift to the eloquent fall of her hair, to the way the material of her robe becomes translucent in the firelight, hinting at her form. She is no less aware of him; the shining joy and wicked mischief glimmering in his green eyes, the way the shadows and light dapple the planes of his face and torso. He might be wearing a robe, but his linen shirt still leaves a fairly large triangle of his chest exposed, and she swallows harshly whenever her eyes light upon it.

They both become bolder as the meal progresses. She is surprised when he plucks a roasted chestnut between forefinger and thumb and offers it to her by touching it to her lips, and she slowly opens her mouth to take a tentative bite, unable, for the life of her, to tear herself away from his gaze that scorches her. He lifts the other half of the chestnut to his own lips and eats it, winking at her as he does so, and her skin prickles, her stomach twists.

She reciprocates then, a touch shyly, by offering him a small slice of apple. He takes the proffered fruit between white teeth, and once he has eaten he slides his left hand down her arm from the elbow, fingers closing gently around the pulse at her wrists, and proceeds to lick the honey from her fingertips, before pressing a closed mouth kiss to her palm and then the inside of her wrist, and she realises she abruptly must consider the idea that she might not be capable of surviving everything he has planned.

Somehow, she manages to stagger into him even though she is already on her knees, and he swiftly wraps his right arm around her to steady her, and she whimpers. A faint smile graces his expressive mouth, and he lifts his left hand to caress her cheek and tangle his fingers in her hair.

“You do know you that you can say no at any point, and we will stop,” he says quietly, solemnly, and her eyes widen. “And I make this vow to you, my love: we will do nothing that you do not say yes to.”

“But won’t you be angry if we stop?” she stutters.

“Angry at myself, yes,” he agrees easily, before continuing seriously. “Because I want to give you only pleasure, and if you ask me to stop it means you don’t like it, and that is not pleasurable, for either of us.” He strokes her cheekbone with his thumb, and she sighs blissfully, lips parting, and she sees the way his eyes flick briefly to her mouth before darting up to her eyes once more. “The point remains that you can always say no, and we will stop. Is there anything you know you do not wish to do?”
She frowns, struggling to understand the enormity of what he is saying. “I can say no,” she murmurs, “and you won’t be angry with me?” Her voice is high and tight with uncertainty, with disbelief and surprise, and she hates it.

“Never,” he vows fiercely, and she can only look upon him with all the ardent, tender affection in the world, blushing.

“I only…” she fights the surge of helplessness and fury and pain she experiences whenever she thinks of what Ramsey did to her. She twists her fingers in the embroidered lapel of his robe, unable to look Jaime in the eye as she answers his question; the remembered humiliation still great. “Ramsey used to bed me in the arse too, and I - never again. Never again.”

“Of course,” he replies softly, and she trembles at the sheer amount of affection she hears in his voice. “Whatever you decide.”

“Anything else,” she continues, not entirely aware where this streak of bravery is coming from. “Anything else, Jaime, I trust you. I trust you with my mind, with my heart, with my body, with my very soul. I trust you.”

“It gladdens my heart to hear that, my love,” he admits lowly.

“And you, Jaime? Is there anything you don’t like?” Whenever she becomes nervous, she realises, she has the most inane tendency to babble, a bad habit she simply cannot seem to cure herself of. “I want to be a good wife to you, Jaime. I want to please you. I don’t want to make a mistake.”

He pulls her more closely into his embrace, entirely against him. “Oh, my sweet, sweet wife. You don’t need to do anything more, Sansa. You are already a good wife to me, and you already please me. I love you for you, my lady, for all that you are. I want you for you, my love, for all that you are. Do you remember what you said to Daenerys and Jon? That you married your equal? That doesn’t change simply because we are in bed. And if you or I make a mistake, then we try something different; we learn together.” He drifts a soothing, heavy hand down her spine. “And to answer your question; there is nothing you could do that I would not like.”

She trembles and quivers at his reassurance, furiously blinking back tears. It’s hard to fully grasp; for her to fully comprehend. It is entirely the opposite of what her mother told her (you must lie back and do your duty; you must give your husband sons; you must please your husband), entirely the opposite to the possession she was to Joffrey and to Ramsey (she is mine to torment), but neither does she think Jaime means what Cersei said to her, that long ago night when the Blackwater burned (tears aren’t your only weapon, little dove. The best one’s between your legs).
No, what Jaime seems to mean is the union she dreamed of as a little girl, one of love. She wants to experience everything he’s told her about; she wants it with a ferocity, all of a sudden, that, had she been standing, would have brought her to her knees. She wants him.

“You said you would make me forget everything except your own name.”

“I did.” She can hear the smile in his voice.

“And I know you to be a man of your word,” she replies into his ear, and she feels him still, though he trembles with restrained passion. “Show me how it is meant to be, between a man and a woman, between a husband and wife, between two lovers.”

His head snaps up, his gaze fixed upon her. “You are absolutely certain, Sansa? That you want this? That you want me?” It is the hint of insecurity, the almost imperceptible waver upon the last word that makes her melt.

“Yes. Yes, I want you, only you.” The words fly from her mouth. “Make love to me, Jaime. My ally, my friend, my lord, my husband, my king, my love, my lover. Make love to me.”

“It would be my pleasure and my honour, my love, my wife. Sansa.” He needs no further urging and draws them both to their feet, leading them away from where they have supped and towards the bed. She shivers with delight at the huskiness of his voice, at the intensity in his gaze. “Let me take off my boots, sweet queen, and then I am all yours.”

She laughs and nods at that. “Could we - could we disrobe at the same time?”

“Of course, lovely one,” he replies.

His task complete, he rejoins her, his countenance soft with an expression that manages to be rakish and tender all at once, and he gently takes her hands with his left one and places them on his chest, but not where he is covered by his shirt and robe, but where he is bare-skinned, above his heart, and she inhales shakily, fingers trembling as they absorb his warmth. For all his japes about not being enamoured of the northern climate, about freezing his feet off, his skin is warm; he radiates heat, and she unconsciously steps closer. He tenses, holding himself deliberately still.

“Your move, my lady,” he murmurs huskily, and she swallows, fighting the temptation to duck her
head, to hide behind the fall of her hair, but instead, quite deliberately, she tosses her head imperiously, mischief glinting in her eyes.

“Where would you like me to begin?” she returns breathily, and his eyes darken.

“Wherever you like.”

“Aren’t you nervous?”

“I trust you,” he replies simply, earnestly. “You have free rein; I give it to you most gladly.” She gulps, then, violently, her lingering apprehension fading away entirely as she understands that he is putting himself utterly in her hands. As she has told him about Ramsey, he has told her about the betrayals and manipulations his sister perpetrated on him, so for him to make such a statement is astonishing to her. The amount of trust, the amount of faith he has in her is humbling, as is his bravery. She can only reply, again and again, tenderly, sincerely, in a voice full of the most reverent admiration, that she loves him most ardently, as her dainty hands gently untie the cloth belt of his robe about his waist, her hands lingering curiously upon the muscled planes of his linen-covered stomach, before bringing them teasingly back up to his shoulders to push the material entirely from his tall frame.

“Your move now, my lord,” she grins at him, and he laughs.

“I’m quite certain that was two moves, Sansa.”

“What are you going to do about it?” she retorts giddily, thoroughly enjoying herself, and her helpless, giggling anticipation only increases at the dangerous glint in his eyes, at the amused twist of his mouth.

He stares at her for a moment, before replying evenly, “This.” He places a chaste, tender kiss upon her forehead, and her eyes flutter shut at the sensation; at the emotion he pours into his action. “And this,” he growls, lunging to hold her against him with his right hand and tickle her ribcage mercilessly with his left. She bursts into peals of laughter against his shoulder, her body squirming playfully against his. His touch is soft through the silk fabric, and the contrast with the hard planes of his body, with the desire she feels from him, makes her entire being melt against him as she giggles uncontrollably. She feels him smirk into the crook of her neck, and when he stops she sways and his hands tighten around her waist. “Your move again, Sansa.” It is almost obscene, the way he curls his tongue around her name; it makes her legs quiver and her belly clench.
She looks at him carefully; but his face is serene, calmly waiting to see what she will do and so she gently tugs his shirttails free, and slides her hands underneath the translucent fabric to drag the shirt off him. He raises his arms above his head to aid her, and when she looks up and catches his gaze, his eyes are burning, and her own eyes widen. This is far more intimate than she had ever thought it could be. His shirt comes off and he stands before her, watching her, the only signs of his disquiet his violent swallow, and the thundering pace of his heart. She runs her hands over his stomach, his chest, his shoulders, his arms, marvelling at his handsomeness, at the light dusting of blonde hair upon his chest, at how responsive he is to her.

Though they have shared a bedchamber since their wedding, they have never been undressed in each other’s presence, and she suddenly realises that though his form does wicked things to her clothed; it is nothing to what she feels now. In the firelight, he is nothing short of glorious; as though carved from the hands of the Gods themselves, for his masculine elegance, and she barely stops herself from swooning. She steps back from him, as much for her own sanity (she could admire him for an eternity, she feels) as much as because she suddenly recalls that it is his turn, and she eagerly awaits his action.

She takes a second step back, and then spreads out her hands, lifting her head to look him straight in the eye, and she waits, and they simply look at each other. She supposes he will disrobe her, but the half-smile upon his face, the dark glint in his eyes, tells her he has something more substantial planned. Her eyes follow his form ravenously as he moves, and her brows draw together in confusion as he steps to her side, and then around, behind her. He stops at her back, close enough for her to feel the warmth he radiates, close enough for her to feel his eyes drinking in the curve of her neck, for her to feel his breath ghosting at her ear, but far enough away that they are not touching, and she bites her bottom lip, catching it for a moment between her teeth.

He takes his time before he speaks, and Sansa wants to squirm, but she does not; some intuition telling her to stay still. Her breath is coming quickly; her skin prickles; every fibre of her being tuned to him, to her husband, to the man she loves. “I think I first desired you when I saw you ride out from Winterfell to meet my armies and I upon that moor. You were so proud, and then I discovered you were witty and brave and honourable and admirable and clever, and though I might not have understood it then; I was yours from that moment on.” His voice is husky, with affection, with heat, and this time she cannot dissemble her reaction.

“Jaime,” she whimpers.

He steps closer, his body now barely touching hers; his toes grazing her heels, his chest brushing her back, and she trembles. “And then I discovered you were kind, too,” he continues tenderly, brushing her long russet hair over one shoulder to expose her neck with his left hand, fingers lightly caressing the top of her spine, and her breathing stutters, and her heart rate kicks up again. This time, she does squirm; feeling restless.
Her husband steps closer to her; the inside of his clothed thighs touching the outside of hers, and she would have stumbled forwards had he not slipped his right arm around her waist, holding her to him. The cool metal of his golden hand anchors her, the hard, smooth surface soothing on her heated skin, the front of her robe having fallen open with his movement. “My lady, my love, my wife,” he murmurs in her ear, and she shivers violently as he begins to press teasing kisses to her neck, following a path down to where her back and shoulders are covered by the red and white silk-

A gasp tears itself from her lungs as he rids her slowly, languidly, teasingly, of her robe, his latest gift to her, not with his hands but with his teeth. He pulls the material off her shoulders so it bunches at her waist, and her head falls back against his shoulder, and he speaks again, in a voice as dark and rich as velvet. “Do you know, lovely one, how completely you have conquered me? I never thought I would feel again and all you have to do is turn your gaze upon me, and I - ” he swallows harshly, and her heart melts. “You inspire me to be a better man, Sansa. One smile from you, one laugh, and I fall at your feet. I love you, I love you to adoration, sweet wife.”

Her hand tightens around his right arm, and she - this man. Every sense of hers seems heightened; the cool evening air upon her breasts, the silk sliding at her waist, his clothed legs around hers, and, she blushes, his substantial erection pressing at the curve of her buttocks, and she can suddenly bear this no longer. She turns fluidly in his embrace, revelling in the feel of his chest brushing against her breasts, and reaches out her arms to pull his lips down to hers, fingers tangling in his golden hair. His right arm sweeps down her spine to rest on her tailbone, and she moans into the kiss, even as his left comes to stroke her cheekbone, her jawline, and twist into her hair. He reciprocates, fiercely, enthusiastically, growling into her mouth in such a manner that leaves no doubt whatsoever to his thoughts. He kisses her so deeply it is practically obscene, and she loses herself once more to the pleasures of his affection. He draws out the caress almost to the point of agony; when he at last breaks the kiss she does not understand how she is still standing. They look at each other, their breathing harsh (she can feel the thunder of his heart against her skin, and it is a blissful thing). His hair is ruffled, and she smiles at the picture he makes.

“How are you feeling?” he asks quietly, leaning his forehead against hers. “Not too overwhelmed?”

“No,” she breathes, eyes shining, and she sighs, enjoying the heat of his embrace - he has long since pulled her flush against him, and she does not see how they could be more closely entwined. “I’ve never before felt the way I do at this moment. I thought I would be more nervous, but I am not.”

“I’m glad,” he replies, and the relief in his tone makes her look at him.

“What happens now? Do I - ” she gestures towards his breeches, and he grins briefly, shaking his head lightly.
“Not yet.” He pauses to press a fluttering kiss to her temple. “Do you remember what I said to you this afternoon?” She is slightly nonplussed by the change in subject and she shakes her head, bewildered. He smirks rakishly, and leans closer to her to whisper, “You are the finest morsel of them all.”

Even as she struggles to take his meaning, her mind whirling, he leads her onto the bed, and they settle on the furs, facing each other, and he runs a reverent hand down her arm. “You are so beautiful as to make my heart ache, lovely one,” he murmurs, and she blushes violently, and he looks delighted. “I have always wondered how far your blushes spread,” he continues, darting her a mischievous glance, “and now I have my answer.” His left thumb traces exquisitely light caresses into the downy swell of her breast, and she whimpers, pressing her thighs together. She stares languidly at him, drowning in the dark green of his eyes. “I said every inch of you deserved to know the worship of my lips, and I intend to keep my word.”

She only has a moment to gasp in quivering delight before he has manoeuvred her gently upon her back. He holds himself above her, resting his weight upon his elbows so he does not crush her, though she thinks she would quite like the sensation of his weight bearing down upon her; and she only is able to catch the merest glimpse of the wicked glint in his expression before she feels the wondrous sensation of his mouth on her. His lips are warm and soft and firm in turn as they lave the spot beneath her ear, trace down to her clavicle, between her breastbone. Her hands twist in the furs; the feel of his expressive lips on the underside of her breasts rattles the breath in her throat; it catches on her tongue, and he melts her from winter to life. He moves to suckle her nipples, working them to hard little points, and she moans and whimpers. From then on, it seems his aim is to drive her mad; and he succeeds. She loses track of time; loses any sense of where she is; there is only him and his wicked, teasing mouth, nipping and suckling and licking, plucking her expertly. She is his instrument to play. He kisses down the flat of her belly, and then, in a move that makes her feverish and dizzy, her mind spinning with desire, runs his hands, both flesh and metal, slowly, torturously, up her lithe legs, and she writhes, gasping with pleasure and a frustration that only increases when his lips follow his hands.

“Jaime!” she gasps throatily, as his left hand lightly strokes the very inside of her right thigh, and her entire being spins helplessly, her heart and belly lurching, a desperate ache tightening in her core, her chest, as his golden hand gently, tenderly brushes between her legs. He grins at her, dropping a tender kiss to the insides of her thighs, and as she stares down in dizzy amazement, her blood thrumming with desire, at golden head between her thighs, she suddenly understands what her husband meant by dessert. “Even there?” she stutters breathlessly, and the intensity of the expression he returns makes her groan and whimper; she is the willing prisoner of his smouldering gaze.

“I did promise to kiss you everywhere,” he replies, his gravelly voice making her tremble, a low, wicked heat curling in her belly. “But you can always say no,” he reiterates seriously, and her entire being floods with tenderness for him.
“You are the most generous man I know,” she whispers. “But I trust you; wholeheartedly. You can do with me as you will.”

“I’ll always ask.”

“And I love you for it,” she smiles, carding her hand through his ruffled hair, and she doesn’t understand why his eyes darken until he suggests, in a voice wry with amusement, expression fiercely intent, that she finds something to hold on to. “But your hair?” she chokes out.

She almost chokes again at his reply. “Oh, I quite agree. There are few things I find more enticing than your dainty hands tangling, clutching at my hair.”

And then he presses his lips to her, and she is beyond coherence, beyond rationality, in the grips of a pleasure so sharp, so overwhelming she can do nothing but let wave after delicious, agonising wave wash over her. She hears his fierce, growling voice clearly even through the buzzing in her ears. So sweet, so wet, so lovely. The rumble of his words sends another jolt of pleasure lancing through her, and he opens her, disarms her entirely, with his voice, his mouth that laps and suckles and drinks from her. When he pushes his tongue into her she almost comes off the bed, her hips bucking wildly into his face, and she cries out with every wicked stroke of his tongue. So lovely. His teeth catch on the stiff little nub hidden in her folds, and she can only gasp out his name. Her eyes roll back into her head, and she is almost delirious, reaching, gasping, wanting -

“Jaime, Jaime, Jaime,” she rambles. “Please, please, please… oh, I love you, I - oh, Jaime -

She is entirely, utterly undone by him; she is floating in Winterfell’s hot springs, her hair streaming about her face, and she feels warm, so incredibly warm… and there is a voice calling gently, tenderly to her. She twists around; she knows that voice; deep and affectionate and heated - Jaime -

She blinks, still disorientated, and finds herself cradled in his embrace. Her head rests against his chest, one bare leg is slung over his hip, her hand sliding over his heart and his metal hand is at the base of her spine; (cool and sharp it melts the ice from her veins with a languid fire - she has never felt more alive) and his left hand is carding gently through her hair. She moans, mewls with drowsy pleasure, looking up at him with heavy, lidded eyes.

The tenderness, the fierce delight in his countenance makes the realisation of what she has just experienced crash through her, and she trembles, eyes pricking with tears. “I love you,” she chokes out. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”
He looks at her, understanding mingling with concern. “Oh, Sansa,” he sighs.

She presses a heartfelt, shuddering kiss to his heart. “Thank you, Jaime. I never -” she breaks off; suddenly unable to stop the choking sobs. “I never knew - the gift you’ve given me - I never realised - and I - ”

His grip tightens around her. “If those foul beasts who tortured you were not already dead I would run them through myself.” He tangles his hand in her hair to bring her face to his, continuing solemnly. “You have my word; with me you shall experience only pleasure, lovely one. You are perfection.”

Chapter End Notes

thoughts?
Chapter Summary

“My sweet, sweet wife,” he replies. “This is new to me,” he continues quietly.

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone; apologies for the wait - the last two weeks have been massively hectic, and added to the fact that I found this chapter rather on the challenging side. Well, I can't wait to see what you guys think; the last act of this has well and truly been set in motion now.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART THIRTEEN

JAIME LANNISTER

He leans against the headboard, his wife draped over him, his right arm low around her hips, his left hand gliding through the strands of her hair, and he sighs. She is silent, tracing idly over his heart, and his pulse jumps. To have her like this, safely ensconced in his arms, when she is languid and sated, is something he does not entirely know how to describe. He swallows, blinking back
tears, because he wants her to see herself as he sees her; not as her torturers saw her.

With the heady taste of her lingering like fine wine upon his tongue, he speaks softly, words tumbling out. “You are perfection; and that was but a taste of the pleasure you deserve. You are the furthest thing from frigid; your courage and your generosity are without compare. The fault lies not with you, but with the incompetence and cruelty of those other men.”

She lays another kiss to his heart, and her voice is thick with emotion. “My father once said to me that he would betroth me to a man who was strong and kind and gentle. You are all of those things, Jaime.” Shock floods him; and he wishes desperately to be worthy of her. He opens and closes his mouth in consternation, grasping for the words to express himself. He does not know how he feels; ever since Ned Stark had disdained him for killing Aerys the Mad, he has had no compunctions about saying how much he hated and resented the man. He does, realise, however, that Sansa is giving him the greatest compliment she possibly can.

She notices, of course she does, and she reaches up to caress his jaw, and he shudders into her touch. This is followed by her nose gently nudging into his touch, his affection. The sheer abandon she shows is something he is delighted and humbled by. He always had confidence that as her own confidence grew, she would respond with the guileless, ardent enthusiasm he finds so compelling, so alluring. She shivers as his golden hand sweeps down her spine to pull her into his lap, as his good hand lifts her hand to his lips. He enjoys being gallant with her; he enjoys the pretty blush it brings to her skin. He also enjoys the intimacy of the gesture, the way they can convey so much to each other through it.

He replaces her hand over his heart and looks at her through dark, hooded eyes. “Will you kiss me?” he drawls, and her whole body shivers at the gravel of his voice. He feels the way her thighs flex over his, sees her blue eyes glitter and darken, her lips part on a blissful exhale, and the jolt of desire he feels makes his head spin, his own pulse thunder and stutter in his chest, and he knows she can feel it, because that radiant, mysterious smile that has been felling him for weeks spreads across her face.

And then her lips cover his. She jolts as she tastes herself on his mouth, but then she mewls and presses herself even closer to him and is suddenly both tender and ferocious; she is utterly absolute. She is claiming him, he realises, and she realises it too as she slides her other hand into his hair, and he groans. She pulls away, but instead of a tight expression of nervousness on her countenance he sees a certainty, a serenity that binds him even more tightly to her.

“You like it when I tangle my fingers in your hair,” she breathes, punctuating her words with the corresponding actions, and he groans.
“I do.” The words fall from his lips like a vow.

“You like it when I rake my nails lightly across your scalp,” she continues wickedly, and he hisses through a clenched jaw.

“I do.”

“You like it when I am in your lap.” She is teasing him now; holding herself just far away enough from him that he cannot claim her mouth as she speaks.

“I do,” he growls, pulling her in for a searing kiss. He is more forceful than he has ever been, but she simply melts into him, and the press of her breasts against his bare chest, her core on his, her thighs sliding against his covered legs, the mewls and sighs she makes, the softness of her lips opening her mouth for his tongue, everything about her inflames him. Where before he’d seduced her with his voice and his touch, now he does so with everything in him. Though he might be absolute, he is unhurried, for he is not certain there is a greater pleasure than this, and it is his desire to prolong it for as long as he can. He has never before let his hands roam when he kissed her; he does so now, and relishes her pleased, breathless moans as he slides his left hand down the curve of her back to clutch at her bottom, pulling her more tightly against him. He cups her face with his golden hand, trails it down her arm, her lithe leg, and she squirms delightfully against him.

Her hands are not idle either, and she quickly finds the surest way to drive him insane with her touches; at times light as a butterfly’s wing on his jaw, firmer, admiring, even, as she traces the contours of the muscles of his shoulders, his arms, his back. With every caress he deepens the kiss in response, until they are both entirely out of their minds, and his breeches are the most uncomfortable they have ever been.

His wife breaks the kiss, flushed with delight, her hair disheveled, lips swollen and red, sapphire eyes dark, and she is an enchanting picture, and then she laughs joyfully and kisses him again, because she wants to, and his heart swells.

“Husband mine,” she repeats, marvelling, and he laughs in return, deeply, and it is a wondrous thing, to him, for his bed to be a place of happiness.

“My sweet, sweet wife,” he replies. “This is new to me,” he continues quietly.

“What is?” her voice is soft.

He feels her sigh as she settles against him, tucking her head into his neck, and placing slow, gentle kisses against his jaw. “How you have suffered… will you let me take care of you, Jaime? I want to chase the shadows away from your eyes. I want to make you laugh. I want to make you happy. I want to bring you pleasure. May I? May I, Jaime?”

He swallows unsteadily. “I am yours, Sansa. Wholly, irrevocably, utterly, whatever our endeavours,” he replies earnestly, a bit dazed, his voice husky. The notion of being taken care of makes his heart ache. She is the only one who has ever offered; and for that reason alone she is the only one he will ever allow. “You are the only one who has ever asked,” he adds quietly, and he is surprised to find himself crying, silently.

“Oh, Jaime,” she sighs, tracing his heart, and he doesn’t believe he will ever become accustomed to her unselfish kindness. “Hush, my love. I will make things right.”

“I believe you capable of anything you wish,” he marvels, and the blush across her cheeks settles something warm and gentle in his chest.

“Lie back, Jaime,” she continues tenderly, smoothing his jaw, wiping away the tears from his skin, and he obeys her, unable to help the way his eyes fall and then linger upon her russet hair, glimmering in the firelight that paints her in Lannister shades of gold and flame, upon the soft swells of her breasts, her slim waist and the flare of her hips… his wife truly is a beautiful creature, fierce and ethereal.

“I am a very lucky man, Sansa, to have you,” he murmurs huskily. “Far luckier than I believe I deserve; but you inspire me to be a better man. You make me believe I am capable of being a better man.” He’s said this before; but he cannot stop himself from repeating it. She is his last chance for honour; but more than that - she is the last person who believes in his honour.

“Flatterer,” she replies, ducking her head.

“Truth,” he insists, stubbornly.

“I’ll add disarmingly sincere to my list, then, shall I?” she grins cheekily, and his chuckle turns
into a hoarse groan as she places sweet, slow kisses down his throat, lingering on the particularly sensitive spot on the back of his neck, and he feels the way she smiles in delight at this discovery, and he knows that his clever, lovely wife is cataloguing him, mapping his body, making mental notes.

“Are you ever going to tell me the entirety of it?” he asks hoarsely as she traces the silvery scars on his upper arms with her tongue, shifting as her long hair tickles his stomach.

“No,” she retorts playfully, and the mischievous light in her blue eyes makes his stomach twist quite viscerally. She sees his reaction, of course, and places a hand upon the quivering planes of his abdomen, and he inhales sharply, her name falling from his lips in a plea. Her gaze snaps to his, incredulous. “I never imagined - imagined that a man could be so responsive to me,” she stutters shyly. “Do you truly want me so much?”

“I want you with everything I have; with everything I am,” he rasps, and her eyes go impossibly wide. “Have I shocked you?” He asks after a moment, but she only shakes her head.

“It is only that I find it difficult to articulate how deeply I feel about you, what one look, one word, one caress from you can do,” she replies, a touch shyly. “I don’t know what to do now,” she continues, trembling, voice tight with uncertainty, ducking her head, and he struggles to understand the intensity of what he feels. “I’m sorry, I -

He is suddenly far too aware that he is clenching his jaw so tightly the muscle aches, that her expressive eyes are burning away his flesh to sear him to the bone. He knows that he has to guide her, but he doesn’t want to pressure her either; it is a very fine line to tread, and his previous confidence is shaken. He desperately wants to be the man she considers him to be, and is frightened of what might happen should he not.

He frowns, considering, lifting his left hand to slide his fingers through her hair in a soothing, repetitive motion, and he feels more than sees her trembling fingers still on his chest as some of the tension in her body fades. He sighs, crafting the words carefully in his head. He wants to get this right; he needs to get this right - he does not know how he could ever bear it if he did not. “Never apologise, not for that, sweet wife. For all the posturing to the contrary, Sansa, men are not born knowing how to bed a woman,” he begins softly, and she looks at him, confusion replacing her fear (and oh, the notion that she is afraid rips something in his chest). “Being inexperienced is not something to be ashamed of, Sansa.”

Her lips quivering, her eyes flutter as she inhales. “How - I -
He draws her more closely to him, sitting up against the headboard, tightening his embrace, and she settles her head in the crook of his neck, placing a soft, gentle kiss against his throat, and he swallows, continuing his languid smoothing of her hair, drifting his hand down her arm to lift her palm to his mouth. “We have time, Sansa,” he reassures her.

“I know, but I want to please you. I want to give you the same joy you gave me, but I don’t know how and I -

He shakes his head. “It isn’t about reciprocating, Sansa. Just because I do something it doesn’t mean you have to do anything. I didn’t kiss you with the expectation of gaining anything in return. It was enjoyable in and of itself for both of us, and that is why I did it.” He draws a finger down her jaw, lingering on her bottom lip, catching it on the pad of his thumb, and her sweet breath over his skin makes him shiver. He swallows thickly at the soft look in her eyes; no-one has ever looked at him as she does, of that he is certain.

“But will you teach me, Jaime?” she asks.

“Do you want me to?” he replies quietly.

“I do.”

“Then I will,” he answers gently, and his heart soars at the shy smile he receives in return. “But for now, I think indulging in this is pleasure enough…” he continues rakishly, arranging her on his lap, and she lifts her face to his so her pretty mouth is achingly close to his, blushing, and once again, she takes the breath from him. It’s only fair, he supposes wryly, as he touches his nose to hers in question, a question she answers with eager, breathy acquiescence, that he should take the breath from her in return. Her thighs are warm and fluid against his, and his mind cannot do anything but supply musings of how her soft skin would feel against his, her legs tangled with his. His golden hand gently cups the back of her neck, and he feels dizzy as he sees the shining gold of the metal tangled with the dark russet of her hair; it does something to him he is not entirely certain how to name; and he still cannot truly believe this woman is his lawful wife. The fingers of his right hand drift from cupping the exquisite weight of her breast to skimming her ribcage to settling on the softness of her bottom, pulling her more closely to him.

She mewls as she shifts against him, and the sensation of her breasts against his chest makes his head spin, and he deepens the kiss. He cannot get enough of her, of her taste, sweet and light; of her lips, soft and yielding and playful; of her tongue, yet shy but gaining in confidence; of the sounds she makes - pleased sighs, mews and whimpers when he is particularly bold, particularly tender; of her heat and her passion; but most of all he finds himself addicted to her affection, genuine and ardent and without guile. Her hands do not wander, but the way she twists her fingers into his hair, twining her arms around his neck so she is as close to him as is physically possible,
anchors him, he finds.

She is his anchor in this strange twist of fate whereby he has found himself a king, his own man ruling his own ancestral lands instead of a glorified bodyguard to multiple mad monarchs. Having this freedom; wielding the power himself is something he still finds strange and he does not think he will ever become used to it. When he sinks into grief (Myrcella-Tommen-Mother-Cersei-Father - his heart beats a tattoo of their names like a drum), it only takes a smile, a touch, a laugh from his lovely wife, and the cloud lifts, the chains dragging his heart ease, and he can think clearly once again.

I do not know what I would be without you, he thinks vaguely, revelling in the languid, tender affection of his wife, and he sighs blissfully as her fingers caress the back of his neck, a rumbling growl reverberating through his chest as she presses herself more closely to him; her lips a siren call to which he gladly hearkens and drowns himself in.

Suddenly, strident, insistent calls of his title, half-muffled by the wooden door, break the haze under which Jaime finds himself, and he breaks away from his wife, blinking in disorientation, and then fighting the overwhelming annoyance and frustration that sears his veins when the urgent knocks continue. Will they always be interrupted? Sansa looks just as bewildered as he does, but comprehension lights up her eyes quickly enough, and she shoots him a tiny, rueful smile. His stomach tightens; the sight of her makes him want to gather her to him again so he can avail himself of the feast that his the taste of her mouth, the haven that is her embrace, the dizzying pleasure that is the touch of her skin on his.

Gritting his teeth, swallowing curses back down his throat, he wrenches himself away from his lovely wife, and bends to pick up and don his robe, belting it hurriedly at his waist, before stalking to the door and wrenching it open, glaring furiously at Ser Addam.

“What is it?” he snarls. “I gave explicit orders not to be disturbed.”

“Ravens from the South, Sire,” Ser Addam replies. Jaime’s old friend shifts, his face grave, and Jaime’s annoyance abruptly melts from him. Jaime knows Addam would not have intruded unless there was no other choice. “They’re ciphered, Sire,” his aide adds when Jaime raises an eyebrow.

Jaime stills, his stomach knotting to lead and his tongue becoming thick and ungainly in his mouth. If these missives are ciphered, they can only be from one person - Tyrion. “Thank you, Addam,” he says evenly, closing his fingers around the parchment the other man extends him.

Behind him, Sansa has thrown on his shirt and her robe, and as he turns to her he swallows
unsteadily at the glorious sight she makes, even as she wraps her arms around his waist, leaning into his frame.

“Ser Addam,” she says softly, acknowledging his bow. “If you could give my husband and I a moment?”

“Of course, your Majesty.”

Ser Addam shuts the door, and Jaime and Sansa are once again alone in his bedchamber, though for a far different purpose now. Jaime turns his attention to the small piece of parchment rolled between his fingers, and, childishly, he finds he does not wish to know what it says. The memory of the last personal raven he received is still burned into his memory, and he is afraid, though he might not speak the words.

A gentle hand comes to rest on his forearm, and he shudders. “It won’t read itself, husband mine,” she says.

“I know,” he nods.

“From Tyrion?”

“Yes.” His speech is clipped, though with what emotions he does not exactly know. “Two other people in the world know this cipher; one of whom is dead. Cersei and I invented it when we were little; Tyrion learned it by listening to us. It can only be him, and I dread to think -

His wife places a gentle hand between his shoulders and guides him gently to sit on the bed; he does not resist; he feels nauseous to the bone; his mind reeling, whirling, jumping from one dreadful scenario to another, each more horrid and dramatic than the last. Her small hand covers his, and plucks the scroll from his slackened grip, breaks the seal, and hands it to him.

As he begins to read aloud; he soon finds his trepidation justified.

Jaime -
Our mighty dragon queen intends to turn her attention to the Rock. Although she has been delayed thus far by negotiations with the Golden Company, she will succeed eventually. Nevertheless, I believe your interests would be best served through your capitulation, as does Lord Varys. Nor will you receive a second chance; a better offer - the monarch I serve is not known for her mercy but her impulsive nature, as ever. All things considered, it is my hope in writing this that you will bend the knee and enter once more into negotiations. For your own sake, Jaime, and that of your people, I hope you will heed my words, or the consequences will be grave. Or you can of course ignore me, but I have never considered you an idiot, and in front of death, as you know, all men are equal. Remain estranged from me; that matters not - what does is your life, dear brother.

Tyrion

“Could it be a trap?” Sansa asks, but Jaime is already shaking his head.

“No; he’s used the triple cipher,” Jaime explains wearily. He really doesn’t want to be thinking about this, to be turning over the possibilities of his brother using his family against him once more. “The first letters of every sentence, if you include the salutation, spell the first: J O A N N A. It was my sister’s idea; in memory of the only person she loved unconditionally. The second; if you use the first letter of the last word of each sentence, you spell the second: R E V E N G E. And the third takes the first letters of the first word of the remaining sentences: F O R. Tyrion’s addition, about ten years ago. Cersei hated it; never used the third. She preferred not to remember that Tyrion was able to unravel the cipher for the language we used in order to speak to one another simply by listening to us.” In light of Jaime’s last discussion with his younger brother about their parents, he’s inclined to believe this intelligence is genuine.

“Trap or not; we should summon our conclave.” He turns to look incredulously at his wife, who shrugs elegantly in response, and he cannot take his eyes from the determined glint in her eyes. “I am not the Dragon Queen; I do not leave my allies to rot. We will defend Casterly Rock and the West together.”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts?
SANSA STARK VII

Chapter Summary

“The textbook place for an ambush,” Sansa breathes.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, sorry about the delay on this next chapter. It is a nice long instalment, and I hope you all enjoy it. Thanks as always for all comments and encouragement; it really does help!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART FOURTEEN

SANSA STARK

Twenty minutes later, they are all standing around the large map table in her solar, and Sansa has difficulty concentrating upon the cartography she is meant to be looking at. Her thoughts are instead with the man at her side, her husband, who even now as he frowns in thought has pressed his left leg against hers, and she shivers. She does not need to glance at him to know that his own musings are similarly scattered. She had never imagined such pleasure in bed was possible; and that somehow - she cannot fathom how - there is still more to come.
After the two of them had read the missive from Tyrion, Jaime had called Ser Addam again and asked him to summon the full conclave. At the same time, Sansa had realised she could not possibly attend the conclave clad only in her husband’s shirt and her robe. When she’d mentioned this to Jaime, he’d only gathered her to him, and drawled his amused, heated admiration in her ear, and she swallows at the memory. She’d yelped in shock as he’d then lifted her into his arms and carried her back to her own bedchamber to dress, but of course this had taken far longer than she’d anticipated, what with Jaime trying to help her. She isn’t entirely certain his trailing of a fingertip down her spine, or his lips on the back of her neck or his arms around her waist can really be termed helping, but his playfulness had been glorious to behold; something to revel in. They have both had a difficult beginning to their respective reigns; and she would never dream of taking away what moments of levity they can find.

Those small, precious moments of intimacy, of laughter and light are worth fighting for, Sansa knows. But it is more than that; they make all the politicking that they must both perforce engage in worth it.

“Did the missive state when, precisely, we might expect the Targaryen attack on the Rock, Sire?” Lord Lydden, one of Jaime’s principal bannermen and Lord of Deep Den, asks. Sansa has noticed that, whether out of deference to Jaime or herself, their lords refrain from addressing Tyrion and the Dragon Queen and Jon by the more derogatory titles she knows they use amongst themselves.

“No,” Jaime replies heavily. “But Ser Devan has the Lannisport garrison already preparing the Rock for a siege, and the sewer entrance has been definitively sealed. Once the Lion’s Mouth shuts there will be no way in to the castle.”

“Then it is simply a question of getting there before they do,” Lord Manderly opines.

“Indeed,” Jaime nods shortly. “Ideally, we would split the cavalry and the infantry. We take the cavalry down the Kingsroad.”

“A forced march would be the only way,” Ser Addam says, and Sansa sees the lords nodding along. “You could do it in a week, possibly less, and you’d be certain of being first. It would be hard, very hard going. But it would be doable.”

Lady Lyanna shakes her head. “She only has to cross the Reach and she’s at your doorstep, practically.”
“The Reach is in chaos,” Sansa replies. “There is no food in King’s Landing; where is she going to requisition it from? There’s nothing left in the Reach. She might be able to get some supplies from the Crownlands. She’d have to raid the Stormlands too. That will buy us some time. But there is something else.” She turns to her little sister. “Arya, how big is Nymeria’s pack, exactly?”

A fierce, cold smile appears on the younger Stark’s lips. “Big enough.”

“Big enough to stampede a Dothraki herd? Big enough to slow them down?” Sansa continues, and she begins to see the understanding on everyone’s faces. “Lord Manderly,” she turns, “how many ships are there currently at Flint’s Fingers?”

“A substantial amount of the northern fleet, Your Majesty.”

“Enough to transport an infantry host to the Rock?” Jaime asks, having caught on to her plan.

“Yes, Sire.”

“The only problem with sailing is the Ironborn. Do we know what the hell is going on over there?” Another Lannister bannerman, Lord Prester of Feastfires, motions to the map.

“No-one has seen hide nor hair of Euron Greyjoy for weeks.” Jaime grits his teeth.

“The Ironborn fleet is scattered to the winds; we’ve dealt with the likes of Euron Greyjoy for decades. Should we be attacked, we can hold our own, Your Majesty, Sire,” Lord Manderly finishes.

“Good; then we’ve decided how to move our troops,” Sansa nods, pleased. “There is, of course, the notion that this could be a trap, a diversion. Whilst we all go West, they come North.”

She sees Jaime’s stricken face at the thought and her heart aches for him. She slips her hand into his left one and squeezes it tightly. He reciprocates, but she feels his fingers tremble in hers. Oh, Jaime, she thinks. “With Moat Cailin and the Twins manned, they will never get past the Neck. The Neck is mist and marsh, and eerie lights lure travellers into the muck whence they sink and drown. The crannogmen, aside from being the most skilled sharpshooters, manning the scorpions in every Northron hold, use ranged weapons of every kind. There is one, almost invisible, that enables the wielder, with a single prick, so light it is almost a caress, to poison the enemy, to send
him to sleep, to provoke hallucinations... the crannogmen alone know the safe paths through the marsh; and not even a dragon can see through a perpetual mist. But Daenerys in her arrogance, in her supposed invincibility, will try. She’ll send a battalion north; and if they get past the Vale and the Riverlands, which I doubt, given Nymeria’s pursuit, they will drown and die in the marsh.”

“And if she gives command of that battalion to her consort?” Ser Addam queries.

“It would not change the outcome; you see - he doesn’t know the paths. Even I do not. Only the crannogmen do.” Sansa shakes her head, and in the somewhat shocked silence that follows, she lets the conclave digest her words before continuing. “And as for White Harbor...” She trails a gentle hand over the map as she speaks. “Daenerys is arrogant but she is not stupid; she won’t risk the march from White Harbor to Winterfell again, not in winter. As for the threat of the dragons, every keep in the North, the Vale, the Riverlands and the West is now equipped with a good number of scorpions, and has the men to man them.”

“How do we believe she’s going to move her troops?” young Ned Umber frowns.

She watches Jaime heave out a sigh. “She won’t take her cavalry by sea; too risky. Her Dothraki are manoeuvrable and fast, and she’ll take advantage of the fact that they will likely pillage their way to us, instilling fear. They’ll go down the Goldroad. And Tyrion will lead her there,” he spits, though Sansa can hear the bleeding wound in his words. “I’d wager she’ll move her infantry by ship; she’s done it before.”

“So we’d be looking at a landward and seaward siege.” Ser Addam sighs.

“Yes,” Jaime replies grimly. “But she has to get her Dothraki through the mountains first. We might well be able to cut her cavalry off past Deep Den; the pass is narrow there; the column will be stretched out; thin, no more than four riders abreast, on a winding road, with a cliff falling away below and mountains too steep to retreat into above.”

“The textbook place for an ambush,” Sansa breathes.

“Indeed. We cut the back half of her cavalry off,” Ser Addam suggests, moving the wooden models around the map so the whole conclave understands. “Doing so, she can’t turn back; she has no choice but to press on. And the Deep Den garrison pick off the remainder - they’ll drop like flies. She thinks she’s in charge; but we’re actually the ones manipulating her to exactly where we want her. We force her to come to us, to the Rock. We pick the battlefield.” And now Sansa knows why Ser Addam was so highly considered as a general by Tywin Lannister, and a grin twitches at her lips.
“How well equipped is the Rock to withstand a siege? Jaime, you said you’d emptied the larders before you left,” she questions. She does not expect her husband to smirk widely in reply.

“So I did,” he replies easily. “I never said anything about the Lannisport larders though, did I?” She laughs at that, bringing his hand to her lips, and when she looks up at him through her lashes his green eyes are suddenly dark, and her breath hitches. “We need not worry on that account; the Rock’s larders have been well restocked in the past weeks.” His voice wrenches her mind back to the conclave, and away from their private lives.

“Good,” Sansa nods, and looks back at the map, considering carefully. Her gaze falls upon King’s Landing, and fragments of thoughts, ideas, memories, all tumble through her mind until, somehow, they have some form of coherence, and she inhales sharply. “King’s Landing,” she says, tapping her finger. “King’s Landing has no food; and what food Daenerys will requisition will go to her soldiers; will go to foreign invaders.” She looks up at Jaime, her jaw shifting. “And what do the people of King’s Landing do when they have no food?”

A broad smile spreads over the King of the West’s face. “They riot,” he breathes.

“Exactly,” she agrees. “We can turn that to our advantage, so that not only do they riot against her; but they cheer for us.” She forces herself not to flinch away from her memories of the single riot she has had the misfortune to experience, and though she feels a sliver of pride in doing so, she hates that there is this part of her that is now so cold, so calculating.

In the stunned silence, Jaime motions for her to continue. She keeps her gaze locked on his as she explains. “Every spymaster cultivates a different sort of spy, depending on their inclinations,” she begins, and the glint in his eyes tells her he’s discerned where she is going with this, and that he is proud of her reasoning. The thought lights something brilliant in her chest, curls something heatedly low in her core, and she inhales shakily, trying to keep her focus on strategy and not on the memory of the perfection of her husband’s sculpted torso. “Lord Varys trained street urchins. Baelish had his whores. You have your merchants, Lord Manderly, and I have my singers.”

She can’t help the smile curving her lips as she continues. “My bards are all over Westeros; including in King’s Landing. It would be the work of a moment to direct them to the city taverns and instruct them to play a new composition… perhaps something telling the tale of how the King of the West slew the mad Dragon King all those years ago, how he rode North to fight the war against the Dead, how he single-handedly slew the Night King, and brought the weapon that took down a dragon, and how he now protects his people and his allies against the Dragon Queen.” She has the distinct pleasure of seeing Jaime Lannister gape and blush, his breathing uneven in shock, his brow furrowed in consternation as he attempts to understand what she is saying and she smiles gently at him; but she is not yet finished.
“And how, in her admiration of his deeds, in her love for him, his wife the Queen in the North named him Goldenhand the Just, for he is the finest man she knows.” His eyes go bright at her words, and she realises she has moved him to tears. His genuine bewilderment, his complete and utter astonishment makes her heart ache, fiercely, and she wishes with everything she is that she might have the power to take his deep, buried hurts from him.

They’d spoken a few days before of how he lost his sword hand, and the horrors of his treatment at her brother’s hand. He’d confessed, shyly, with no little embarrassment, how he’d dreamed of honour; the promise he’d made to her mother. She sees the conclave stir at her words, but she simply looks at her husband. She is proud to be his wife, his ally, his friend, his lover; and she will declare it aloud, a hundred times, a thousand times, if that is what it takes. Let there be talk; let lords and smallfolk alike wonder. She does not care. She is proud and deliriously happy with her position as the Kingslayer’s wife; and she will not let anyone take that from her.

She watches him inhale shakily with a heart more full of tenderness, of love, than it ever has been. She wants to comfort him, to card a hand through his golden hair, to drift a warm palm down his temple, across his cheekbone. Had they been alone, she would have already moved.

He has no such compunctions. He grasps her hands and presses long, ardent kisses to her knuckles, his left thumb sliding wickedly across her palms to brush the insides of her wrists and she trembles violently at the gesture, abruptly feeling quite lightheaded.

When he speaks, his voice is deep and gravelly with emotion. “Only if the song also includes the tale of how the beautiful, kind, clever Queen in the North worked tirelessly to feed her people in winter, giving them the strength to defeat the Others, how she rides to the aid of her allies instead of abandoning them to their fates, and how honoured the King of the West is to have her love, and how he laid his heart at her feet the moment they met upon Winterfell’s moor.” She cannot look away from him; the intent look in his eyes, fierce and tender and entirely too eloquent makes her dizzy, breathless, and her entire being trembles violently with emotion and desire, for him, her husband, her lover, her king.

They are alone in her solar; the conclave dismissed now that their plans have been finalised. They ride at dawn; Sansa is leaving Arya as the Stark in Winterfell, Lyanna Mormont and Ned Umber as advisors, and a garrison of a thousand to defend the North - a mixture of Wildlings, cavalry and infantry.
He is tense, staring down at the map on the table with a clenched jaw, his shoulders, his entire posture tight. She places a gentle hand between his shoulder blades, and she feels him shudder out an unsteady breath at her caress. “Oh, my love,” she sighs. It is not the thought of having to fight for his ancestral seat that wounds him in such a visceral way, she knows.

“Ever since I was old enough to understand,” he begins quietly, “though still a child myself - ever since I was old enough to understand that I was different to the rest of my family, that I was like my mother, I have wondered. Why me? Why am I cursed with this wretched heart that feels too much? Why am I cursed to love my mother and my father and Cersei and Tyrion? Why was I capable of loving both of my siblings when they not only hated each other, but actively tried to turn me against the other? I’ve never understood it. How could personal ambition matter more than family?” He laughs, hollowly, bitterly. “And now, even now, when my little brother sends me a missive wherein it is clear that he is attempting to play both sides to his own personal advantage, when he leads an army of savages, rapists and foreigners who know nothing of these lands to conquer my ancestral seat in the name of a Targaryen, still I cannot hate him!” He turns to her, furious anguish twisting his features into incomprehension, betrayal and despair, and she goes to him, wrapping herself around him, laying her head on his chest, sighing as his arms come around her waist.

“What is wrong with me?” He continues, voice thick with tears. “He killed our father, in cold blood, on the privy, he leads an army against me, against us, he does not care what happens to me - I think he’s adequately proved that now - so long as he gets the Rock - and the only think I can think is that he is my little brother whom I taught to ride, whom I always tried to protect and champion to the best of my ability, and I - oh, Sansa, my sweet, lovely wife - I cannot endure this.”

She can only murmur his name again and again, and in that moment, despite what kindness Tyrion showed her in King’s Landing, she hates him for what he has done to Jaime, and she tightens her embrace, feeling him sink helplessly into her touch, and she turns her head to place chaste, gentle kisses to his chest, the wool of his cloak feeling slightly strange under her lips, but she ignores the sensation. She continues until she feels some of the tension bleed from his frame, until the pattern of his breathing is more regular, and only then does she break the silence, her voice soft, though her words are themselves bitter and acrid, heavy with loathing and self-recrimination.

“I hate playing the Game, Jaime,” she says, and his grip on her tightens and she revels in it, because the touch anchors her - anchors her to him, her safe haven in the storm, and the only person with whom she is Sansa, and not the Queen in the North. “I hate that my experiences have taught me to play it, and I hate that I play it so well. I hate that there is a part of my mind constantly changing people - living, breathing, thinking, feeling people, into mere pieces upon a cyvasse board. And I hate that Petyr Baelish is responsible for it. I tried him fairly, I executed him for his crimes against me, against my family, and still I hear his voice in my head - except when I am with you.” She cannot look at him as she makes this confession. He raises his left hand to brush her temple with his thumb, gently, lightly, and she bites her lip to keep herself from bursting into tears. She surrenders wholeheartedly to the caress, and her voice is dazed when she continues. “You fight the ghosts away, just by being near me, and I want to do the same for you. You have
entrusted me with your heart, and I want - I will protect it, Jaime, I swear. From anyone and anything.”

“I love you, lovely one,” he chokes out. “I love you, I love you, I love you, my valiant defender, my sweet wife, my perfect queen - Sansa -” he says the words as if she is the only thing keeping him alive, and she raises her head to look at him. The expression on his countenance makes her tremble with heartbreak and love, and she raises her hands to cradle his face and brush her thumbs across his cheekbones. It is a wondrous, humbling thing, to see how completely he reacts to her gentle touch, nuzzling her palms, exhalando deeply, eyes fluttering closed.

“Flatterer,” she replies impishly, grinning, touching the tip of her nose to his, and the way his eyes snap open and then glimmer rakishly at her words makes her breath hitch.

“Truth,” he responds in his habitual drawl, before bringing his mouth to hers, and she melts instantly, mewling sweetly, the taste of him making her swoon. She presses herself more closely to him - she has discovered, to her delight, that bringing her hands to his face, or to tangle in his golden hair, means she can be as close to him as possible, the sensation of his broad chest against her never failing to send shivers of delight dancing down her spine - and is promptly rewarded by him growling into her mouth. Kissing her husband is something she will never tire of; something she has difficulty using the right adjectives to describe, for there can never be enough (and if Jaime knew she wagers he’d accuse her of flattery when she is merely telling the truth). She giggles at the thought, and this causes him to deepen the kiss still further to something deeply sensual, sliding his left hand into her hair and his other in a dragging, languid caress down her back, until she is nothing short of a gasping, incoherent mess, her toes curling in her boots.

When he pulls away, his eyes, though bright, are still a touch shadowed. “At dawn, we ride for war,” he says, sighing deeply. “I thought we would have more time. I could have a thousand years with you and it would not be enough.”

She tries to smile, to reassure him. “We’re going to win, Jaime. We’re going to win, because the Dragon Queen fights for greed. We fight for love, in defence of our land and our people, and we’re going to win.” His answering smile is wan, more of a grimace than anything else, but some of the light has returned more fully to his gaze.

“Is it strange that I’m more nervous about whatever the hell is going on with the Golden Company than about the dragons?”

“No,” she replies gently, fingers brushing his neck. “I think your sentiment is entirely justified. We know how to bring down a dragon. We’ve done it before, and we know we can and will do it again. Elephants are another matter… though why a company founded by Backfyres is willing to support a true born Targaryen I have no idea - it doesn’t seem right.”
“Perhaps they’ve decided to back her merely because she’s promised to pay them,” Jaime replies, brow furrowing in consideration. “They are a company of sellswords, after all.”

“Perhaps,” she repeats. “I’ll have my singers find out what they can. Do you want to attempt to turn them against the Dragon Queen?”

“We have nothing to pay them with.”

“I hate politics,” she grumbles, and he laughs, though it’s a sound devoid of humour. The sound tears at her insides, and she determines to redirect the conversation. “I think we’ve allowed Daenerys and Tyrion to disrupt our evening enough, haven’t we?”

“They certainly have a gift for… interrupting, that is true.”

“So, enough,” she replies softly, running her hands over his shoulders and down his arms. He swallows at this, the light in his eyes deepening to something heated and tender all at once, and she shivers. “I don’t want to think about war anymore, not tonight. No more politics, no more conclave - only the two of us, until dawn.”

He leans forward to rest his forehead against hers. “Only love, only us, until dawn,” he sighs, and she smiles faintly.

“Only love, only us, until dawn,” she repeats, and then she yelps before dissolving into giggling, helpless laughter, as he once more lifts her into his arms, carrying her through the servants’ passages to his own chambers.

“If you carry me everywhere,” she says laughingly, her head in the crook of his shoulder, “I’m going to get fat.”

“No, you won’t,” he retorts lightly. “And even if you did, I’d still carry you everywhere. You are far too perfect to ever touch something as mundane as the ground.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”
“Don’t ruin my fun,” he replies in the same tone, waggling his eyebrows, and she bursts out laughing, even as he sets her down, and she staggers into him, only held upright by the arm wrapped firmly around her waist.

“I love you, you ridiculous, incorrigible man,” she whispers, blinking back tears.

“If I told you how many times I have dreamed of you, of this, you would doubtless find me quite boorish,” he says, a self-deprecating smile upon his lips. “I have dreamed of having you in bed, properly, thoroughly, for far longer than is doubtless appropriate.” She sighs as he gently grazes her temple with his knuckles; her heart stutters at the aching lightness of his touch. She cannot think; she can do nothing except feel the way she is held to him, feel the way his chest moves with every breath he takes. She can do nothing except let the sound of his voice - that glorious drawl, amused and heated, tender and deep - wash over her, ensnare her, melt her until his arm, his body is the only thing holding her up at all. His voice makes something deep inside her seize and clench, and her hand falls forward languidly to rest on his shoulder, and she takes shallow, unsteady breaths, the dizzying taste of his scent upon her tongue.

“How?” She blushes violently when she realises she’s spoken aloud, but she doesn’t retract her question. She suddenly finds herself deeply curious. How do men dream of women when they respect and love as well as desire them? “How have you dreamed of me? How do you want me?”

She starts as his fingertips travel from her temple to trace her jawline and lift her chin so they are face to face. She almost gulps at the look in his green eyes; intent, burning, rakish, glimmering with such tender depth of emotion (for her, for her, all for her and that is the astonishing thing) that her heart somersaults in her chest and she is drowning, falling, flying; irrevocably, completely, wholly in love with him and only him. “I have dreamed everything. I want you everywhere. I want you for always.”

She staggers.

How can this man - earlier in the evening; before the conclave, when he’d kissed her everywhere - she flushes deeply at the thought - she’d thought perhaps she might have gained some understanding of the depth of his desires. Now she is coming fast to the realisation that she still has absolutely no idea. She only knows that she is feeling too much; but he is feeling, and able to
recognise it, understand it, use it to fantasise. She hates her ignorance; that she - her fantasies must be so innocent compared to his. Tangling their fingers together, standing together to greet the dawn on Winterfell’s ramparts, lips swollen and hair ruffled. Dancing with him, being held by him… kissing him, his weight on hers… riding out together and finding a secluded clearing and him laying his head in her lap as she cards her hands through his golden hair. She now adds to her list him kissing her everywhere - but she has no fantasy more explicit than that because she does not know what else there is to know. But she wants to find out; most desperately.

So she takes up her courage and does the only thing she can. “Will you tell me? Will you show me?”

“I did think you liked my voice as well as my hands,” he returns lightly, emphasising his point by running his golden hand down the line of her waist to her hip, drawing his vowels into something liquid, something obscene that makes her tremble, and he smirks.

“Vain, arrogant man!” she retorts, smiling radiantly.

“I am a Lannister, lovely one,” he shrugs casually, before his expression shifts to something sharper, and he slides his left palm, warm and calloused, from her chin across her cheek and back to her temple. Even as his fingers wind into her hair, his thumb begins to trace circles into her skin and his previous words come back to her - desire begins in the mind - and she fairly quivers with anticipation. “Where shall I begin?” he muses, and she whimpers his name.

He looks at her slyly, and then begins to speak in earnest, and her breath leaves her in shuddering gasps as his hands come to follow his words. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy taking your gown off.” Her hands tighten around his biceps as he pulls at her laces, trailing his fingers down her spine as he exposes it, slowly, teasingly, and she buries her face in his neck. She tenses slightly as he brushes the silver scars on her back (despite earlier this evening, when him kissing her scars - on her back; the mottled skin of her calves where it was flayed - brought her to tears), and Jaime only kisses the crown of her head, his fingers gentle upon her skin, until she relaxes again in his embrace. It isn’t that she doesn’t trust him, because she does, but it is only that the sensation of being touched there in kindness, in affection, in love, in desire, is not a feeling she is accustomed to.

Her dress catches around her forearms, and the contrast of the wool of his cloak against her breasts makes her whimper again, and Jaime steps back. The loss of sensation, of his touch, leaves her feeling bereft and cold and a protest rises to her lips, only to die silently as she understands that his movement was only so that he can pull off her sleeves himself. He lifts her hands to his mouth before tugging the material free and then, as the dress falls to the ground in a shivered whisper, he leads her gently to step out of it.

“Lovely one, my sweet wife, my lady, my Sansa,” he murmurs reverently as he kicks the offending
garment aside, and she starts towards him, wanting the comfort and heat of his embrace. “Will you undress me?”

She nods mutely; he has robbed her of coherence, it seems, and she can’t help the streak of playfulness that rises up in her in response. She wants him to be equally affected by her, and she quickly decides that the best way to do this is to do this slowly, so very slowly. She begins with his hands instead of making quick work of his cloak. His right golden hand is heavy in her palms, but she lightly traces the metal, biting her lip at the coolness. She slides her fingertips from metal to the soft skin of his wrist, under his leather surcoat, and he makes a strangled, choked sound.

Her gaze snaps up to his, and she is stunned by glimmer of tears in his eyes. His jaw is tight, his expression unguarded, open, entirely open. Though she has kissed his metal hand before, it suddenly occurs to her that her feelings about her scars (they haven’t spoken of them, not in any great depth, not yet) are akin to those about his hand. They are cruel, terrible, destructive things, demons of the night that are far more dangerous than any mortal ghost because they are incorporeal, which have words instead of a face.

“My Goldenhand the Just,” she whispers, and he blushes. “My love, my husband, my king, who with his touch of metal and skin makes the life flow once more through my veins.” It is appropriate, somehow, as Queen of the North, that the touch that changes her, that makes her human from statue, should hold a hint of winter, of frost and ice, whilst still being mortal. She is not one for fire.

He swallows audibly as she brings both of his hands to her lips to press kisses to them. His fingers tremble under her caress, and she feels his pulse skitter as she kisses the sensitive inside of his left wrist. She steps closer to him, so she is standing between his legs, and runs her hands up his arms and over his shoulders to unfasten his cloak. She watches in amazement and no little satisfaction as his head drops back, a hoarse groan of pleasure tumbling from his mouth, his eyelids fluttering. He is warm even through the leather, she realises, pressing her thighs together, and, suddenly impatient, she all but tears it off him.

“Eager, are we, my lovely one?” he teases, winking at her, and she blushes violently - she must be as red as her hair, she thinks - warming at the heated, intimate way he darts his gaze over her.

“Yes,” she replies breathlessly. “Yes, I am.”

He groans a laugh at that, his hands coming to rest upon her waist, his left thumb tracing shivers into her skin. “You have no idea how appealing you are, do you?”
“What do you mean?”

“Your enthusiasm is intoxicating… I knew, even in King’s Landing, that beneath your stoic facade lay the most incredible capacity for love, for passion - but even my dreams, my imaginings, they all fade in the face of reality. You are so generous…” he smiles, a touch self-deprecatingly. “In truth,” he continues more seriously, “I am honoured beyond measure that you have chosen me.”

“Always, Jaime,” she replies equally seriously. “You, only you, always.”

He leans his forehead against hers and she sighs blissfully, before abruptly collecting her scattered thoughts and remembering that she is meant to be disrobing him. He laughs as she commands him imperiously to take off the rest of his clothes, and her heart swells, and then she is once more in his arms and the world tilts and spins and then she is settled languidly upon the furs of his bed, and she can only watch through half-lidded eyes as her husband sets about making certain all the doors are locked. She drinks in the sight of him; his powerful, elegant lines, his swordsman’s strength, his ruffled golden hair, and the heat in her belly curls in delight. She notices he is holding himself more proudly than he might normally do, and she laughs again.

“Show off,” she murmurs, and he only preens even more, green eyes flashing in amusement, before he catches sight of his golden hand, and his face twists suddenly.

“Well, I do have this to make up for, don’t I?”

“You have nothing to make up for, Jaime,” she replies with solemn, ardent admiration. “You are magnificent.”

He blushes and averts his eyes and she extends her arms to him in response. “Will you come to me?”

And then suddenly he is next to her, and she is draped over him, her head tilted up against his shoulder to look at him, and this is very different to the gentle stillness of their embrace earlier on; she is aware of him. His manner of breathing, the heat he radiates, the way his gaze falls upon her, fierce and tender, now that he allows himself to look - she feels his presence as a pricking on her skin, and she shifts restlessly. There is a coiled energy to his frame, and she abruptly remembers that he is a knight, a leader of men, the Lion of Lannister, and his gentle touch, skimming her hip to travel up her ribcage, trailing up the underside of her breast, makes her squeezes her eyes shut.
“Too much,” she gasps. “Jaime - too much -

“So if I told you that I wanted to make love to you, here, now, to gather you to me and make you forget your own name, you’d refuse?” He drawls, and the wicked, mischievous glint in his eyes makes her gasp and hide her face against his arm.

“Arrogant, insufferable, infuriating man!” she huffs out.

“May I?” He asks more solemnly, and her acceptance is tumbling from her lips before she is entirely aware of what she has said. His answering smile, boyish and playful, threatens to blind her, and then he is sitting up on the bed, arranging her so they are face to face, knees touching, his hands gentle around her waist. His eyes never leave hers, and she shivers at the intimacy of it. She feels boneless and languid as he draws her closer to him so that she is sitting on his lap. She can feel him pressing against her belly and she moans, heat coiling and whirling through her body.

“How are you feeling?” he asks tenderly, and her heart swells at his consideration.

“Well - very well,” she replies a little breathlessly, blushing, and her laugh turns into a sigh as he leans in to trail burning kisses down her neck.

“And if I do this?” he continues, his voice gravelly and wicked against her shoulder, and her whole body shudders as he insinuates his left hand between her legs and strokes her lightly. She jolts and digs her fingers into his biceps, trembling. She can barely breathe, barely think, the pleasure is so sharp, and then she melts against him as the sensation settles to something more languid, though still heated. “So lovely, sweet wife,” he murmurs raggedly, and the longing she feels makes her head spin.

“Please, Jaime -

“More?” he smirks wickedly, his green eyes dark, and she can only nod mutely. “Then you shall have it.” She mewls as he drifts his right hand up her spine and tangles her hair in the metal, holding her to him, and she inhales sharply as he presses a finger inside her.

“Jaime…” she sighs, and he laughs, looking at her with the playful, boyish adoration that never fails to make her pulse stutter, and she thinks her heart almost stops entirely as he closes his mouth around her nipple and moves his finger inside her at the same time. Things begin to blur; she is only aware of feeling, of him. His chest against hers, his hair tickling her breast, his mouth warm
and wicked upon her skin, and his clever fingers setting a fire between her legs, his voice low and rich and deep in her ear, encouraging her, praising her, a litany of tenderness and reverence and desire falling from his lips and winding its way through her mind and body to bind and wrap around her heart, his lips on hers, kissing her deeply, heatedly, and he swallows her cry as the tension builds and builds to something so sharp that she can no longer bare it, and she whimpers as she tumbles over the edge, light flooding her, body and heart.

She blinks owlishly at him, slumped in his embrace, and her eyes widen as she sees him lift his left hand to his lips and lick his fingers.

“You are perfection,” he says, kissing her below her ear, and she mewls, sinking against him. “And this is only the beginning.” She clenches her thighs at the heat, the promise, the sensuality of his voice, and she thinks she must be going mad. Her head is spinning, she is dizzy, her body languid and yet still wanting, still yearning, still longing, for him, with a desperation she can’t understand. Her hands drift over his shoulders, mapping the muscles of his back, and she is absurdly pleased by the ragged groan that escapes him. “Now,” he says, “like this.”

He lifts her up so she feels him, hard and hot at her entrance, and she can’t help the twinge of nervousness she feels. He sees it in her face and sighs, drifting soothing caresses into her skin. “You can always say no,” he reminds her gently, eyes glimmering with sympathy and tenderness.

“I know,” she replies. “I know you won’t hurt me. I know you will be gentle.”

“But knowing something and experiencing something are two different things,” he finishes, smiling sadly, his fingers brushing the skin of her hip. “This position gives you more control; all you have to do, when you’re ready, is lower your hips, as slowly, as far as you like.”

“On to you?”

“Yes,” he drawls, “on to me.”

She flexes her hands on his shoulders and breathes in deeply. She wants this, and though she is nervous, though she is afraid, she is a Stark and she can be brave. *I will conquer this*, she thinks. *I will not let Ramsey Snow destroy what I have with Jaime from beyond the grave.* He watches her, intently, and she does not look away. It is the confidence in her that is apparent in his expression that eventually gives her the courage to sink down on to him.
It is like nothing she has ever felt.

It is incredible.

She bursts into tears, burying her face in his neck, and she feels him freeze. “I’ve hurt you,” he realises, his voice full of self-loathing. “I’ve hurt you and I promised you I wouldn’t.”

“No!” she exclaims, lifting her head to look at him, at his anguished green eyes. “No - it’s only - it wasn’t painful. I’m not in pain,” she laughs hysterically through her tears. “I’m not in pain and I did not know it could be like this.”

“It’s meant to be like this,” he replies softly once he has managed to collect himself.

“It feels wonderful,” she admits shyly.

“Yes,” he replies just as quietly. “Yes, it does.” He regards her tenderly, before the glimmer of boyish mischievousness comes back into his expression. “And now, we dance.”

“Dancing?” she grins, raising an eyebrow. “Is that what you’d call this?”

“With you?” he answers. “Yes.” There’s a devilish light in his eyes now, one that makes her breath hitch in anticipation. “We touch, we move, we listen, we look, we savour…” He emphasises his words with languid rolls of his hips that make her gasp and mewl. “We make music of our own,” he growls into her ear, guiding her hips as she begins to meet his movements. The feel of him against her, in her, is better than anything she could possibly have imagined. He makes love the way he speaks, she realises. He teases, but always with some more profound intent, and oh, there is nothing more profound than the way he is moving in her now.

“I’m never going to be able to think of dancing in the same way ever again,” she huffs.

“Good,” he replies, nipping kisses from her ear to her lips. “That was the general idea.” He head falls back with a whimper, and she surrenders herself to pleasure, wrapping herself around him, shivering in delight with every agonisingly slow, exquisite thrust. There is only him; the heat of him, the scent of his skin, the gold of his hair and brilliant, dark green of his eyes, his kiss, possessive, fierce, tender, absolute, him, filling her.
His kiss pours his soul into her and the world spins again, and she is vaguely aware of the furs at her back and him above her, propping himself up on his elbows, and she whimpers and bucks because he is too far away. She wants his weight on her, to be completely surrounded by him and nothing else.

“Come closer,” she pleads.

“Like this?” he asks, taking her hands from his shoulders and pinning them above her head, leaning down to kiss her as he does so. “Better?” he whispers against her lips.

She tangles her fingers with his. “Yes.”

“Wrap your legs around my waist,” he rasps, and she slides her legs slowly up the backs of his purely so she can watch the changes in his expression.

“Sansa…” he warns, and she laughs. His eyes flash with wicked, rakish amusement. “Careful, lovely one,” he says mildly, trailing his right hand grazing the length of her body to pull her hips more closely to his, and he surges forward, and the change in angle makes him sink so deeply into her that her vision blurs and her heart almost stops.

She gasps his name, and he does it again, and again, and again, and she finds herself vaguely wondering how there can possibly be more than this, but there is, somehow, and she can only wrap her legs more tightly around him, surrender herself to him, and give everything of herself to him. Her pulse thunders in her ears - or is it his? She no longer knows. The stretch and drag of him is maddening, intoxicating as he leads her to an exquisite delirium. The gravel and velvet of his voice is in turns heated, languid and fierce in her ear, and drives her higher, stokes this desperate, longing pleasure into something more, more, more, Jaime, more.

She is undone by the passion in his green eyes, drowns, is dashed against the rocks by the waves but the only thing that matters is that he follows her, roaring.
She is curled up against him, both of them still breathing harshly, his left hand carding gently through her hair, and she sighs into his touch, nuzzling into his neck.

“How are you feeling?” he asks quietly, and she presses herself more closely to him, unable for the life of her to stop the glorious smile from spreading across her face.

She shifts to look up at him, bringing a warm palm to his cheek. “It was magnificent.”

“You are happy?”

“You know I am,” she returns, impishly kissing his chin, and the light in his sea-green eyes makes her head spin. “I did not know it could be like this. I know I said this earlier, but thank you, Jaime. You have given me the greatest gift of all.”

“I hoped I would please you,” he sighs, and something within her twists at his uncertainty.

“You have,” she replies. “Most thoroughly,” she adds, grinning, and he laughs, throwing his head back, and the gold of his hair catches the firelight and shines and the sight takes her breath away. Pride and pleasure and love, overwhelming and complete, surge in her heart, and she smiles a secret little smile that she has managed to make him happy. “I love you to adoration, you know.”

“I love you more than you love lemoncakes,” he replies, and she bursts into giggles.

“I love you…” she cocks her head exaggeratedly, considering, rejoicing and revelling in the glimmer of laughter in her husband’s countenance. “I love you more than a direwolf loves the snow.” He raises his eyebrows incredulously at that, and she can see him biting back his amusement. He gathers her more closely to him, so that they are once more chest to chest, her lying on top of him, and she looks at him through half-lowered lashes, her body melting as he runs his hands languidly up and down her spine.

“I love you more than a fish loves a water, a lion the hunt, a tree the sun,” he returns intently, his gaze tender, and she shivers. “I love you, I adore you, and I want you, always, whatever our endeavours. My lady, my love, my Queen, my valiant defender, my sweet wife, my lovely one, my Sansa - I love you.”

She can only touch her nose to his and then kiss him and be kissed by him ardently, passionately,
languidly, eloquently, pausing only to murmur endearments before again commencing, again and again, until she notices her husband’s eyelids begin to flutter shut, and his words begin to slur as sleep claims him.

She laughs lightly, tenderly stroking his ruffled hair, and settles back against him. Jaime has the right of it, she thinks. She is worn out, though now at peace, truly at peace for the first time in years, and she swallows down the threat of tears and pulls the furs over both of them, and drifts into slumber, safe and happy in her husband’s embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts?
Chapter Summary

That there should be a castle in the midst of this eerie land, solid and squat and square and stone, seems incredible to him.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, hope you all had a good Christmas and New Year & holiday all round.

Here's the next chapter for you to enjoy (hopefully, lol)

Lots of stuff happens :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART FIFTEEN

JAIME LANNISTER

Jaime awakes with the grey pre-dawn light falling through the windows and his wife curled up naked in his arms, her magnificent russet hair like silk upon his skin, her breath sweet and warm
against his neck, their legs tangled together, and a broad grin spreads over his face. Now, drifting his hand gently through her hair, he can admit to himself how nervous he’d been; how desperately he’d wanted to please her. His breath catches in his chest as he recalls the heat, the silk and velvet of her, and he swallows unsteadily, trembling fingers lightly drawing her features. The arch of her eyebrows, the slope of her nose, the curve of her cheeks, the softness of her lips. She shifts in her sleep at his touch, and he cannot shake the feeling of being in a dream. For as long as he can remember, before Sansa, his bed has been empty, and he’s passed more lonely nights, sick with fury and despair and jealousy, in the past twenty years, than he cares to count or admit.

They’ve been sharing a bed since they married; though chastely, and this isn’t quite the same thing. The sensation is sharper now. The peace, the happiness, he feels, is entirely foreign to him; so foreign, in fact, that it takes a moment for him to recognise what it is. Being able to take his time in bed, waking to find that he is not alone, that he is embracing the woman he loves, skin to skin, is something nothing short of glorious, and something that he vows never to take for granted. It loosens some knot of anguish deep in his heart, and he tenderly kisses her temple, entirely content with his current position.

She stirs then, blinking open sleepy blue eyes, and his stomach clenches violently. “Good morning, husband,” she murmurs, smiling.

“Good morning, sweet wife,” he replies hoarsely, brushing his thumb over her cheek, and she nuzzles into his touch. “How are you feeling, lovely one?”

“Well,” she replies. “A bit tired, though riding all day might be a bit awkward.” She groans in frustration. “I’m so stupid,” she huffs, and he closes his eyes in consternation. He really ought to have remembered.

“I’ll call for a hot bath for you, that should help,” he says, hesitating before he continues. “But I didn’t injure you, did I?”

“No. It was more wonderful than I ever imagined,” she smoothes his jaw, her eyes soft and her hand softer still as it trails down his skin as he swallows harshly. “How much time do we have?”

He looks to the windows. The grey light is brightening slowly. “A little less than an hour, I would estimate.”

She rubs her eyes at that, and curls more closely into him. “I don’t want to get out of bed. I want to stay here with you.”
“Believe me, lovely one, the sentiment is entirely mutual.” He brings a hand to his lips, pressing tender kisses first to her fingertips, then her knuckles, before tilting her dainty hand and touching his lips to her palm, and then the sensitive inside of her wrist, and he sees her tremble, pink lips parting, exhaling his name on a sigh. He knows he should stop this before they get entirely carried away, and so he regretfully rises from the bed to dress. “I’ll go and see how the conclave is getting on; they should have already begun striking the camp. Have your bath, eat, dress, and then come and find me.”

“It is not yet dawn,” his siren of a wife murmurs sleepily, clasping his wrists in a gentle hold. “Stay,” she entreats him. “Stay and tell me of the Rock.”

He is powerless to resist; he does not want to resist, and he sighs deeply, easing himself once more into her embrace. He lets his eyes linger upon her form, languid, at ease, beautiful, desire coiling in his belly, and he tangles his legs with hers, marvelling once more at the silk of her creamy skin. She rests her ear upon his heart, a dainty hand drawing circles into the muscles of his abdomen.

“Until dawn,” he replies, voice soft and gravelly with sleep, and her shiver, the playful bite of her bottom lip is an infinitely precious thing which he locks into his heart.

“Your bannermen await, Sire.”

He swallows harshly, unsteadily, as he meets Ser Addam’s gaze in the mirror. He is in full armour, his sword strapped to his waist, his golden crown atop his head, and though the thought that he rides for his ancestral seat has been swirling around his mind since he arose, that is not what makes him uneasy. Aside from his father’s chain, the full war regalia of the Lord of the West and thus of the King also comprises a heavy crimson sash. Normally worn without a cloak, but it is too cold to forego the garment, so he is wearing both. It is the first time he is wearing it, and he cannot help but think of his father.

“Thank you, Addam,” he replies, shaking himself free of those thoughts and making his way down to the principal courtyard. His old friend must be able to read his musings upon his face, because
he claps his shoulder in comfort.

When he arrives, his wife is already there, looking at the spot where the dragon fell and he slows to admire the way the cut of her white riding habit, embroidered in silver and dark crimson, accentuates her figure. She wears her habitual wreath in her hair and her furred cloak upon her shoulders. They'd come up with the idea, a few days past, of using the bones and hide to fashion weapons and armour for those staying in Winterfell.

She smiles at his approach and her staggering beauty, her radiance, hits him like a hammer to the chest and he finds he is breathing far too raggedly as he lifts her hands to his lips in greeting. “Are you well, lovely one?” he asks lowly, and he sees her eyes widen and darken, her cheeks pink, her lips part, and he wants to draw her into his embrace and kiss her until neither of them can do anything but feel.

But they are in public.

The only consolation is that he reads clearly on her face that her thoughts tend in the same direction; and her tone of voice as she replies, intimate and tender, conveys all that her words cannot. “You know I am.” Her gaze flicks to his crimson sash, his heart pounds as she openly appraises him, smirking, and he drowns in her eyes.

“Sire! Your Majesty!” It is his wife’s little sister who calls them, gesturing to the horses that have been brought round for them. The rest of the Lords coming with them are mounting up, and there is a grim, almost silent determination hanging in the air.

Lady Arya strides towards them, frowning, and Jaime prepares himself for some last minute disaster. He is entirely nonplussed, therefore, when instead of bringing them a raven scroll or suchlike, she turns to him with carefully disguised nonchalance. “You’re wearing Lord Tywin’s sash?”

He is too befuddled to reply. His wife is not. “How did you know it was Lord Tywin’s?” Her voice is sharp.

“Oh, I was his cup-bearer at Harrenhal for a time.” She fidgets, grey eyes flashing.

“What?” Sansa’s brows draw together, her voice hollow. “How did no-one know of this? You were believed dead.”
“He didn’t know it was me.”

He feels Sansa stiffen, and something in her irises shatters, before she smooths out her features, relaxing the tense set of her jaw, but Jaime knows all is far from well. There is still more grief in his wife’s heart, and he grits his teeth, ruthlessly pushing away the sudden swell of fury that sears his veins to ash.

“You’re the Stark in Winterfell until I return, Arya,” she continues briskly. “You have Ned Umber, Alys Karstark, Wylla Manderly and Lyanna Mormont with you; Sandor Clegane too. And I have every faith in you. Remember Nymeria.”

The younger Stark swallows hard at this, and quite unceremoniously throws herself into Sansa’s arms. Jaime sees his wife tremble and then consciously square her shoulders, breathing deeply. The two separate with wan smiles and stoic nods, and then Sansa motions for Pod to lead their caparisoned destriers closer so they can mount.

Jaime is all too aware of his wife’s tendency to shut things that distress her out. In his long years as a Kingsguard, it is a technique he used more than once, and so he suddenly decides he doesn’t care that they are in public.

He draws her to him, golden hand at her waist, his left cupping her cheek and she blinks, before shuddering, fingers twisting in his sash, nuzzling into his caress. He leans to rest his forehead against hers, and he sighs at the sweetness of it, at the sudden calm that courses through his veins. “Whatever our endeavours,” he whispers against her lips, and she smiles slightly, some of the hurt fading from her eyes, some of the tension from her frame.

“I know,” she responds softly, before covering his lips with hers in a kiss that, though brief and chaste, aches with longing and passion and love. “Thank you,” she adds quietly, eyes averted.

“Always,” he replies fiercely, lifting her palms to his mouth so that he might kiss her hands instead of being tempted by her lips. “Always.”

And then, as the winter sun rises slowly but steadily over Winterfell’s ramparts, casting the whole courtyard into shadow, he realises that they really need to go, and he steps away from his wife regretfully. Sansa mounts swiftly, with her usual elegance, and he assists her with her stirrups, grasping her slender, booted ankles with an infinitely gentle grip, and she smiles down at him as she arranges her skirts around her.
Then he vaults into his own saddle, gathering the reins and feeling the stallion’s skittishness underneath him. “We ride for the Rock!” he calls, urging the horse into a lithe, powerful, ground-eating canter he knows the animal will be able to maintain, Sansa at his side keeping pace, and Brienne and the rest of their formal guard and the Lords not commanding the infantry, behind. The plan for the infantry is to march through the Barrowlands to Torrhen’s Square and from there take rafts to Flint’s Finger where the fleet awaits to convey them down the coast to the Lannister ancestral seat.

To Jaime’s great amusement, his and Sansa’s guards have been dubbed the Wolfsguard and Lionsguard respectively. His wife has once again put her embroidery skills to exemplary use, aided, if he is not mistaken by Wynafryd Manderly, the heir to White Harbor, to create their cloaks. Silver lions roar in the dawn upon rich crimson, and white direwolves snarl upon shimmering gold. Raising knights to his own guard a few days before had brought back those glorious, wrenching memories of taking the white at Harrenhal. He still remembers the roar of appreciation from the crowd, but most vivid of all is the pride mingled with what he now knows to have been wistfulness in Arthur Dayne’s eyes. He has not stipulated that taking the silver means forsaking land and family; he has seen firsthand how destructive that directive can become. He does not know entirely how to describe the emotion that fills him when he looks upon these men and women who have sworn their lives for his and his wife’s. He realises, as he hopes he might have some knowledge to impart, that even as he rides to war his mind has turned to the future, to building, to peace, and that reassures him.

Sansa, of course, would have no-one but Brienne of Tarth as her Daeme Commander of the Wolfsguard, and the shimmering glitter in the wench’s eyes as the Queen in the North made her pronouncement is not an expression, an emotion Jaime believes he will easily forget. As for himself, his Lord Commander is Ser Leonidas Lydden. His childhood friend Addam Marbrand is too valuable as a general in the field; Jaime cannot ask him to guard his king instead.

Behind them banners are raised by the standard bearers, horses snort and whinny, armour clangs, and shouts go down the line as they ride out of Winterfell’s great gates and four thousand cavalry, Northmen, Westermen, Valemen and Rivermen alike, follow as they ride first through the remains of the camp.

It is a clear day, though bitterly cold. It has not snowed in more than two weeks, and that is a blessing, because the Kingsroad will be clearer, enabling them to make better time. A forced march pace consists of one hour in the saddle at a canter, followed by half an hour running on foot to give the horses a breather, before getting back in the saddle again. They will eat in the saddle and stop only to sleep. These next few days will be long and hard, Jaime knows, but it is their best chance, and the only way of getting both the men and horses to the Rock in a condition that will still enable them to fight.

When they halt two hours after dusk, in the ruins of Moat Cailin, stiff, weary, muscles screaming
in protest, and absolutely stinking of sweat and horse, Sansa gritting her teeth against the pain, her gaze steely, he is grateful that they have made good time; because they have to navigate the marshy wastes of the Neck next. From here on until the Twins, the Kingsroad is impassable, blocked by great drifts of snow that hide the bog beneath, a consequence of the White Walkers, and only rendered more treacherous, not less, by the slow thaw.

As the men raise the camp, setting up tents in the stone ruins ominously silhouetted by distant starlight and flickering torches, aided by the local garrison, Lord Howland Reed, his wife’s bannerman, is there to greet them. The crannogmen will guide the cavalry host through the misty, treacherous bog, and though their pace will be slower, Jaime is pleased to hear, that, all things being well, they should make it through the Neck in two days, possibly even a day and a half if they ride hard. He suppresses the flash of fear that shivers down his back, cold and lancing, at the thought of sleeping a night in the marsh. On previous occasions, when he’d ridden North, it had either been high summer or high winter, and therefore he’d gone up the Kingsroad. The current climate of the thaw makes such a thing impossible, and he is nervous, he will not deny it. He reminds himself that it is the only way, and squares his shoulders.

They sup intimately, he and Sansa alone, lounging languidly side-by-side upon a mountain of cushions, unused to the strange sensation that is a half-ruined bedchamber, protected from the elements only by an awning of tent fabric hung from the half-crumbled walls. It is a modicum of privacy; providing the illusion of seclusion at the very least, though it is an illusion shattered by the unsettling way sound travels here, at once muffled by the stone and projected far and wide. The firelight, too, casts dancing shadows upon the dark stone, distorting the human form into something grotesque. It is only now that they are alone that he broaches a subject that has been playing on his mind since the morning.

“In all her travels, Arya never mentioned Harrenhal,” he begins cautiously, and Sansa goes utterly still in his arms. “Why should she have been there? More to the point, masquerading as my father’s cupbearer?” He continues incredulously.

“I don’t know,” Sansa replies, toying with the sleeve of her shift. He is momentarily distracted by the way it falls off her shoulder, exposing her creamy skin, and he presses a teasing kiss in the hollow of her collarbone, tenderly brushing away the shining fall of her hair, smiling unrepentantly as he feels her breath hitch and stutter in response. “Jaime…” she rebukes, smiling.

“What?” he murmurs mischievously. “What is it that my sweet wife wishes to tell me?”

“Only that Arya is a hypocrite,” the Queen in the North replies, a touch sardonically, but Jaime easily reads the hurt beneath, and he slides a hand around her waist, intending to comfort, not tease.

“What do you mean?” he asks as her fingers tangle with his, and she shifts still closer to him so that
she is leaning into his frame, their thighs touching.

“She threatened to kill me for sending that letter to Robb that was dictated by Cersei, urging him to bend the knee to Joffrey,” Sansa recounts quietly, disbelief colouring her tone. “She called me a turncloak; when she was enjoying herself in Tywin Lannister’s company and did nothing to harm him.”

He does not know how to comfort her, he does not know what he can possibly say, so he only holds her more tightly, lifting her into his arms and carrying her to their bed, where he intends to make her forget the outside world. What follows is searingly intense, and he swallows every sweet giggle and mewl and moan and ragged gasp that tumbles from her pretty lips, enjoying the way her legs wrap around his waist, the way she can’t seem to decide whether she wishes to grasp the muscles of his upper arms or grip at his shoulders, his hair, and he buries himself in her, again and again and again because with her he feels whole and he wants to give her everything of himself.

Lord Howland Reed is dressed in an odd assortment of furs and cloth, Jaime thinks, as they assemble just before dawn. Mottled greens and greys and browns, with no discernible reason that he can see for such a pattern. The crannogmen are a short people, fiercely loyal to their liege and they ride quick, shaggy ponies with calm brown eyes, that appear unperturbed by the roiling morning mists rising in great plumes and swirls from the great marsh to the south of Moat Cailin.

The horses have been slathered in some stinking substance that chases away some native insect. Their venom is not deadly in and of itself, Lord Reed explains. A bite only causes hallucinations and disorientation, before making it easy for marsh fever to set in. There is all manner of small, strange beasts that lie in wait in these stagnant waters, from fish that chew through leather boots to get to the encased flesh (Jaime can imagine only too well what follows: gangrene, fever, a horrid end) to marsh fleas that will make a man scratch and bleed himself to his doom.

Bronn’s loud, nonchalant commentary (I signed up for a wife and a castle, not being covered in this stinking shit with a fire lit under my arse) puts a wry grin on Jaime’s face as he urges his own horse forward. The Lionsguard riding in front of him, his Lord Commander Ser Leonidas Lydden, son of the Lord of Deep Den, snorts at the sellsword’s words.
As Lord Reed and his crannogmen guide them along the narrow, meandering paths that mean travelling in single file, Jaime begins to understand. It is only because of the pony’s outline in front of him that he is able to see Lord Reed at all; his strange manner of dress renders him almost invisible in this strange half-light of mist and shadows. He loses any sense of time. Sounds carries in this land, echoed and thrown about; a whinnying horse answered and then answered again from further off, the constant, low, creaks and clangs of armoured knights hissing in the back of his mind. The sound of pebbles and stones breaking the surface of the muddy pools.

Childhood histories begin swirling through his mind; the tales of dead men falling here, aeons ago, drowning in the water’s murky depths. One wrong move, one foot out of place, and your life is forfeit. The low winter sun struggles through the fog, and Jaime fancies he sees a hamlet, with flickering lights, gold and red and blue and white, an ominous black shadow, floating upon the water, but the mist swirls and the image is gone, so quickly that he wonders whether it was ever there at all. The remnants of a spear or a lance, ragged pennant fluttering; branches, as twisted and gnarled as an old man’s hand; a moss covered statue, half the face eaten away, and always, the swirling, dancing, luring lights - lanterns, Jaime surmises, he cannot see what else they could be - that make him swallow down his nausea. He is more glad than he can say that the Kingsroad was yet passable upon his journey north. Rationally, he knows, they are safe. They are guided by the crannogmen whose land this is. There is nothing to fear.

And yet -

The marsh is perilous; woe betide the man who thinks to master it.

Everything blurs; he is lulled despite himself by the gait of his horse, by the swinging lantern lights. Only the insidious gusts of wind that blow the fog into his face, momentarily blinding him, the rustle of wind upon quiet water, the plaintive whistle of the reeds, set his hair on end, making his skin prickle uncomfortably. He is at once asleep and far too alert, his heart thundering in his chest; he notes not the passing of the day. If he eats he marks neither taste nor substance and it seems as though an eternity has passed before Lord Reed at last raises his spear and Jaime notices a faint concentration of light in the distance, hovering in the air. Greywater Watch, he surmises absentely, but he knows better than to trust what he sees as the light becomes brighter as they advance; they are a ways off yet. He ruthlessly squashes down the wild hope that leaps in his chest.

A looming, floating structure seems to come towards them in the gloom, a concentration of golden flickers, blinking and waverning, a warmer counterpart to the cold, distant stars high above. Windows. A hearth. Warmth. A bed and food. A bath to wash away the grime and stink of the day. A respite from this world of shades and mists and laughing, deceitful lights that lure a man to his doom. That there should be a castle in the midst of this eerie land, solid and squat and square and stone, seems incredible to him.
But the castle that rises, stone grey and black from the water, is indeed real, and the promise of the shelter it offers is seductive indeed. It is with no little relief that he clatters across the drawbridge and into the castle, dismounting with shaky legs into the courtyard, before helping Sansa down.

His wife sinks into his embrace, allowing herself a moment of respite before turning to Lord Reed and thanking him for his guidance and hospitality. He follows suit, and he follows gratefully as he is shown to a chamber where he and Sansa can bathe and eat in peace. The rest of their men are being led to the scattered floating settlements in the vicinity, where they and the horses will bed down for the night, before setting off in little groups at dawn. The plan is for the whole host to reassemble on the other side of the bog, at dusk tomorrow at the latest.

They eat in an exhausted silence, too tired to adhere much to the rules of politeness, though Jaime notices his wife is dainty and courteous even as she falls asleep on her feet. They both strip off their clothes and clamber into the bed, tangled together with the furs pulled up to their chins, and Jaime attempts to sleep as the wind begins to howl in the dark outside.

The next day passes as he imagined it would; by dusk they have traversed the remainder of the marsh and so they push on for another few hours until they arrive at the Twins, still accompanied by Lord Reed and his crannogmen. Despite the punishing pace, and the ever present thought in the back of his mind that he must get to the Rock before the Dragon Queen does, he finds himself in a happier mood than he had anticipated, at least until he notices his wife’s extreme discomfort, and that of the Northern Lords.

Again, he and his wife take rooms, bathe and sup alone. His wife curls up against him, her head against his shoulder, her splendid russet hair loose down her back, and they deliberately keep their discussion light. It sits ill with him to stay in what was until very recently the seat of House Frey; he cannot imagine how it feels for his wife whose brother and mother were slaughtered here at a wedding feast.

That night she screams in her sleep; she wakes hysterical, trembling, her cheeks wet with tears, and she holds onto him so tightly he knows he will bruise, sobbing into his neck, and his heart breaks for her.
Their guards, Ser Darius Crakehall and Daeme Morgana Mormont, come crashing into the chamber, swords drawn at the first scream. Jaime holds Sansa against him, shielding her with the furs, and nods at the Lion and Wolfsguard in acknowledgement. They look entirely nonplussed at the picture before them, and he dismisses them both with a short jerk of his chin, and both resume their posts on the other side of the door.

He tries to soothe her as best he can, holding her to him, kissing away her tears, running his hand through her hair, lingering at her temple. She calms at that, and apologises for waking him, her voice small.

“Do not apologise,” he growls into her ear. “You have nothing to apologise for.”

“No, I do,” she gasps. “I do. I betrayed my family, I told Cersei my father was going to leave, I was a stupid little girl -

“Breathe, lovely one, breathe,” he cuts her off firmly, gently, recognising that she is working herself into hysteria. “She manipulated you, Sansa. You believed you could trust her because she manipulated you.”

“I should have known.”

“How could you have known? You had no reason to believe she would manipulate you in such a way. Innocence is not a crime, Sansa,” he insists, cradling her. “Do not apologise for believing that people are good.”

“Your family fought a war for Tyrion, they fought a war to get you back, they did everything they could, and mine, with an eight thousand year old reputation for honour, left me to rot. And I have wondered why, for so long I have wondered,” she murmurs, her voice tight with heartbreak and humiliation and defeat. “What answer is there other than my own failings?”

“Your brother’s own failings,” he retorts sharply. “He won the battles and then lost the war because he could not keep his cock in his breeches. The fault is his.” He violently shoves down the discomfort he feels at the mention of Robb Stark, at the memories of his long imprisonment, chained, humiliated, beaten and taunted, left to rot in full view of Robb Stark’s host. Now is not the time for that.

“But he did not even attempt to get me out of King’s Landing. He treated you in a manner he
should have been thoroughly ashamed of. Why?” she asks hoarsely. “Why did he prefer war to peace?”

“Because war is simple,” he replies bitterly. “Peace is not.”

War is blood and the sword, war is fortune grabbing you by the balls and tossing a coin high, high into the air and when it falls either you have skill enough to continue the fight or you take a blow to the neck or the back or the chest. War is the carrion birds wheeling overhead, blocking the light of the sun, the hail of arrows punching into your shield, it is horses and men screaming. It is life and death and the dance upon the fine line between the two. War is the smell of fear: steaming viscera and excrement, and, if one fights the dead or the dragons, the smell of bubbling, charring flesh, of metal being heated until it melts, of men’s brains frying in their helms. War is the sun setting, and not even a flame in the dark can replace the light of the sun.

Peace is bread and salt, peace is the poisoned wine, peace is long, frustrating days of parleys where it seems that nothing has been done and nothing has been achieved; that the stalemate is eternal, unbreakable. It means having to decide between what is necessary and what you want, it means listening to what your enemies have to say, it means haggling with your opponents, it means haggling with your own lords. Peace is the apricot tree that grows upon terraces carved from the slopes of the mountains of the West, peace is the vine, Jaime thinks. Difficult to plant, still more difficult to grow, requiring sustained care and attention, a temperamental thing, but Jaime would much rather eat apricots than ash.

“He was my older brother,” she says, tracing patterns into Jaime’s chest, frowning, choking upon the words. “And though I am meant to love him I hate him for leaving me to my cage. I hate him for treating you so despicably. I hate him for his hypocrisy. And yet I cannot hate him for he was my brother, and he was slaughtered here in cold blood, at a wedding feast.”

“I know, my love, I know,” he kisses her forehead. Robb is Sansa’s Tyrion, he realises, with no little consternation. “I know.”

“The way the Boltons killed my brother’s wife…” she trails off, shuddering, and Jaime winces. “Joffrey boasted of it... he told me they’d stabbed her in the belly again and again to kill her child before slitting her throat...” her fingers twist and convulse, and he stills them against his skin. Still they tremble, and rage roils, biting, potent, painful, in his belly. “The Dragon Queen is treacherous, Jaime... she’s proven that again and again.”

He cuts her off, fiercely, lifting her chin with his fingertip. “Nothing will happen. Our guards will not let anything happen to you. I will not let anything happen to you, I swear it. My sword stands between you and the world, always.”
She only curls up more tightly against him, but he feels her breathing settle slightly as he continues to card his left hand through her hair. The thought of losing her is unbearable to him. He loves her as he has never loved before; a world without her is nothing at all.

“He didn’t choose me,” she says, so quietly that he strains to hear it, pulling him away from his morbid thoughts. “He chose war over me and his-his lust over an alliance, he chose mistreatment instead of honour.” She swallows. “No-one has ever chosen me; not for myself. I am only Queen because Jon made the mistake of becoming involved with Daenerys. I was only the Key to the North because all my brothers were dead. Robert Baratheon only chose me to marry Joffrey because I was a Stark. Baelish only lusted after me because I am Catelyn Tully’s daughter.”

He is furious, heartbroken, to see her so vulnerable, looking up at him with shattered ice in her eyes, trembling, afraid, hurt, and he touches his lips to her forehead as gently as his words are fierce. “I choose you. I will always choose you.” He repeats it again as he touches his lips to her temples, her eyelids, the tip of her nose, both of her cheeks, the line of her jaw, under her ear, her chin, and then her lips. She trembles beneath him, arching guilelessly into him, so exquisitely responsive, and he repeats the litany over and over again, in time to the beating of his heart. She is a creature of laughter and light and the winter dawn, the sun’s rays upon the ice, his wife, and he will fight for her; he will fight to his last breath for her, to give her all the happiness in the world. I choose you. I love you. I adore you. I want you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

It isn’t until they are within sight of Riverrun, having ridden due south across thawing fields that the strange calm of the past few days, where there has only been the hard ride, battling the wind and the cold, every muscle in their bodies protesting, and then his quiet evenings with Sansa, uninterrupted by the conclave, shatters.

The horses sense it before them; ears flicking back and forth, tugging at the bit, snorting, becoming skittish. And then he hears a sound that he has heard only once before, one that freezes him to the bone, before his tongue becomes unstuck and he begins a fast, clipped litany of orders.

“Lances!” he calls. His generals and Sansa’s are already galloping down the line towards him as he sees appear upon the horizon like a distant cloud the Dothraki host, cresting the shallow hill, and
their low, ululating cries and screams carry towards them. “Sansa, ride for Riverrun, now.”

“You’re going to engage them?” Her voice is tight.

He nods. “We’re on higher ground, we have a numerical advantage, they have the sun in their eyes and with the lances we can unhorse them before we get within range of their arakhs. They’re heading North, to the Neck. We intercept them here…”

“A calculated retreat, Sire?” Ser Addam questions. “We bring as many of them down as we can, we rout them, they follow us into the Whispering Wood, and then the stragglers will flee to the Neck and die in the bog there.”

“Indeed,” Jaime confirms. “Let them come to us,” he continues, nodding his thanks as Podrick rides up to pass him his lance. He tests the balance briefly, nodding to himself. It will serve. “We hold until they reach the beginning of the rise, we charge, we about-wheel and hit them again from the side.” He grins briefly. “Play the same trick on them that Robb Stark played on me, once upon a time.”

Around him, four thousand knights are falling into line, lances pointing up at the grey sky above where the carrion birds are beginning to circle. His orders are being signalled, and he hears the usual commands bellowed out. *Hold, hold the line, steady lads. Hold, hold, hold.*

His heart sinks as he abruptly notices that Sansa won’t have time to get safely to Riverrun, and he whirs his destrier to address the Wolfsguard. “Guard my wife,” he snarls. “Stay as far back as you can, and as soon as you get the opportunity, make for the castle.”

This order is acknowledged with short nods, and he turns his attention to his wife. Her eyes are wide with fear, and he edges his stallion closer to hers, close enough that he -

She is faster than he is, and she aggressively, fiercely, passionately, captures his lips with her own. “Come back to me,” she whispers urgently against his mouth, fingers tangling in his hair, and he relishes the painful tug. “You will come back to me.”

“I have everything to fight for, everything to come back to,” he replies. He cannot allow himself to think too much, already his heart is pounding, the cold clarity of combat descending upon him.
“I love you, husband mine,” she says, kissing him again.

“I love you, sweet wife, my lovely one,” he rasps, and then he wrenches himself away, his last image of her like the winter sun, pale and determined, branded upon his heart. He canters to the front of the host, his seven Lionsguard flanking him, banners flying high and proud.

And then he begins to count.

At four hundred paces he wraps his reins around the pommel of his saddle.

At three hundred he calls the order for drawn swords.

At two hundred and fifty he sounds the advance at a trot, and the host moves forward, ten men deep, four hundred wide, horses fighting against the imposed restraint, but the line holds. At two hundred he calls for the canter.

At one hundred and fifty he sees, in his peripheral vision, grey, fleet-footed shapes, fanged and clawed, race ahead in front of him, and his smile is feral indeed (he remembers the way they snarled and ripped and tore through men in the Whispering Wood like a knife through silk - the echo of Robb Stark’s ghost - he hears in his mind his wife saying remember Nymeria and sees the dangerous glint in the Lady Arya’s eyes).

At one hundred, as the ground slopes gently away beneath them, he calls for the lances again, and as one, four thousand lances are lowered and aimed squarely upon leather-covered Dothraki chests. He selects his first enemy, wild haired and screaming, arahk held high, and calls for the charge.

Only now do the Dothraki hear the lions roar and the wolves howl.
The battle is the bloody rout Jaime had predicted, though he had not banked upon capturing Ser Jorah Mormont. When the Queen in the North learns of this, she merely orders him bound, stripped of weapons, under constant guard by Westermen and stipulates that she will treat her prisoners with honour.

Equally surprising are the skeletal smallfolk, who come from Riverrun and loot the Dothraki of their silver, their weapons, and carve up their dead horses for much needed sustenance, and who, when questioned, give the Crownlands, the Stormlands and the Reach as their places of origin, and Jaime’s mood, already grim, becomes grimmer still at the thought of the Dragon Queen ravaging her way around.

This must end, he thinks, uncharacteristically despairing.

And then he almost bursts out laughing in a hysterical release of tension when he is met with the utterly incongruous sight of his wife, bucket of snowmelt at her feet and rag in hand, gently, patiently cleaning Nymeria’s bloody maw. The direwolf endures it good-naturedly, pausing only to playfully swipe at the tail of one of the most majestic creatures he has ever seen, and his breath is entirely stolen from him.

Nymeria and the Queen in the North stand next to a lion, of a height with the direwolf, with a luxuriant golden mane and glossy fur, eyes alert but calm, and he approaches, awed. The lions of his childhood pale in comparison, caged and chained in the bowels of the Rock. He’d been frightened, he recalls. Cersei was not. He is not frightened now.

There is intelligence in the Lion’s eyes, and he shifts uncertainly as their gazes meet, green on green. It is a strange thing, to be so scrutinised, but he senses no ill will. This is not a simple animal; this is something more, something like the Stark direwolves, and so he does what feels he should.

He bows, reverently.

And when he straightens the Lion bows his head at him in a fluid, noble motion, and Jaime swallows unsteadily, extending his palms, exhaling sharply when his fingers sink into the golden fur, feeling the rumbling purr, and to distract himself from what it might mean, he turns to Sansa.

“Do I get a bath too?” he drawls wickedly, sliding his arm around her lithe waist and pulling her bodily against him, breathing in her scent, relishing the feel of her melting, sighing into his embrace. It gives him a reassurance he did not know he required.
“Oh, insufferable, infuriating man!” she laughs, smirking. “But you haven’t answered my question - do I get a bath too? I am, after all, covered in grime and gore.”

“I don’t care about that,” she responds, her voice quiet and serious. “I only care that you have come back to me,” she continues solemnly, tracing his lips with shaking fingers. “Jaime, Jaime, Jaime - ”

“Sansa,” he gasps, his whole body shuddering, and he touches his nose to hers. “Sansa, my lovely one, my sweet wife, my queen, my love.”

“I love you, I love you, I adore you, I love you, I love you,” his wife chants desperately between kisses, and he hears a guttural, wrenching sound he realises has come from him. He is crying, he thinks vaguely.

The joy of lounging against the headboard, his wife held securely in his arms as he feeds her is a very substantial and pleasant distraction from the grim memories of the day, at least until he offers her a roasted chestnut, pressing it gently to her lips, only for her to blanch and swallow harshly, pushing his hand away with a distressed moan.

“Sansa?” he tenses, watching she curls closer against his form, burying her face in his shoulder. “Sansa?”

“I can’t - I can’t eat them,” she replies, and her strain in her voice makes him swiftly carry the platter over to the far side of the room, and when he returns to her side, her stomach knotting itself into excruciating tangles as he - has she been poisoned? - she moans again, and he gathers her to him, wanting to ease her discomfort but not knowing how.
“Sansa?” he swallows past the lump in his throat, debating whether or not to shout for a maester. “Lovely one -

She bursts into tears then, clinging to him, draping one leg over his waist, her hands toying with his hair. He rubs her back, attempting to - he doesn’t know what he’s attempting to do -

“I love you, I love you, Jaime, Jaime, Jaime -

She gasps between her sobs, lifting herself to look at him as he reaches out to cradle her face with both hands.

“Sansa,” he rasps hoarsely, “You are frightening me, lovely one. What is wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing is wrong,” she hiccups.

“Then why?” He brushes the tears from her cheeks.

“Am I like this?” she finishes his question with a choked, rueful laugh. “Only once before in my life have I been unable to stand the smell of chestnuts.”

He thinks chestnuts are a very strange thing to be unable to stand, and he’s abruptly reminded that Cersei found scallops unbearable when she was -

His eyes widen. “You’re with child?”

She nods, laughing through her sobs, and he inhales sharply at her confirmation.

“I - Sansa. Sansa. My lovely one, sweet wife…” he murmurs, dumbfounded, swallowing violently, admiring the light in her sea-coloured eyes. “I did not realise you could know so soon,” he marvels.

“It is rare, but it can apparently happen,” she grins briefly, before her features shutter and her voice takes on the carefully neutral tone that it always does when she speaks of the horrors she has endured. “It helps that I knew some of the signs already.”
He traces her cheekbones and she settles against him with a sigh. “Lovely one, sweet wife, Sansa, I love you, and this gift is…” He shakes his head, blinking away the tears, struggling against the bittersweet ache in his chest. “I do not have the words.” He reaches out with his left hand to brush her stomach with a disbelieving kind of reverence.

“Then don’t speak, my love,” she replies mischievously, touching her nose to his. She does not have to ask; he eagerly presses his mouth to hers, tasting deeply of her, revelling in her mewls of pleasure, and he rolls them over so that she is beneath him, her lithe legs coming to wrap themselves around his waist, her hands sliding into his hair, and he proceeds to lose himself quite thoroughly in her passion, her affection, her love, reciprocating enthusiastically, giving all that he can, all that he is.

Chapter End Notes

thoughts?
SANSA STARK VIII

Chapter Summary

It had never been enough.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! welcome to this next chapter. As always, thank you for your comments and encouragements; they really do make a difference.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART SIXTEEN

SANSA STARK

She wakes before the dawn, suddenly, breathing hard, some half-forgotten memory or dream jolting her into consciousness. Riverrun is a castle of carved stone balconies and gurgling fountains and lily-ponds and arching windows that let in the light and the breeze through gauzy curtains, enclosed behind high ramparts. It is not suited to snow and winter, as demonstrated by the roaring fires burning through the night in every chamber, and by the pile of furs she - the Queen in the North - and Jaime, are currently huddled under.
She frowns; she is safely ensconced in her husband’s arms, her cheek to his heart, their legs tangled, his arm around her, and so she does not understand what has woken her. She glances up at his face, tracing his cheekbone, the line of his jaw, biting her bottom lip as he shifts in his sleep to follow her light touch.

“I love you,” she murmurs against his heart, as though her words themselves might themselves sink into his very skin. “I am happy, my love,” she continues softly, her left hand sinking down to tangle with where his hand rests, large and warm and possessive, upon her stomach. She swallows unsteadily, thinking of the child she carries. Her skin is still flat, she knows, but her mind leaps ahead to the time when all will be able to tell that she proudly carries her husband’s child. She wants this child with a desperation that frightens her, she realises. She wants a family, she wants a child created of love. More than that; she wants this family, she wants this child.

“I love you, Jaime. I love you, I love you, and I am happy. I am so happy. I am the most happy.” She kisses his chest again, tasting the scent of his skin, deep, addicting, delirium-inducing, him, him, him. Only him. A miracle, a hope, a future, something infinitely valuable for which to fight in this time of war and death and destruction. There is something to await aside from scorched earth and ashes. The Thaw is truly here. In Winter living things slumber and await rebirth; it is fitting, therefore, that the Queen in Winter should fall with child at the time of the Thaw.

Her child, hers and Jaime’s child, will be of the Spring, and just for a moment, in the grey of the end of night, when even the stars fade from sight, and before the sun begins her timid ascent, she allows herself to dream. The sweet sound of her child’s laughter carried upon the wind across the surf, frolicking in the sun, and knowing nothing of death and war and fear and pain.

She is happier than she has ever been in her life, and it is the kind of happiness that has been hard fought and hard won, and is the more precious because of it, and she is surprised to find herself blinking away tears.

She could stare at his slumbering form for an eternity, she thinks with a girlish giggle. I love you, I adore you, I want you, dear, darling husband mine.

For a man so given to movement whilst awake, for a man so passionate, (she blushes) that he is so still as this whilst asleep might seem incongruous, but she has noticed that her husband stills only in anger or in peace.

He is so at ease when he is beyond the cares of the waking world; his brow is smoothed, untroubled, though she knows his dreams, his fears, the memories that torment him. What are you dreaming of, husband mine? She wonders tenderly, and considers that instead of following her first thought - that is, to wake him - gently, teasingly, with light kisses upon his skin, with soft caresses to warm him - she ought to let him sleep. The past days have been arduous indeed, and all the more
arduous for the bloody rout the day before. Mercifully, her husband had not returned to her injured, and the number of their men who’d fallen upon the battlefield had been very small.

Some impulse forces her into movement; with a regretful sigh, she slips out from the warmth of Jaime’s embrace, and she smiles softly as he shifts in his sleep.

Pressing her lips together, she drifts a tender hand through his hair, smiling to herself at how ruffled it is and then regretfully tears herself away from him, hissing at the sudden sensation of the cold hitting her skin. She has never wanted less to rise from bed; but there is something tugging upon her heart, some awareness pricking and sliding across her skin, her body tense with some instinct she cannot ignore.

She dresses in the grey light of the last of the night sky, in a white embroidered riding habit, leather boots, her heavy cloak swung about her frame to shield her against the chill, her hair loose, and she quietly slips into the corridor, jolting the guards on duty. “Be at ease,” she tells Brienne and Ser Leonidas. “If you would tell my husband when he wakes that I have gone to the Whispering Wood; there is a weirwood tree at the heart of the forest, a lone survivor from the elder days, and I should like to pray there.” The words fall from her lips before she realises, but they feel right. She does not know why or how, but she just knows that she must find that heart tree.

“Our Majesty,” Ser Leonidas bows.

Brienne, however, steps forward. “I am coming with you.”

Wynafryd Manderly, fresh-faced for the start of her shift, does the same.

“Of course,” Sansa replies, undeterred.

Riverrun is quiet, though not truly silent; not with four thousand cavalry encamped, not with the swarm of refugees from the rest of the South, bringing with them what few possessions they could, that have sought shelter here. The smokehouses - if they can be termed thus - most are little more than open campfires - have been running continuously since the first dead Dothraki horse was retrieved from the battlefield, and Sansa knows they will keep running for many days yet, until all the meat has been dried and smoked, so that people will be able to eat until the next harvest can be planted. The smell, acrid and somewhat bitter, hangs in the air like mist, clinging to clothing and skin with all the desperation of a scorned lover, and makes Sansa cough, makes her eyes sting, and she hurries her pace.
But the tents themselves are devoid of the habitual chaos of an encamped host; bugles and shouts and raucous laughter, the hissing rasp of whetstones sharpening blades, the crackling of campfires, neighs and whinnies of tethered horses, the marching of men in armour. Amidst the sentries cracking their jaws in yawns, men snore and horses stamp their hooves, but that is all.

She likes being able to walk, virtually unacknowledged, Brienne and Wynafryd striding warily beside her, willing, for some strange reason, to humour Sansa in this. And then Sansa sees the Lion beyond the castle’s walls, still at the water’s edge where it is unfrozen, watching silent as she approaches. Her breathing quickens; her heart softens at this, a visible manifestation of her husband’s soul, just as Lady was hers. The previous night, after the raising of the camp, after all were settled for the night, Jaime had gone to the Lion, and cautiously pressing his forehead to his sigil’s, breathing the same air, and Sansa had seen all the tension melt from her husband’s frame, suddenly washed away. The ensuing light in the King of the West’s eyes had made her own heart leap.

“Good morning, great one,” Sansa speaks quietly, extending her hand towards the Lion. Her Wolfsguard make to intervene, but Sansa simply raises her other hand. “No, it’s alright. He means me no harm. He is my husband’s Lion.” She sinks her fingers into the soft fur, and almost weeps at the sharp lance - Lady, where are you? - that pierces her heart. But the Lion merely rumbles a purr in response, and it comforts her a little, and she suddenly understands. “Are you coming with me to find the heart tree then?”

The Lion only turns away, moving elegantly towards the forest, and Sansa follows, lifting her skirts so they are not soaked by the slush and mud. The walk through the trees enables her to clear her mind from the tumult of the past days. From the sudden news of the impending attack on Casterly Rock, to the mad scramble of the forced march, the incredible deepening of her intimacy with her husband… Arya’s revelation about Harrenhal, the Dothraki attack, capturing Jorah Mormont… She has not had time to think, to contemplate, to breathe. She would not change the moments of quiet and pleasure with Jaime for anything in the world, but she realises now that she needs some time to wrap her head around the way he has completely upended her conception of the world in such a short span of time.

That he wants an equal in bed, that he wants her willing - that he only wants her willing, that he does not judge her for her past experiences, that he fights for her, that he chooses her when no-one else has ever done so… it is difficult for her to comprehend. It is so much the opposite of what she has been taught, by her mother, by Cersei, by Joffrey, by Ramsey… it will take time, and she is inordinately grateful for Jaime’s patience.

She is fiercely angry, too. At her mother, principally, for teaching her to be subservient -(obey your husband, do your duty, give him sons) and oh, how easily that had been done! She had wanted so desperately to make her mother proud, to make her father proud, and so she’d done everything she’d been told. Swallowing complaints of it’s not fair, because ladies never complain. Spending hours at her embroidery, her music, her poetry - which she had enjoyed - but that she’d also thrown herself into because her siblings teased her for being prissy and uptight and a lady and stupid,
septa-like, with her naive insistence on following the rules, on things being fair.

And still, it had never been enough.

She’d wanted to play with her siblings, but they’d always be getting dirty. The rough-and-tumble nature of their play had genuinely frightened her. So too had her Septa’s scoldings, her mother’s scoldings whenever she’d come in with stained skirts. And so she’d stopped, only to be mocked as haughty, especially by Arya and Theon. Her father, who’d looked at her brothers with pride, who’d indulged Arya in everything she did, yet regarded her as some strange thing he did not know what to do with. If Sansa had acted in the same way as her siblings - but that wasn’t who she was. And so she’d buried the hurt and the incomprehension and sought comfort in pretty things. If she was playing the high harp and reading poetry she didn’t have to think.

She is angry, as much as she feels shamed by it, but she is angry at her father too. Why did you not fight for me? For my direwolf? Why did you blindly obey the King? The King listened only to you, Father, you could have stopped it. Why did you not warn me of King’s Landing? To slay her direwolf, the sigil of their House, in the name of his old friend the King, and then to think to replace Lady with a baby’s doll? Had Ned Stark’s opinion of his eldest daughter really been so - superficial?

King’s Landing, becoming Joffrey’s betrothed, had seemed like the perfect chance to escape at the time. How wrong she’d been! But instead of feeling disdain at the young, innocent girl she’d been, she realises, she feels strangely protective of her. She doesn’t understand why she hadn’t been warned about what exactly she’d been walking into, that neither her father or her mother had not once spoken to her on the subject. Neither had her septa. Was it because even her family had thought her too air-headed to notice or care what was going on around her?

Have I made you proud now? She thinks, a touch viciously, her hands twisting in her skirts, her thoughts bitter and bleeding upon her tongue. Now that I am a Queen, now that I have left pretty things and sweet songs behind, now that I have left innocence behind? Now that she is no longer that which she once was?

Or am I still disposable? The pretty, air headed daughter who spoke her courtesies flawlessly but who was devoid of any substance? Insipid, and stupid? Not a son, fierce and strong, not Aunt Lyanna reincarnated. She finds herself blinking back tears, and she swallows, furious with herself. Why was I not enough?

Why had she not been enough, as an innocent, naive child, who believed the best in all? She looks at the trees, the bare trunks, the uneven patches of snow; but the land cannot answer her; the land is mute and still. Some vestiges of that little girl who was pure and gold of heart yet remain, though she shows them, for the most part, only to her husband. He is the only person she knows who will
not mock her for them and defend, cherish them instead. Why is she enough for Jaime when she was not enough for the honourable Ned Stark and his wife? Was she truly so foreign a creature? Was her gentleness truly something to be so despised? Was it truly that much of a weakness, instead of one of her greatest strengths? Is it truly so terrible a thing that her torments have only made her kind?

She doesn’t understand, and she wishes she could ask her parents; but they are dead, her father entombed in cold dark stone beneath the fells, and her mother lies upon a lonely riverbed, and she knows that if she does not learn how to lay the matter to rest it will torment her for the rest of her life. So she walks up to the young, bewildered, abandoned girl in her mind’s eye and draws her under her wing. She hears Jaime’s voice in her ear. *It was their fault, not yours. Do not apologise for believing that people are fundamentally good. You aren’t alone any longer.*

She has been so excruciatingly lonely, for all of her life. Lady had been her first and only true friend. Now she has Jaime, but she realises the isolation she has lived in is untenable. She toys briefly with the idea of creating a circle of ladies in waiting, but that isn’t very realistic in a time of war. But she has Brienne, and Wynafryd Manderly and Morgana Mormont, Lyanna’s elder cousin, she thinks suddenly. Her court might yet take shape.

Her parents are dead and dust; and still, married and a Queen in her own right, still she hungers for that elusive thing which is her parents’ pride, her parents’ approval, and in some recess of her heart she hates herself for it. Hates her weakness, hates that they both have such power over her, hates that she does not understand what more there is to do.

*Are you proud of me? What must I do to make you proud of me? What more must I forget and change?* No, she cannot slay another part of her soul. *Father, Mother, have I made you proud? Do I now deserve the Stark name?*

Her parents are gone, and her stomach twists with nausea.

They are gone and they cannot answer her, not now, not ever.

The Lion gently nudges her shoulder, jolting her from her thoughts, and she treads forward slowly, her cloak sweeping the snowy ground. The branches of the trees of the Whispering Wood are bare, all except for the heart tree in front of her. It is not as great as Winterfell’s; somewhat shorter and squatter, but the bark is the same smooth white, the leaves the same dark red, and the air is the same, heady and still, silent, and she finds a sort of solace in this strange familiarity.

And then she sees something that brings her to her knees in awe and joy and sorrow. Wynafryd and
Brienne leap forward to help her, but she is entirely insensible of it, for rounding the heart tree, with a smooth, swift gait, is a direwolf, as large as the Lion. This direwolf’s fur is red, as red as the weirwood leaves, as red as Sansa’s hair, the colour of the deepest sunset. But it is the direwolf’s eyes that make her tremble.

She knows them. She recognises them.

It is impossible, and yet -

“Lady?” she murmurs, almost deliriously, extending a pale, wavering hand, swaying on her knees. The direwolf approaches, and Sansa can see that her belly is slightly distended. A tremor runs through her, and her hand unconsciously brushes her waist. Not Lady, and yet this direwolf is Lady. The direwolf comes to settle against Sansa, and queen and sigil press their foreheads together, as they did when they were little, when they were sweet and innocent. Lady, grey-furred, gentle, trusting, golden-eyed Lady, belongs with the Sansa who was killed at the same time that Lord Stark put a blade in Lady’s neck. This Lady, proud, regal, with veins of frost and ice, and fur like Sansa’s hair, russet, sunset red, gentle still, though less trusting, belongs with Sansa the Queen in the North, Sansa’s Jaime’s wife, Sansa the lady, the woman full-grown, not Sansa the girl.

Nothing ever happens the same way twice.

And then Sansa throws her arms around her Lady’s neck and weeps convulsively into the luxuriant fur.

The Lion beside them in the silence of the wood is frozen, but for his tail twitching back and forth and the languid glint in his eye.

She swallows harshly, determinedly settling the sudden thundering of her heart. How could the last of her mother’s kin do such a thing? And yet, judging by the Lady Roslin’s raven, her uncle has. They’d been on the River Road for less than an hour when one of the maesters had ridden up to her and Jaime and Lady and Jaime’s Lion Fortune at the front of the column and silently handed her the scroll. Making out raven-script whilst in the saddle of a cantering horse is not the easiest thing,
but she’d taken a leaf out of Jaime’s book and wrapped her reins around the pommel of the saddle, so that both her hands might be free.

“Sansa?”

“I must speak to my conclave,” she replies shortly, her shoulders tense. “I’ll explain once it’s settled.” She has to find out how far the seeds of this go, and she has to do it now. The dread, clawing and snarling in her heart, makes her nauseous, and her mind irrationally leaps from scenario to scenario, each more terrible and painful than the last.

Her Wolfsguard make to follow her, cloaks fluttering in the wind, but she motions for them to remain as they are. “I do not need my guard to speak to my bannermen.”

“Sansa, take Lady with you at the very least,” her husband says, and she wants to snap at him that she has nothing to fear, that her conclave would take it as an insult that she needs to be protected from them, but the tightness of his expression, the masked look of apprehension in his green eyes makes her relent and she nods. That Jaime trusts her Lady as she trusts his Fortune is no little relief to her, and she can’t decide which expression of his she’d preferred: when his lion had bonded with him, or when he’d seen her direwolf as she returned from the Whispering Wood after dawn.

“Come, Lady,” she calls, and the better half of her soul lopes elegantly, a shadow at her side, and the set of Jaime’s shoulders loosens in relief. She smiles wanly at him, and she pirouettes her mount around, cantering swiftly down the line to the Lords Glover and Royce. Beginning with them seems like a good idea.

Lords Royce and Glover are visibly surprised at her approach, but they recover quickly as she nimbly turns her horse to ride alongside them. “Your Majesty,” they bow their grizzled heads, bare even in the still biting chill of these days of the Thaw.

“My lords,” she replies softly, inclining her head in return. “I must apologise if I have appeared distant from my conclave these past days; it was not my intention.”

The two lords don’t exactly know what to say - that much is readily apparent. They shift uneasily in their saddles, their horses snorting and skittering at the sudden change in balance. “Come now, my lords,” she implores gently. “Has it not always been our way that any bannerman may speak his piece freely to his sovereign? I promised to listen. I gave my word as a Stark and a Stark honours the word given.”
“You are happy in your marriage,” Lord Glover offers eventually, in tones of mingled satisfaction, confusion and disbelief.

“My dear Lord Glover,” she replies, laughing gaily at his disgruntled expression, before sobering and continuing more solemnly. “I am happy - very happy. Happier than I ever thought I would be.”

“He knows what he’s about on the battlefield,” Lord Glover continues reluctantly, and an amused, wry grin dances upon her lips.

“Is that respect, I hear, my dear Lord Glover?” she rejoins, teasingly, and the man harrumphs. She reaches across to lay a dainty gloved hand on his arm. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell him. His ego is big enough already,” she continues, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, and that makes both of these stalwart, curmudgeonly men bark with laughter.

“When you look past the constant japes he is actually quite serious,” Lord Royce muses. “Though, with a family like his…” He trails off, and Sansa wonders if he is bold enough to finish such a thought aloud in her presence. She has thought the same, of course - that japing is the only way Jaime has managed to remain sane - but that does not mean she would ever speak such a thing. It would hurt her husband, she knows. Indeed, there are some things too painful for him to make light of.

“So you approve, then, my lords?” she questions lightly, though her heart thunders in her chest like a runaway horse.

“It’s one hell of an alliance,” Lord Royce answers. Despite herself, she smiles secretively.

“Aye,” Lord Glover responds with a frown, more straightforwardly, and Sansa nods.

“But others do not,” Sansa replies swiftly, her voice tight. “My uncle Edmure amongst them. According to his wife the Lady Roslin, when we reach the Rock he intends to declare for the Dragon Queen.” Are all the men of her family to betray her, to abandon her, to consider her worthless? Sansa thinks, the bitter taste and claws of despair and humiliation wrenching at her insides.

“When we reach the Rock?” Lord Royce frowns, and Sansa senses from his tone of voice that he has understood what that means. The breaking of guest-right, in a dark irony.
“He is no doubt bitter about being held hostage. Jaime intends to free him, I know, as a gesture of goodwill, but now…”

“That would be ill-advised, Your Majesty,” Lord Glover opines gruffly.

“And yet not doing so would lend more credence to my uncle’s whispered plot at the same time,” Sansa replies wearily. Just when she’d thought her luck had begun to turn - happily married, Lady returned to her, the freedom to make her own decisions - she hears some of the Riverlords, led by her own uncle, mean to break the alliance that has been so hard-won, and shatter once more the delicate peace between Starks and Lannisters and plunge the Seven Kingdoms once more into war, a war no-one can afford, not now, at Winter’s Thaw, and with the Dragon Queen at their gates.

“Your Majesty,” Lord Glover continues, warming to his theme. “I say let these traitors continue their schemes, and when they are revealed we will shame them for their treachery.”

“Forgive me for saying this of your uncle, Your Majesty,” Lord Royce interjects, “but he is not well-liked or respected amongst the Riverlords, and much less in the Vale and the North.”

“Aye,” Lord Glover snorts, slapping his thigh, “there are all those songs about his impotence, sung far and wide.” Sansa blushes at the implication before schooling her features. “He is neither a good commander nor a conscientious Lord - those who would follow him would be few indeed.”

“We understand the ways of war, Your Majesty - mayhap Lord Edmure does not. Your husband was commanded to lift the siege at Riverrun, and he did so in a manner that did not result in a single drop of blood being spilt,” Lord Royce considers. “He used his reputation to good advantage.”

“He wouldn’t have carried out that threat,” Sansa finds herself saying. “He is not that kind of man - no longer, at any rate.”

“No, but everyone thought he would, and that is why his gambit worked,” Lord Royce replies.

“I say let them plot and scheme; continue being nothing like the Dragon Queen and your bannermen’s loyalties will not waver,” Lord Glover speaks solemnly, a touch of shame colouring his next words. “Not any more.”
She knows exactly to what he refers; to the way some of the Northron houses refused to help House Stark reclaim Winterfell, and she shakes her head. She understands why they did not, and the South taught her pragmatism, as well as how not to rule. “Lord Glover,” she begins seriously, looking the man straight in the eyes. “There is no debt. We Starks do not buy our bannermen’s loyalties. And I have no desire to be the kind of ruler who holds a sword over her bannermen’s necks. It breeds fear and mistrust and contempt. I would much rather foster the spirit of cooperation.”

Lord Glover’s mouth goes slack. “Your Majesty - I should be ashamed not to redeem the name of my house.”

She shakes her head. “You have no need to do so. There is no debt - I mean it.”

“We should have crowned you from the beginning,” he rasps, and Sansa is stunned to realise that tears glisten in the Lord of Deepwood Motte’s eyes.

Sansa swallows harshly. “You truly mean that, Lord Glover?”

“Aye, I do.”

“And I agree with Lord Glover,” Lord Royce states calmly.

She can only incline her head, forcing her words past the lump in her throat. “You honour me, my lords. I promise you I will not take it for granted.”

“Your Majesty,” Lord Glover replies, “we know you will not.”

“Dine with Jaime and I tonight,” she says impulsively. “Both of you. I’ll suggest to my husband that he invite two of his bannermen as well. I admit that circumstances have meant forming a court proper has rather fallen by the wayside. I intend to remedy that.”
They halt briefly to water the horses at Wayfarer’s Rest, and she notices that her husband is not only silent, but grim, and her heart trembles in her chest.

“Jaime?” she ventures, her voice tight. “What is it?”

He jerks his head, an abrupt motion of his chin, and she follows his gaze over to the left. In the midst of dismounted knights standing around, tightening loose girths and vaulting back into saddles as the host prepares once again to depart, she sees Jaime’s Lord Commander, Ser Leonidas, with his father Lord Lydden. The two men appear deep in conversation, and they touch their wine gourds in a toast before embracing fiercely. “Here is where Lord Lydden leaves us, this is where he turns due south to ride through the narrow, hidden paths through the mountains to reach Deep Den, where he will do his best to thin the Dragon Queen’s numbers as we have agreed. I am sending him to his death. I know it, Ser Leonidas knows it, Lord Lydden knows it, as does his company, and yet he will still ride south.” Her heart twists at her husband’s weary words, at the subtle anguish carved into the set of his jaw. “This is not my first war,” he continues distantly, “but sending my men off to die never gets easier.”

She reaches out to take his left hand in hers, and she squeezes it gently, before lifting it to her lips and kissing his knuckles, his fingers, and then his palm; the only public gesture of comfort she can offer him, and the stiff set of his shoulders settles slightly, but his gaze never leaves Lord Lydden, and when the Lord of Deep Den vaults into the saddle Jaime nods sharply to himself.

“You’ll want to be in the saddle for this, Sansa,” he says, and though she is confused, she tightens her mount’s girths and vaults nimbly back into the saddle, suppressing a wince as her muscles protest. Jaime helps her with her stirrups, as has become his habit, drifting lingering caresses to the tender inside of her ankles, before mounting his own horse.

The host mounts up around them, Sansa noticing that the Westermen all have their lances held upright, as Lord Lydden makes his way towards his king. He must be of Lord Tywin’s generation, perhaps slightly younger, and though grizzled he is still trim and strong, the glint in his eyes still sharp.

“Sire,” the bannerman says, his voice solemn, inclining his head. “Your Majesty,” he continues, and Sansa smiles gently in response.
“Lord Lydden,” The King of the West replies, and Sansa catches the well-disguised conflict in her husband’s tone. She knows, without a doubt, that he absolutely hates this, hates asking his men to die in his name, and she watches curiously as he reaches for his wine gourd from his saddlebags, pulling the cap off with his teeth, before extending his arm so Lord Lydden can touch his own gourd to Jaime’s.

“To the gods,” Lord Lydden says.

“To fortune,” Jaime replies.

“To the setting sun,” Lord Lydden and Jaime intone together.

Both men pour out a libation before drinking, and the wine splatters, blood-dark, onto the snow. Their gourds replaced, Jaime grasps his bannerman’s forearm in the traditional salutation. “I am honoured, my Lord Lydden,” Jaime continues gravely.

“I have one last war in me, Sire. Those foreign savages will have to hack my arm off at the shoulder if they wish to part me from my shield.”

“I expect no less from a man who has looked the setting sun in the face all the days of his life.” Jaime’s grin is something fierce, and feral, and Sansa sees how his bannerman sits taller, straighter in his saddle, the pride that lights the lord’s gaze at the confidence his liege shows him, and her heart warms at how her husband is able to inspire his men. He is truly a worthy ruler, she thinks proudly.

“I have seen the Lions of the Rock raised once more to Kings of the West, rising again from their fall, and united under a ruler I am proud to call my own; and now comes the time for me to heed the call of the setting sun, though I will not go quietly.”

Jaime swallows unsteadily at his bannerman’s words. “Thank you… Lewys,” he acknowledges thickly, and that is when Sansa decides to edge her horse towards the Lord of Deep Den, and to his great surprise, she places a gentle kiss upon the whiskery cheek.

“The North Remembers,” she says simply, quietly, “and your valour shall be sung in the stone halls of my forefathers.”
“Your Majesty,” Lewys Lydden replies hoarsely, and she smiles gently, understanding that the time has come, urging her horse back. Beside her, Jaime calls for his lance, and once he has hefted it into the air with his left hand, once the hundred heavy cavalry riding south have formed up, he nods one last time at his bannerman.

Then Lord Lydden draws his sword with a rasp, returns his liege’s nod, and bellows in a voice that will carry easily across any battlefield, Sansa knows, “Hail the King! and to the Den!”

Jaime extends his lance out, his teeth grit and his jaw set, and Lord Lydden meets the lance with his sword as he canters past, and Sansa sees her husband’s arm jar, but the lance remains raised, as all one hundred men of Lord Lydden’s company canter past, meeting their king’s lance with their own swords. Jaime’s gaze does not waver; he looks every knight in the eye, and only once the company is gone, standards flying high in the wind, headed straight for the mountains, does her husband move at all.

“‘To the Rock!’” he calls once more, and they set off again at the pace they have been able to maintain these past days, and the host begins to move in a thunder of hooves and banners catching in the wind and horses, neighing, snorting.

The plan, Sansa knows, is to reach Sarsfield by nightfall, and from there it is half a day’s hard ride to the Rock itself. As they approach the Lannister heartlands proper, she finds herself intensely curious about her husband’s country. The road here is wide and well-made, cutting a straight path through the mountains that rise around them. Here, too, she sees destruction; apart from patches of snow and mud and rock, she sees the charred skeletons of Jaime’s apricot and olive trees and stumps of grape vines upon the lower slopes. The cypresses that line the road as far as the eye can see, a splendid colonnade, are black and bare branched, a dead mockery of what was once green and alive before the war. Here and there she sees signs of recovery, and as they continue upon their way and get closer to the Golden Tooth, where the mountainsides become more forbidding, craggy, as the road winds its way up to the pass, more of the terraces are cultivated, and Sansa marvels at how they have been hewn from the rock.

She recalls that her brother Robb fought a battle at Oxcross; the burnings and destruction - some of it, at least, must date from his time, (Oh, Robb, why did you want this burning glory? It is naught but ash and bitter in the mouth - why did you ride west and not south - to me? I waited, I hoped, desperately, I hoped, I kept faith, and my sole reward was to be beaten; as this land went up in flames so too I bled, and for what? Only now is the war between Starks and Lannisters at an end, and not through any actions of yours, brother - oh, brother mine, why? If only your reason had overruled your lust - I would have ridden south, Robb, I would have got you back!) - though the more recent swathe of death is the result of the Dragon Queen’s roving troops.

Her husband hides his heartbreak well from all except her; she sees the desolation wrought upon the land mirrored in the desolate expression in his green eyes, in the way he looks around him,
wearing upon his countenance the disbelief of a young child, and her own heart wrenches. She
remembers what she saw in her Riverlands, how ravaged they were, and the distant fires
smouldering in the East, in the Stormlands, the Crownlands and the Reach, telling of the Dragon
Queen’s promise of *fire and blood*. It must end; it must. Even as they ride to war, even knowing
that the notion of the Dragon Queen agreeing to a peaceful, political, diplomatic solution,
eschewing further bloodshed, is more than likely nothing more than a desperate delusion of her
innocent heart, still, even now, she hopes for peace.

She wants her child to know nothing of the horrors she and Jaime have endured, of the ravages
visited upon their lands. She wants harmony and love and life and laughter. Torture and captivity
and rape and war have not managed to kill the tender, gentle heart of the little girl she once was;
not entirely at least, and it is something she clings to with the desperation of one who knows how
precious and rare and important such a thing is because it was forcibly wrenched and beaten from
her.

She manoeuvres her horse closer to his so she can take his golden hand in hers, and he looks at her
curiously. “We will replant the trees, Jaime, I swear it. Your apricot trees will grow once again
upon these slopes if I have to plant them myself,” she vows lowly, fiercely, and she sees awed
astonishment flit across his face.

He swallows harshly, momentarily rendered silent, and he lifts her gloved hand to his mouth for an
ardent, eloquent kiss, his gesture telling her all that he cannot bring himself to express.

“If this is how bad this road is,” he says eventually, his voice rough and hoarse, “I dread to think
what the state of the Goldroad will be. That was the way the Unsullied retreated, and I have no
doubt that they left only blackened char and ash in place of trees and fruit in their wake.”

“Oh, Jaime,” she sighs mournfully. She can well imagine what he means. She remembers the way
Winterfell’s stone walls were blackened, first by the Ironborn and then by the Boltons, though they
did not burn (for fire cannot destroy rock), how the fortress resembled a black gash, a jagged scar
upon the landscape, ripping a chasm between the grey sky and the snowy fells.

The mountains that rise from the Goldroad would ordinarily be called picturesque; snow capped in
winter, green and flowered, abundant with life in the more temperate seasons though a harsh,
unforgiving place; ravines rendering the way treacherous indeed. Now, blackened by soot, grey
with ash, bare, dead branches and fierce crags, sloped terraces abandoned, ravaged, everything
ravaged by the flames, such a view would provoke only sorrow.

That does not mean these mountains of the West are entirely without a fight left, Sansa knows. The
way to Deep Den is a narrow, treacherous ravine, to a fortress hidden within the mountainside
itself, utterly invisible from the outside, commanding an excellent view of the Goldroad. It winds
and twists steeply, and the path is slippery with shingle. The road is no different; narrow enough that only four horses may be ridden abreast and unpaved, it winds its way up to the pass and then down the other side, obstructed by stones that fall, rumbling, down the cliff-faces, and with vertiginous drops into the ravine below, which is only swollen with rushing water during the greatest of thunderstorms. It is where the wild mountain lions, great black beasts, ferocious and patient hunters stalk their prey and make their dens. The Dragon Queen’s journey to the Rock will not be easy, Sansa knows. The notion does not reassure her as much as it should.

Sarsfield is a fortress built upon a high promontory that rises from the valley, the mountains soaring high into the sky both to the north and the south, and here at last she sees the valley has green still, snow only remaining upon the high peaks, but there is life upon the lower slopes, and also upon the terraces higher up, where the rock is too steep to be cultivated without the stepped terraces being carved into the mountainsides, and it lifts a weight from her. Jaime, too, brightens, though Lord Lydden still weighs heavily upon his mind, she knows, just as the twin problems of what to do with her Uncle Edmure and Ser Jorah Mormont weigh upon hers.

She takes the opportunity of catching up on her despatches whilst they bathe and dress for the evening meal, washing the dust and mud and smell of horse from the road off their bodies. Though dark outside, the solar is bright with candlelight, and she appreciates not having to strain her eyes too greatly. To avoid lengthy messages from her spies, she works with ciphers, and for a time the only sounds in the room are those of candles sputtering and the nib of her quill scratching away as she hunches efficiently over the papers.

All is quiet in the North, and that lifts an unseen weight from her shoulders. The Dothraki lured towards the Neck have all drowned in the marsh, and satisfaction, fierce and grim, flows through her veins. There has still been no sign of Euron Greyjoy, and that disquiets her. Where can he be hiding? Even with a depleted fleet he is still not a threat to be summarily dismissed, and she is all the more nervous because her fleet carrying all the infantry is at this very moment sailing through such contested waters.

But it is the news from Dorne, of all places, that holds her attention.

Scrawled upon the flimsy raven parchment, in tiny black lettering, is something that once more turns the whole Game upon its head.
Dorne knows no rule but Dorne herself.

Arianne of House Martell, Princess Regnant of Dorne

The Princess must have been hidden away by her own supporters, Sansa thinks, after her father the Prince Doran and her younger brother Prince Trystane were murdered by Ellaria. Her mind spins. Ellaria had no authority to declare herself the ruler of the desert country. No right to ally herself to Daenerys Targaryen in the name of her people. Daenerys Targaryen never had Dorne in the first place.

She will not be pleased, of that Sansa is certain.

Dorne is no friend to the Dragon Queen, but can Dorne be a friend to the North? the Riverlands, the Vale? to the West? Or is neutrality the best that can be achieved? Is a treaty possible in the slightest? It would be foolish of her to assume that she is the only person the Princess Arianne has sent a raven to.

She pushes her cushioned chair back from her desk violently, the carved wood protesting, and dashes from the chamber in a manner that is most un-queenly, the raven scroll clutched tightly in her fist, Lady on her heels.

She needs to find her husband, and she needs to find him immediately.

Chapter End Notes

thoughts?
“The thing about spies is that you have to assume every side has their own set.” The lilt of Sansa’s voice is musical and caressing, entirely incongruous with her subject matter, but fitting to the way he knows she goes about these duties. It is her coping mechanism; the only way she survives trawling through ciphers and conflicting reports when she is already tired from riding cross-country and discussing matters of state with him and the conclave. She finds managing her spies easier if she can find the beauty in it, he has noticed, in the perfection of an elusive cipher, in a note written as a piece of music which she must play on her lap-harp in order to understand. He has often found her frowning in concentration over the instrument in the waning of the afternoon before the evening meal in her solar in Winterfell and in their rooms on the march, sounding out melodies before pacing, humming a second tune with which to respond. “If we can have spies in King’s Landing and Sunspear and Highgarden, for example, it stands to reason that so does the Dragon Queen, so do the Dornish, so does the Reach. A spymaster must be able to think ahead.”

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, welcome to this next instalment! Thanks as always for your continued support and encouragement; it really does mean a lot and it really does help me as a writer, and it inspires me to continue to write.

Lots of plot stuff for you to enjoy, with a few... unexpected cameos, shall we say?

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Lord Sarsfield has a fine keep,” Bronn comments nonchalantly, leaning back in his chair as he brings his goblet to his lips and takes a long draught, before sighing contentedly.

Jaime throws his sellsword friend a sardonic glance. “And a Lannister-

“Always pays his debts, I know,” Bronn replies with a touch of asperity.

“I did pay you; it is not my fault the Dragon Queen decided to set the supply train alight,” Jaime says evenly, lifting his own drink to his lips. Beside them his friend Ser Addam is looking between them, bemused, brows furrowed. It is almost time for the evening meal, but there is time for Jaime to enjoy the view of the sunset over the valley, lighting the Rock on the far horizon a distant, burning gold and painting the high peaks with streaks of pink and purple, dazzling in the snow, accompanied by a glass of wine and the company of friends, something to take his mind off the grimness of the afternoon. Fortune his Lion lounges idly about at Jaime’s feet, though the flickers of his eyes and ears tell Jaime he is ever alert.

“What’s all this about?” Addam asks, bewildered. It has been a long, grim day in a series of long, grim days, and the man can’t keep his impatience from his tone, or his confusion at the relevance of such an issue.

Jaime makes to answer but Bronn is faster, declaiming in a dramatic, ironic voice, “The King of the West here promised me gold, a wife and a castle for my services. Thus far I’ve only seen the gold, and that was melted by that silver-haired bitch.”

“We’re at war, Bronn,” he replies sardonically. “I’ve paid my debts so far - you’ll get your pick of
keeps.” Now is most certainly not the time; he’s given his word, and that should be enough, for the
time being. He’s never liked politics; he never thought he would become King, has never wanted
power for the sake of power, and sometimes it feels like he is drowning under the weight of
competing demands; the conclave, the war, his family. Only Sansa, only his wife and her support;
their support of each other and the comforting knowledge that they need not work alone, that they
can be each others confidants and advisors and lovers, makes it easier for him to breathe. Around
his wife the worry and the fears recede, they fade away like ghosts in smoke, and he feels more
capable, including outside the military arena. That does not mean he enjoys it. He also knows he
would not be able to rule effectively alone.

Cersei had always said his dream of marrying and having a family and being free of the cares of
the world was a fool’s dream. But it is not so easy as that to change a man’s ambition, and his
deepest, most secret ambition, indeed, has not changed. What has changed is that he now
understands that he wields the power to shape this ambition into being. Conclave meetings become
less difficult and wearisome when he keeps that in mind.

It might seem incongruous for a knight and a king to want peace - after all, what would he do all
day? he would get bored without someone to pit himself against - but he’s always thought such
reasoning to be simplistic. After so long alternately fearing for his life, enduring horrors, being
vilified, having to fight and war and reconstruct himself, he simply wants time to be able to enjoy
what he devotes so much of his energy building. His entire life has been a tale of the cycle of
building stable foundations, only for those foundations to be summarily destroyed and the illusion
shattered. He wants more than foundations; he wants a city, he wants a world and he wants to be
able to enjoy it.

And if that is hubris then so be it, but that will not stop him fighting for it.

He wants peace and quiet and calm and rest. He wants to spend entire days in the company of his
wife, listening to her sing and play, kissing her, bedding her. He wants to take her swimming in the
surf and galloping along the beaches in the shadow of the Rock. He wants to watch his children
grow old and he wants to take joy in being a father, in being a husband.

“Something on par with Ser Addam’s Ashemark here, I think,” Bronn drawls between gulps of
wine, leaning back in his chair with his usual nonchalance, drawing Jaime, blinking and unsettled,
back into the conversation. He may as well get to the bottom of this now, he thinks wearily. “After
all, how much do you think your arse is worth, Sire?”

Addam snorts at that and Jaime glares, unamused. “Do you trust me, or shall I write you a list of
keeps?”

“I trust you to ask me to man the scorpions, I trust you to lead the charge in battle, and I trust you to
Jaime throws him a withering glance. He allows the sellsword to get away with many things, but commenting upon his wife is not one of them. He knows that as King of the West his private life is the subject of scrutiny; and he has spent long enough around unfit kings to understand that the importance of a secure succession is paramount. That does not mean that he wishes to hear the japes and the songs; he finds it disrespectful and cheapening, but he also knows that there is no easy way around it.

Bronn continues, undeterred. “If you don’t want your men to talk about it, you should be more discreet. I heard a song this morning about the lion tangling his tail with the direwolf’s. It was shit, though. Rhyming howl with lion on the prowl should be outlawed,” he says blithely, ignoring Jaime’s clenched jaw and Addam’s sudden, sputtered guffaw.

“She’s my wife,” he bites out, spitting the furious words from between clenched teeth. Brorr has always delighted in provoking him, and he is self-aware enough to realise that a life like his provides the man with many things to make fun of.

“I suppose I should have seen it coming, really. You always do seem to go for the beautiful, formidable ones.”

“Bronn?” He says tersely. Sometimes he wonders why he keeps the sellsword around.

“Aye?”

“Enough.”

“Well, if we can’t talk about the Queen in the North we can talk about the lady Ser Addam seems to have his eye upon?” Brorr says jovially, and Jaime’s annoyance fades as he sees his oldest friend’s hand tense around his goblet, replaced by curiosity as the significant thing is that Addam does not deny the insinuation as he has often done in the past. “One of the Wolfsguard, isn’t she? The pretty one with black hair, more formidable with a short sword than most men ever will be. What’s she called again?”

Jaime frowns, an incredulous tone to his thoughts. “You’re not talking about Morgana Mormont, are you?”
Addam smirks but remains silent, and that is when Jaime realises he’s deduced correctly, and he freezes in shock.

The sellsword whistles, a long, crass sound. “That’s not Lady Mormont’s cousin, is it?”

“So you have been paying attention, then?” Jaime drawls languidly, having recovered from his momentary surprise, and after Bronn’s japes at his expense, he doesn’t find himself in a particularly charitable mood. Addam snorts but merely takes another swallow of wine.

“Seems to me that Westermen have a thing for formidable northern ladies,” Bronn says, grinning, waggling his eyebrows obscenely.

“Bronn,” Jaime begins, his voice curling with dry amusement, the thought dawning on him as he speaks, “are you afraid of my wife?”

“Sire,” the sellsword replies, “she’s fucking terrifying. She only has to turn her head and the bannermen rush to do her bidding - it’s fucking weird seeing grown men, powerful men - obey a woman and it not be out of fear but out of respect and love. And then she also stared down the Dragon bitch, naked.” He gestures towards himself. “I’m many things but I’m not an idiot, I like to think I’m just as clever as you high-born shits, possibly cleverer, seeing as I seem to not cock things up so often, and only an idiot wouldn’t find her frightening.”

And Jaime throws his head back and laughs.

“Dorne?” He is entirely astonished. He had neither expected to hear of nor have anything to do with the Dornish ever again, not in light of the fraught, convoluted histories the Houses Lannister and Martell share. “Dorne?” Had she been anyone else he would have questioned her sanity, but not Sansa.
“I know, Jaime, I know.” His wife moves into the chamber proper, Lady and Fortune on her heels, moving soundlessly over the flagstones to take the seat next to him, recently vacated by Bronn. The sellsword had paled upon the arrival of the Queen in the North, and one look at the solemn expression on her face had been enough for him to rise with an exaggerated swagger, sauntering off with his habitual brand of ribald humour. Though Jaime did notice that Bronn’s speech had been strangely devoid of any quips about Sansa.

“Arianne Martell is not like to be a friend either to Starks or Lannisters, but neither to the Targaryens,” Addam ventures, and Sansa acknowledges his words with a swift nod.

“Indeed,” she continues, her tone becoming more urgent, more fraught. “We are not our kin. I refuse to believe that we are mere vessels for the names of our families. We are more. We must be.” Jaime sees her fingers begin to twist into her skirts; the only indication of her disquiet, and he gently takes her hands in his and brings them to his lips. They tremble in his grip, her breathing stutters, before she forces it back to calm, and she squeezes his left hand in gratitude, bowing her head. He knows all too well what she is referring to, and has seen the consequences with his own eyes. Turning men and women into weapons is difficult and has a tendency to backfire. It also brings nothing but personal tragedy.

“May I ask what you intend to do, Sire, Your Majesty?” Addam asks, and Jaime glances at his old friend before turning his attention back to his wife. Her brow is knit in concentration, her dainty fingers rubbing tired circles into her temples, and she stands from her chair to pace out her frustration.

“What can we do? Extend the hand of friendship? Hope for their neutrality?” Jaime throws out various ideas, although none sound particularly appealing, principally because he doubts their chances of success. Whether he likes it or not, and he most decidedly does not, politics is not a game of certainties. It is not simple, it is not black and white, and it is rarely played how its makers envisioned. There is always some variable that is not fully accounted for, some late entrant which turns the whole landscape upside down. Politics is a game of cards wherein each player must do the best with the hand they have been given, and where the shades of the past linger over their shoulders like scorned lovers pleading remember me, remember me through the veils of time.

“Extending the hand of friendship, I do believe, is not ever a mistake,” she muses thoughtfully, looking out into the sunset. “The difficulty will be whether or not Arianne Martell takes such overtures seriously.” For a moment, her back is to him, and the reddish-gold light of the evening illuminates her, and she suddenly shines so brightly he cannot look at her, and then she turns her head in his direction and the instant is shattered and the queen of the winter realms is mortal once more. He is fully aware that he is entirely smitten with his Northron wife; he also doesn’t care one jot that he is.

“Martells, Starks and Lannisters… what a thought!” He exclaims with a mirthless chuckle.
“Stranger alliances have happened,” she replies wryly. “Ours, for example. We managed to end the Stark-Lannister war, and that gives me hope.” He cannot help smiling back at her, and the edges of his vision blur, so focused he is on her. He cannot help wishing they were alone, that he might trace the delicate, elegant lines of her features with his fingertips and his lips.

“Even with the Martells? Even with the Targaryens?” Addam questions, and the intruding voice drags both Jaime and Sansa back into the world in which other people exist.

Her expression is pensive. “I do not know,” she replies to her husband’s bannerman before she looks at Jaime, suddenly determined, proud steel running through her veins, her bearing charismatic and solemn. “But I do know this - if I do not try I will regret it forever.” He has thought before that she is the worthiest of a throne that he has ever known, he has thought it nearly every day since that first time, and he thinks it again now.

“He can come to lay siege to the Rock as we both suspect she will, then I am yours, Jaime. I am with you, your ally, your wife, your lady, until the very end, whatever our endeavours, I am yours. But for the sake of my own conscience I must attempt to resolve this peacefully, one last time.”

He nods, and is about to suggest they go down to the hall for the evening meal (a quick glance at the hourglass upon the mantlepiece tells him they should soon be on their way or else risk being late, and a more offensive action towards his host Jaime can scarcely conceive; it would be the height of disrespect to do so) but Addam raises another point, one they have not yet discussed.
“The lines of the board are being redrawn, courtesy of Arianne Martell of Dorne. Are you certain that they have been redrawn for the last time? It seems to me that around you both alliances are shifting like quicksand.”

“The Reach?” Jaime surmises, and Addam nods. “Sansa?”

“The thing about spies is that you have to assume every side has their own set.” The lilt of Sansa’s voice is musical and caressing, entirely incongruous with her subject matter, but fitting to the way he knows she goes about these duties. It is her coping mechanism; the only way she survives trawling through ciphers and conflicting reports when she is already tired from riding cross-country and discussing matters of state with him and the conclave. She finds managing her spies easier if she can find the beauty in it, he has noticed, in the perfection of an elusive cipher, in a note written as a piece of music which she must play on her lap-harp in order to understand. He has often found her frowning in concentration over the instrument in the waning of the afternoon before the evening meal in her solar in Winterfell and in their rooms on the march, sounding out melodies before pacing, humming a second tune with which to respond. “If we can have spies in King’s Landing and Sunspear and Highgarden, for example, it stands to reason that so does the Dragon Queen, so do the Dornish, so does the Reach. A spymaster must be able to think ahead.”

“Every war has three battlefields,” Addam agrees, a wry twitch to his mouth. “Upon the general’s map, upon the wings of the raven, and in the shadows.” It’s an old saying Jaime has heard before, of course, though this is the first war he has been involved in where he has to pay attention to all three instead of the first two alone.

“I have to sift through piles of contradictory, half-formed accounts and then combine them with what I know of how our adversaries think and what I know them to want,” Sansa explains. “The most I can glean is this; something is brewing in the Reach. I cannot discern for certain who leads them. They are playing a very close game. Most of the information appears to be originating from the Hightower, from Horn Hill and Brightwater Keep.” Jaime reads through her words to understand her true meaning.

“You have some idea of who they might be?”

“Educated guesses,” his wife agrees. “Based upon logic, what I know of the histories of their Houses as they relate to the particularly convoluted lines of succession in the region.” She pauses. “I do know this; considering what happened with Randyll and Dickon Tarly, I would be very surprised if pro-Targaryen sentiment still has much hold there.”
Dinner that evening is solemn without being grim or morose, libations being poured in honour of the men currently riding for Deep Den, and amidst songs and reports from various fortresses of the West, and lighter recounts, reminiscences of tourneys past and battles fought, during the strengthening of the bonds between these men of various realms, the conversation turns, between swallows of wine and mouthfuls of roasted wild boar and stuffed apricots, to what is to be done with Jorah Mormont. Sansa had ordered him stripped of weapons, bound and guarded by Westermen, but unharmed, and both he and Sansa know that they cannot keep him thus indefinitely.

“How precious is he to the Dragon Queen?” Lord Sarsfield asks thoughtfully, spearing a piece of the sunset-coloured fruit. Jaime likes him; he has a reputation for rigour and meticulousness, and his castle is famed as much for its farmland as its wealth and the skill of its archers.

“I’ve heard tell he’s the most long-serving member of her little… harem,” Sansa replies evenly, though Jaime catches the well-disguised glint of amusement in her blue eyes and smirks to himself.

“So how much is he truly worth?” Addam muses, and Jaime sees him bite back the crude japes on the tip of his tongue out of deference to the Queen in the North. But Sansa, as Jaime well knows, misses very little, and hides the twitch of her lips behind her goblet.

“He’s a slaver and a failed spy and a craven coward of a man!” Lord Glover interjects so hotly Jaime fancies he sees steam coming out of the man’s ears.

“True as that may be, my lord, - and I assure you I have no intention of letting him slip the net, as it were - we must use his value to Daenerys to our advantage; it would be very stupid not to,” Sansa placates him evenly, raising a dainty hand. “From what I have understood and been able to glean, he is the only man alive who might be able to call himself her friend. He is also utterly, irrevocably in love with her, but that is beside the point.”

“Her friend?” Lord Royce scoffs. “In love with her? She is a monster!”

“Indeed,” Sansa snorts delicately. “Her oldest friend, her oldest confidant, the man who has been at her side, apart from when she banished him, of course, but she welcomed him back easily enough,
since she first married a Dothraki warlord.” She pauses, continuing almost dismissively. “No
person is free of error, of course, and I include myself in that. But the difference between Ser Jorah
Mormont - (she punctuates her words with a disdainful, imperious flourish, making Jaime bite
back his laughter) - and the great majority of other people is that most men and women learn from
their mistakes, whether quickly or slowly, but they do learn. When they realise that the person they
love is a monster their affection withers like a grape upon the vine and fades away into the shadow
of dust, into hate or indifference.”

“Northern, Western, Vale and Riverland independence?” Jaime asks incredulously, understanding
her point. “You think he’s worth that?”

“And if he is not?” Ser Leonidas questions.

“Then we use that too.” His wife’s eyes glint like winter frost, cold and unforgiving, utterly
implacable. “Truly Daenerys is a tyrant indeed if she will not even exert herself to intervene for the
life of her oldest friend,” she continues with a drawling expansiveness that only emphasises her
determination, drawing approving chuckles from the men around her.

“You would ransom him?” Lord Sarsfield confirms.

“If that means she leaves us alone without more bloodshed, then yes I would.”

“Do you intend to speak with him, your Majesty?” Lord Royce interjects.

“I do,” Sansa nods.

“I’ll accompany you, my lady,” he says, the thought of interrogating Jorah Mormont sends a
vicious surge of satisfaction through him. At his wife’s curious, raised eyebrow, his eyes flash, a
wicked, feral grin lighting his features.

“Let me simply say that I have an… old score to settle with Jorah Mormont,” he drawls, leaning
back in his chair.
“Ser Jorah Mormont,” Sansa begins, her voice harsh and cold, her back straight, her chin held high as she looks down at her prisoner, Jaime detecting the undertones of distaste in her cadence. The man looks up from his rope-bound hands, startled by the Queen in the North’s words, and her almost silent, graceful entrance, and his gaze narrows when he catches sight of Jaime a step behind. Jaime observes in turn, absently noting that, as he’d expected, his wife has kept her word.

The room that constitutes the temporary cell whilst the allied host overnights at Sarsfield is akin to the tower cells in the Red Keep, Jaime thinks. Difficult to access, at the top of a narrow and winding stairway, with several thin, narrow windows to let in light, but too small for a man to escape through them, it has a bed with a straw-filled pallet and a lumpy pillow, a rickety chair and table. There is a tray of food upon the latter, plain, water instead of wine or ale, but nothing rancid or inedible.

Morgana Mormont and Ser Leonidas step inside after Jaime, shutting the heavy wooden door with a dull thud, and the temperature in the room seems to drop, the air thickening with mistrust and hostility.

“My father Lord Stark convicted you as a slave-trader, and for that, as is the law, sentenced you to death. You escaped. You cannot escape now. But as my father did before me, I, the Queen in the North, will give you a hearing. Tell me, why should I not kill you now, where you stand? You a slaver and a fugitive from justice?”

“I have repented my crimes,” the man replies hoarsely, defiantly raising his head.

“Indeed?” Sansa continues evenly, arching a fluent eyebrow. “Then I am surprised to see you in the service of a Targaryen, whose family rose to power upon the ill-gotten gains of slavery. The Valyrian Freehold is an ironic name, I have always found,” she says, conversationally, “because it was many things but it was not free.”

“Daenerys is the Breaker of Chains!”

“Does she pay her Unsullied for their services?” Sansa retorts pointedly, though still politely.
Jorah Mormont gapes, but eventually finds his voice. “We follow her because we believe in her,” he explains, as though to a child, and he knows without looking that Sansa has stiffened in affront, but it is the lack of response to his wife’s question that Jaime notes.

“Even though her Meereenese experiment was a catastrophic failure? Even though your jaunts through Essos should have cured you of your slaving ways, you follow a woman who does not pay her sellsword armies?” And as Jaime knows she would, Sansa too has taken notice. “That is not freedom; that is merely slavery under another name,” she points out.

“She has forgiven me my crimes,” Jorah Mormont exclaims, leaping to his feet, stepping closer to Jaime and Sansa, stopping only when Leonidas and Morgana draw their blades with an eerie, warning rasp. Jaime grits his teeth; the inference is not difficult to make. Daenerys, because she is a magnanimous saviour, deigned forgive her remorseful servant. Thus, if Sansa does not do likewise, she is not merely making an error in judgement, a mistake, but she is also being needlessly cruel. Jaime tenses in annoyance, but the Wolfsguard is faster.

“You disgust me, cousin,” Morgana Mormont spits. Jaime had known she was the Lady of Bear Island’s elder cousin, but this level of animosity is another thing entirely. The man, turns, stunned, stumbling back into the chair, dazed by the dark-haired young woman’s ferocity.

“Cousin?” he chokes out.

“Yes,” the Wolfsguard snarls. “Though I would you were not - do you realise the shame you brought to House Mormont? To me, your preferred relative?” Her voice cracks, she laughs hollowly, and Jaime inhales sharply. “You don’t even remember me, much less recognise me, do you,” she continues bitterly. “Well, shall I refresh your memory, cousin dearest? I am Morgana Mormont, and I idolised you as a little girl. And then, at the age of four, I learned that you were so in thrall to your harridan of a wife that you sold poachers into slavery so that you could buy her the expensive silks and jewels she wanted. And how I suffered for my preference. I was watched day and night after you were sentenced and ran, for any sign that you may have corrupted me, for years I was watched, barely trusted to write my own name in my lessons with the maester, much less trusted with a weapon of any kind. So I trained secretly, which only caused more suspicion. Only after I took an arrow to the shoulder for Maege when the Ironborn came a-reaving did she deign pardon me for a crime I never committed in the first place.” She swallows unsteadily. “At least in the Wolfsguard I may regain my honour. A true nobleman would have accepted the punishment for his crime. A true Northman would never have committed such a foul crime in the first place. But it is abundantly clear that you are neither.”

In the stunned silence that follows, Sansa presses her advantage, and Jaime nods to Leonidas and Morgana, both of them sheathing their weapons, though the Wolfsguard does so begrudgingly. “If you tell us what we wish to know, Jorah Mormont,” she begins in a conciliatory tone, soothing to Jaime’s ears after Morgana Mormont’s scathing outburst, “you will live, free and unmolested.”
The man stares at her, disbelieving.

Sansa continues, undeterred. “You have my word as a Stark, and as Queen in the North.”

Slowly, eventually, Jorah Mormont gives a single nod; the barest incline of the head, but it is enough.

“Where were you going with that Dothraki horde?”

He laughs, a hysterical release of tension, in response.

“Though you were married first to a Lannister and then a Bolton, you remain the stupid little girl Tyrion always said you were,” Jorah scoffs. “That is truly what you wish to know?”

Jaime stiffens but Sansa shoots him a warning look.

“Ah, a man led by his cock!”

“At least I am not mad enough to keep making the same mistakes,” Jaime retorts severely, “unlike another I could name, who - oh, what was it again? Oh yes, I remember, this man took a wife, and in order to feed her greed for silks and jewels he turned to slavery. Years later, he finds himself panting helplessly like a kicked dog after a woman who plainly has no romantic or sexual interest in him at all, but he keeps hoping, desperately for some small scrap of affection from her and to this end follows her every command, even when it leads to his own ruin.”

“What is a Lannister worth without his gold? Nothing.”

“Perhaps this will deflate your ego, Jorah Mormont,” Sansa snaps. “How many men do you estimate died upon that field near Riverrun? How many Dothraki corpses did the smallfolk loot for weapons and precious metals and leathers to help keep them warm through the winter? How many horses are being cut up and cured in refugee smokehouses?”
“You’re a proper Southerner, your Majesty,” the man comments idly, disguising the flash of shame in his eyes behind another scornful statement. “With your… flowery words… ha! You’re no Stark, that was clear even to Jon, and now it is clear to me.” Sansa stills, the ice in her eyes becoming more perilous, her face white with mingled fury and anguish.

“Better the occasional flowery word than being a monster,” Jaime growls, wanting to divert the conversation - if it can be termed thus - away from a man who even when hundreds of leagues away from his wife still has the power to hurt her, and he has had enough. “When I took Highgarden,” he drawls, “I had a rather interesting conversation with Lady Olenna Tyrell, I seem to recall. She told me that Cersei was a monster and that I would pay the price for having aided her.” He swallows, deliberately keeping his tone light, though his heart beats that desperate, grieving tattoo Cersei-Father-Myrcella-Tommen-our unborn child, and he is comforted by Sansa’s discrete hand smoothing down his back as he steps in front of her to stare down this troublesome prisoner of theirs. “Well, Cersei was a monster and I paid my price.” He glares disdainfully at the other man. “You should be afraid. You should be very afraid, because Daenerys is a monster and you have not yet paid the price for abetting her folly.”

“I’ll tell you what folly is,” Jorah Mormont rejoins. “Fucking your sister, Kingslayer, that’s what.”

He is inured by now to the first insult. The second is another matter, though he has been hearing it for twenty years. “I’ll tell you what you are, Ser Jorah Mormont,” he drawls, his words laced with danger. “You’re a hypocrite. You can’t condemn me for incest and yet willingly follow a woman who is not only the product of centuries of incest but who also quite happily engages in the practice herself,” he pauses. “Yes, I killed Aerys, breaking my oath, because he was such a revered king, was he not? what with his penchant for burning Lords Paramount left and right instead of hearing their petitions!” He lets the bitterness seep into his tone before catching himself, but Sansa is once more at his side, wordlessly offering her support, and he breathes a silent sigh of relief. “So, to resume,” he continues expansively, “you are a hypocrite, and I’ve beaten you fair and square on the battlefield.”

Ser Leonidas behind him quickly muffles his snort of laughter.

“Better a hypocrite than a sisterfucker twice over.”

Rage sears his veins, only Sansa’s firm grip around his wrist keeping him from doing anything rash, and her voice is calm, dismissive, even, when she replies. “As much as Tyrion might wish he could have had me; the facts remain. He never did have me and the marriage was annulled. It is as though it never existed in the first place.”

He feels her frame shake next to his, and he forces himself to calm, summoning every single ounce of disdain and disgust he feels for the man, letting it drip like rain from his voice. “I’ve often
wondered whether you ever regret riding against me in the joust at Lannisport, Ser Jorah? Do you ever wish you hadn’t impressed Lord Hightower enough for him to grant you Lynesse’s hand in marriage?”

He grins sharply at his wife. “It’s quite a tale, sweet wife, and I know how much you simply adore stories, if you would care for a retelling?” He trails off suggestively, a rakish eyebrow raised, a leonine glint in his eyes.

Sansa gestures her acceptance, guarded curiosity carved into the soft lines of her smile.

“In the final round of the joust of the Lannisport tourney,” Jaime recounts, striding expansively around the room, unable to help the acrid tang of bitter anger leeching into his tone, “Ser Jorah Mormont and I rode against each other, and we shattered lance after lance upon each other’s shield. Five, six, eight, nine. Until our esteemed King Robert Baratheon got bored of watching us and arbitrarily declared our guest here the victor.”

“Says the man who took a scarred woman to wife,” the exile responds with the look in his eye of a man clawing at the jugular.

This time, he does almost punch the man, growling, striding forward, but his wife is faster still, and the shock of her words snap him out of his fury. “As the man who infected an entire city with greyscale, I don’t believe you have a leg to stand on. Mine mark me as a survivor of torture; yours tell the world you are a senseless fool, responsible for the destruction of countless lives.”

“You truly believe you can defeat Daenerys Targaryen?”

The sudden change of subject catches Jaime by surprise, but Sansa is unperturbed. “Why do you say we cannot?” She asks, her voice smooth, her head tilted.

“Because although she was unable to persuade the Golden Company to her side, fickle sellswords that they are, she has two dragons and an army that is fanatically loyal to her. She inspires awe and fear wherever she goes. All bend the knee to her.” He leans forward, an intense light in his expression. The man looks enthralled, Jaime thinks, and it is not a compliment. “She will burn your castles to the ground, including that famous Rock of yours, oh mighty King of the West, if you once again refuse to bend the knee.”

“You have been with her since the beginning, have you not?” the Queen in the North asks evenly.
“Surely she must listen to one so loyal as you.”

“I am her oldest and truest companion,” he replies proudly. “Of course she listens to me.”

“Your Queen has both strength and determination,” she continues conversationally. “I have never doubted that.”

“She is fair and wise and good,” the man agrees emphatically, and Jaime has to choke down his laughter. “You are fools not to see it. I see it, Tyrion sees it, as does Jon.”

There is a moment of silence before Sansa replies, her tones mild. “Thank you for your explanation, Jorah Mormont. You have kept your word and so I shall keep mine,” she continues, sweeping towards the door, motioning for it to be opened. Flinty-eyed Morgana Mormont executes the wordless request immediately. “You will be freed… in time,” she drawls, exiting the cell, Jaime at her side, the guards locking the man back in behind them.

She says nothing as they make their way back down the stairwell to their own chambers, not until the door to their bedchamber is bolted and she is curled naked into his side upon the bed and he is absentmindedly carding his hand through her hair, the bedcovers draped over them.

“Well,” she murmurs, pressing a chaste kiss to his cheek, and shivers, still feeling her gentle, affectionate caress even when her lips are no longer pressing desire into his skin, “that was about as informative as I expected it would be; it confirmed those things we both already suspected.”

“You are admirable, lovely one,” he replies. “That was far easier than I thought it would be.” He will forever marvel at the elegant turns of her mind, he thinks.

She grins at that. “It was, wasn’t it?”

“My clever wife,” he answers, pressing tender kisses to her forehead, her nose, her eyes that flutter closed under his ministrations, her cheeks, her chin, her lips. “My lady, my lovely one,” he breathes, chuckling hoarsely as she winds herself around him, passionately indulging themselves in languid kisses, too exhausted to do more.

She looks at him carefully, smoothing his brow, his cheeks, her blue eyes liquid and tender, and he inhales shakily. “How are you feeling?” she asks quietly. “Not too unsettled?”
“Isn’t that my question?” he choke, his throat tightening. She’s noticed his restlessness, of course she has, the way he is so exhausted and so anguished by - by **everything** - that he thinks he is about to shatter.

“You’re very good at annoying people, Jaime,” she continues, her fingers drifting gently across his scalp, and he sags helplessly into her touch. “But I also know that the price you paid for that this evening was very high.”

“I would pay it again,” he replies immediately.

“I know,” she smiles, cupping his cheek, and he makes an incoherent, strangled sound. “Your capacity for giving of yourself, for love, is one of the qualities I admire most about you. In fact,” she continues, drawling, wry amusement bleeding into the soft timbre of her voice, “it is the first thing I wrote down on my list.”

He huffs a muffled laugh. “Now who is the flatterer?”

Her eyes shimmer. “Starks don’t lie, I thought you’d know that by now.”

He swallows heavily, the strange, unfamiliar weight of pleased embarrassment unsettling him, dislodging something in his chest. “Lovely one, I - ” he shifts so his head is pillowed upon her breast, and she resumes raking her fingers across his scalp, and he rumbles his weary pleasure. “Somehow, it always comes back to Aerys, doesn’t it?” he continues acridly. “It doesn’t matter what he was, does it? It only matters that I was sworn to defend him and that I killed him.” The words tumble freely from his mouth, and now that he has begun speaking about it, it seems he cannot bring himself to cease. “I sometimes find myself wishing that those two years were nothing more than a nightmare, and then I remember that they can’t possibly be a nightmare because how could I possibly imagine those horrors? I didn’t know what a burning man looked like before I took the white. I didn’t know what a burning man’s screams sounded like. I didn’t know what a raped queen sounded like, until I did. Killing Aerys is the act I consider to be my finest, and it is the act I have been almost universally reviled for.”

“Oh, Jaime,” his wife sighs, brushing moisture away from his cheeks, and that is when he realises he is weeping silently. “Of course it bothers you, of course it hurts you. How could it not? But I think that sometimes the letter of a vow must be broken for its spirit to be upheld. Yes, you swore to protect the King, but you also swore to defend those who could not defend themselves and protect the innocent.”
He blinks in consternation. “How can you know my reasons? Unless Brienne told you, or Bran?”

“Neither of them told me,” she replies gently.

“Then - how?”

“I don’t know your specific reasons for killing him, Jaime,” she says softly, to his great surprise. “And I do not need to for me to know that you made your decision in the full knowledge of the consequences of your actions. It follows therefore that you had good reason to commit such an act.”

“Why?” he chokes, lifting his head to look at her, utterly bewildered by her words - he cannot have heard correctly - a strange tightness building in his chest.

“Because I love you,” she replies simply. “Because I love you for who you are, because I know who you are, and more pertinently, because I trust you with everything I have and with everything I am.”

“But - but -

“There is no reason you could give me that would alter my good opinion of you, Jaime.” He wants to believe her, he wants so desperately to believe her, but this is beyond the realm of his comprehension.

He doesn’t have her strength; he is the coward in this, and he cannot stand his doubt, so he tells her. Haltingly, his brow furrowing as he struggles to articulate the sequence of events and the terror and helplessness he felt in those last, waning, mad months of Aerys’s reign. She is silent throughout, listening attentively, giving him her affection freely in an attempt to comfort and reassure. His tale finished, he sags wearily into the mattress, curled around his wife, weary to the bone, and he shifts to look apprehensively at his wife.

She is weeping, and she gathers him tightly to her, peppering his face with feverish kisses between her sobs, and he reciprocates ardently, desperately. “Oh, my brave, proud, ridiculous man,” she says, “how can I not love you? How can I not protect you? How can I not defend you? Defend your heart?”
“I love you, my lovely one,” he gasps, lifting her hands to his lips and pressing lingering kisses to her fingertips, her palms, the soft inside of her wrists, revelling in the way she shivers.

“As I love you,” she replies with a private smile, pulling him back down to the pillows and settling the bedcovers over their shoulders. “Sleep, Jaime,” she continues. “We’re almost there, my love,” his wife whispers to him, as he drifts off to sleep, resting her ear over his heart, her glorious russet hair blanketing his chest, their legs tangled together. “We’re almost at the Rock.”

_I love you, I love you, I love you, _he thinks hazily, surrendering to rest. _I am yours._

Chapter End Notes

_Thoughts?_  
I'd really like to know what you guys think of Bronn and the banter, because that's something I find quite difficult to write. I'm also particularly curious to hear your thoughts on the Jorah scene, and for your predictions! I've been scattering a fair few clues throughout, so finding out what you all think is going to happen next is something I think would be fun for everyone.

_Until next time x_
"Now I understand where the Lannister arrogance comes from," she breathes.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! I'm back properly now after what has been a really chaotic, crazy last month/six weeks. I apologise for the delay on this, aside from RL shooting me in the foot, I had some trouble with this chapter, and as always comments/predictions etc etc are massively appreciated. They really do encourage me to keep writing this story, and I'm always really curious to see what you guys think of each chapter.

Shoutout too to northernsky/galaxiasincognita, who has been an incredible help with this story in general, and with helping me untangle plotlines, with characterisation, etc etc.

Also, our protagonists arrive (finally!) at the Rock.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART EIGHTEEN

SANSA STARK
Her mount canters lightly up the slight slope, and her husband’s smirking encouragement makes her breathless. She is close enough to the coast to taste the sea-salt upon her tongue; the rest of their host thunders easily behind them. She’s followed Jaime ahead, with only their sigils for company, and as she crests the rise she halts in astonishment, the splendid sight that greets her rendering her silent in slack-jawed wonder.

“Now I understand where the Lannister arrogance comes from,” she breathes, collecting herself with a swift shake of her head, taking in the view of the sunlight upon the sea, the bay that stretches out below them, undulating hills giving way to sand and then water beyond, the mountain peaks to their backs. Her husband laughs, intent at her side as her gaze falls inexorably upon the mountain in front of them, the city which can only be Lannisport curled protectively at its foot, fishing boats dotted about upon the dark cerulean sea, upon the Rock which is as a beacon in the sunlight, so blindingly bright that she must shade her eyes with her left hand.

They are not far now; no more than an hour’s easy ride down the slope, and though she is reluctant to indulge herself she can feel the mounting relief in her veins. Sansa realises Jaime is peering intently into the distance and she turns a questioning, furrowed brow on him. “My King?” she asks quietly. He startles at her address, gazing at her with wide eyes, but she only smiles her private smile for him in reply. These are his lands, his heartlands, beautiful and formidable at once; she will honour that, and he eventually looks away, putting aside his confusion for the time being, back out at the vista before them.

“They’ve seen us,” he replies, tense, coiled energy gathering in his frame, his horse prancing agitatedly as the noble animal senses his rider’s anticipation. “There, do you see?” he continues, pointing at the lighthouse in the middle of the bay upon a rocky islet. “Lann’s Lookout, and then the Mouth, the Teeth, Pride’s Pass, the Seastair - ” his arm travels up from the water to the heights of the Rock itself, to the ramparts and imposing gates of the fortress, and he breaks off to twist around in his saddle and bellow for his faithful friend and general, Ser Addam. Sansa peers carefully at the designated structures, aided by the wonderfully clear sky, devoid of any haze, and sees patterned flashes of light, a rattled volley of colour. She suddenly recalls conversations with her husband before the battle of Winterfell, when they were attempting to work out a signalling system, and she remembers Jaime explaining that the Westermen used flags during the day and mirrors to reflect the light of the sun or moon over longer distances, and at night.

“Ser Addam, signal our acknowledgement, and raise the banners,” Jaime orders, and the knight inclines his head, before galloping away to carry out the command.

“Acknowledgement?” she queries.

The King of the West flashes a reassuring smile at her, lightning fast, before resuming his solemn
bearing. “The normal procedure,” he explains. “It’s to avoid falling for the trap of an enemy host carrying Lannister banners to approach the city uncontested. So we signal back, and that way the standing garrison of Lannisport and the Rock know who we are.” He urges his mount closer to hers so that their knees touch, and she shivers at the warmth of his clothed thigh against hers. He throws a sardonic, amused smirk at her. “I’d wager we are about to get quite the welcome.”

She quickly discovers that her husband is not wrong; indeed, as soon as the slope levels away, as they begin to pass small hamlets and farms where the trees are black and bare but the smallfolk lining the road to Lannisport and the Rock above cheer as soon as the host comes into sight, horses snorting, the banners flapping proudly in the wind, solemn, unsettled in the face of such raw adulation. One little girl, golden-haired and bright-eyed, runs alongside Sansa’s direwolf, and the Queen in the North tenses in fright as the child extends a pudgy hand towards the soft fur, but Lady merely stops to allow the gesture, before licking the girl’s cheek in a sloppy kiss, and continuing on at Sansa’s side.

“I cannot say I ever expected this,” Sansa murmurs to Jaime as he shares a melancholy, grimacing, unsettled glance with her, before his mask, imposing, gratified, solemn, settles back upon his face as he looks out again at his people. Her own features are similarly impassive. She thinks briefly that she should smile, but she is uncertain. I will make them love me. The childish thought flits through her mind before she can stop it, but it seems inappropriate for her to smile, not after these smallfolk and nobles and townspeople have endured the horrors of occupation of a foreign, indifferent power, negligent at best and destructive at worst. So she inclines her head, makes her salutations, and looks the young children caught up in the excitement of it all in the eye, her gaze soft. She looks the women - weavers and porcelain-painters and seamstresses and fishwives and mothers and sisters and daughters - in the eye, and sees mingled curiosity, wariness and hope reflected back at her. It turns to outright reverence and joy when their gazes shift to fall upon her husband’s tall form, and that warms her heart. The men raise their chins to her, defiant and proud, far too proud to call her their saviour (it isn’t a title she wants anyway; it isn’t what she is - she is Jaime’s ally, and allies fight together; and she would never be so arrogant as to assume she has the power to save another person, much less a whole city of them, but she intends to hold true to her promises - she has sworn to help and so she must, she will, she has the resources to do so) but the expression in their green eyes softens when they see how she acknowledges them, and that gives her hope.

This alliance will hold; she will make it hold, not merely against the Dragon Queen, but in the future too. It is not merely a fool’s hope, the dream of a naive idiot, but something whose foundations are currently being driven deep.

The only previous experiences she has of large crowds have been definitively negative and frightening and horrible. The mob screaming for her father’s death. The mob screaming for bread. The mob greedy for a highborn lady’s flesh. The mob, fickle and dangerous and untrustworthy and cruel. The mob, a raging entity, fuelled by misery and hatred.

This is different.
Though the crowd press towards her and Jaime, Lady and Fortune forge them a path through the masses that part before them, instantly, obediently, even reverently. They are not screaming obscenities, not screaming for violence and ruin. Instead there is a desperate kind of joy, so potent that it lances through Sansa’s veins like wildfire and she swallows unsteadily at its power. She feels all the honour of their trust, all the weight of the notion of coming to their aid, and it is an overwhelming thing.

Beside her, she sees her husband similarly touched. He looks upon his people solemnly, inclining his head, acknowledging their fealty, and she knows, pledging his own in return. He does not need to say the words; it is apparent in the deliberate nature of his every gesture; as deliberate as her choice of dress this morning had been. Both of them are clad in what can only be termed their full ceremonial garb, wrought leaves of gold shining against her husband’s hair, her red wreath laid upon her own, she in her best gown of white and silver and blue, her heavy embroidered cloak upon her shoulders, and he in full Lannister armour with his father’s golden chain and crimson sash, his cloak warding off the chill that yet lingers.

Ser Daven, Jaime’s cousin and the commander of the Lannisport garrison, rides out to meet them at the gates of the city. The man is a few years younger than her husband, Sansa estimates by his long yellow hair and beard and smiling hazel eyes whose joviality belie the steel she knows is there. This man is one of the commanders Jaime values most, and not a man her husband has seen since the siege at Riverrun.

She prepares herself for formality, for coldness, even. She knows that when her brother Robb executed Lord Rickard Karstark, Ser Daven Lannister was robbed of his vow of revenge, but any notion of such tension flies from her mind when she sees how Jaime’s shoulders visibly loosen with relief, the way he swiftly and easily dismounts, the way he goes to joyously embrace his kinsman, who has also leapt from his horse’s back, striding forcefully towards his king, a broad grin upon his face.

“Sansa,” her husband turns, eyes alight, and her breath hitches at the sheer life in his expression, at the raw energy, charismatic and hopeful, that radiates from him, “may I introduce my cousin Ser Daven Lannister, Warden of the East and commander of the Lannisport garrison.”

“A pleasure to meet you, my lord,” she replies smoothly, sincerely, inclining her head, dismounting daintily even as her husband divines her action and steps closer to her so she can place her hands on his shoulders to steady her. She shivers at the feel of his hands, one warm, one metal and cool, firmly at her waist, her cloak dragging down the saddle as she steps into Jaime’s embrace, gazing up at him, her hands lingering upon his arms, enjoying the intimate way he regards her, the way he tenses and then eases into her gentle touch.
The moment is broken as Jaime’s kinsman clears his throat with a laughing cough, and she ducks her head briefly, slipping her hand into the crook of her husband’s offered arm, as he leads her properly to his cousin to finish introducing her.

“Coz, I present the Queen in the North, of the Trident and the Vale, Sansa Stark, my dearest ally, my wife and truest friend.” She blushes at the flamboyance of his declaration, but nevertheless offers her hand.

“Your Majesty, the honour and pleasure is all mine. Please, I am coz to you both,” he replies, clasping her dainty fingers and bowing so properly over her hand that she cannot help but laugh in delight. “And that is truly a wondrous sound!” he exclaims, straightening, grinning raffishly. Turning to Jaime, a teasing glint in his hazel eyes, he continues, “I know now why you married her, Jaime.”

She stiffens uncertainly (she isn’t blind or deaf, she’s heard the songs as well as Jaime has, and she’s also heard his reaction to them) but Jaime only throws his head back and laughs, and she relaxes, curling more closely into his side. As always, her husband reciprocates, pressing his shoulder more firmly against hers.

“And I have missed your wit, coz,” he replies lightly, though his tones are laced with a heavy, aching solemnity that she can only wince at. “I believe the last jape you made was about the uselessness of the Freys at the siege of Riverrun.”

Ser Daven shrugs in reply. “Aye, it would be, would it not?” Then, forcing himself to lightheartedness, he continues, leaping back onto his horse. “Come, Sire, your Majesty, the city and the Rock await!” Sansa and Jaime follow suit, touching their heels to silky flanks for their mounts to bound forward, and they are close enough to hear his muttered, “and there go the bells!” which makes her laugh again.

And then it seems like all the bell-towers of Lannisport and the Rock begin to peal, a jubilant, ringing, overwhelming sound that is almost deafeningly loud, that she feels in her very bones. The great gates open, and the sudden, buffeting wall of sound makes her wonder suddenly if she has indeed lost all ability to hear after all. It is a roar of joy so great to make the city’s walls themselves tremble. Dazed, she vaguely senses Jaime nudge his mount closer to hers so their knees touch, and to offer her his warm hand. Gratefully, she slips her fingers into his, his firm grasp anchoring her.

In front of them, Ser Daven bows deeply in the saddle before gesturing expansively. “The city is yours, the West is yours, the Rock is yours, Sire.”

He draws his sword, holds it high aloft, and Jaime’s hand stiffens in hers, before the commander of the garrison bellows in a voice that frightens the pigeons from the parapets above, “Hail to the
And thus they enter the city.

They ride side by side, overwhelmed, apprehensive, incredulous at such a welcome. Lady and Fortune bound up the paved streets in front of them and the townspeople fall to their knees, the cries of Long Live the King! The King of the Rock! The King of the Rock! The West! The West! Hail, Sire! The Queen! Long Live the Queen! intensifying as they come into view, clattering their way through the city, making the journey up the wide, rising streets to the Lion’s Mouth looming above, a protective giant roaring defiance at the sun itself. Behind them follows their guard and then their cavalry, and Sansa does not know how she is still aware of anything beyond the bells, the shouts, the whinnies and snorts, the repetitive nodding, the clatter of hooves upon paving stones, beyond Jaime’s hand in hers, but she is because she realises that they are coming to the Mouth of the Rock, the imposing entrance to the fortress proper.

The Rock is carved from the mountain itself, not built upon it, and this lends it quite a unique appearance. It is wild and rugged and windswept and stern and indestructible, because not even fire can burn down a mountain, but as she notices how the light hits it, turning the walls a burnished red-purple-gold, dappled with sun and shade, beautiful, and refined, somehow. This fortress is as old as Winterfell, she remembers abruptly, and it is obvious. There is a weight, a power to this place that has nothing to do with how high the walls are and everything to do with the way it dominates the landscape, at once demonstrating the mastery of those distant heroes over nature and the mastery of the aeons themselves over man.

The gates are sunk from the walls by some fifty paces, funnelling men to the Mouth, slowing their passage, forcing them to remark the carvings upon the stone; proud lions in relief, roaring, maws wide to show off dagger-sharp fangs, dripping with droplets of ruby blood, glimmering emerald eyes, manes inlaid with crimson mosaic, bodies gilded with gold leaf in such a way that when the light hits them the lions seem to move, seem to be alive.

Jaime at her side inhales sharply as the Lannister banners are unfurled down the gatehouse wall at their approach, and she mutely squeezes his hand in support. He glances briefly at her, forcing himself to swallow the tears gathering in the corners of his eyes, so she does the only thing she can; she lifts his hand to her lips and presses chaste, close-mouthed yet ardent kisses to his knuckles, his fingertips, his palm, his inner wrist, never breaking her gaze from his, and she has the pleasure of seeing his whole expression blaze with gratitude and heat in return, of feeling him tangle his fingers once more with hers, his thumb lingering absently over her knuckles, curling a low coil of pleasure in her belly.

She does not know how to feel as she rides into the castle proper; for so long this place has existed in her mind as the seat of many people who wished her ill, and whom Sansa wishes she’d never met, and so to see it now, not as an enemy, but as an ally, is unsettling. To realise that within these
walls live blacksmiths and horse-masters and serving boys and scullery maids as blacksmiths and horse-masters and serving boys and scullery maids live within Winterfell’s walls is a startling realisation, and the animosity towards Cersei and Joffrey and Tywin Lannister that has for so long burrowed within her heart - she understands now that she can release herself from it.

Only the fortifications are above ground, and so they ride up from the Lion’s Mouth which is the first gatehouse to the second, named the Teeth for the courtyard whose ramparts it encloses is shaped akin to a triangle, the paved road tracing a series of sharp hairpin bends to navigate the steep rise. The ramparts looming high above their heads block out the very sun, ominous even now at the height of the day. Her husband’s hand is tight and tense around hers as they urge their mounts up the gentle, staggered rise, through the cheering crowds, and to make him smile she tugs gently on his hand. He glances at her quizzically, eyes widening when she deliberately looks down at their joined hands and slowly raises them until they are high in the air.

It is an expression of victory, of unity, of strength, and the effusions of the crowd lining their way grow greater still. Jaime looks at her with a sort of incredulous, amazed, moved embarrassment that makes her heart ache. He abandoned his seat once (but at what price? the destruction they saw upon the River Road to Wayfarer’s Rest and then Sarsfield has cut him, wounded him deeply, she knows) to spring a trap in a move worthy of Lann the Clever himself, she thinks, and now he returns, a bittersweet, wistful sort of homecoming. Cautiously, he acknowledges his people with a rakish grin, hiding his turmoil behind an arrogant facade, and his grip on her hand grows tighter still, but she doesn’t mind.

“This is once in a lifetime, Jaime,” she murmurs into his ear as they sweep around the final bend and canter through the next gate, even more imposing than the previous one, and into the second of what she knows to be four courtyards, all enclosed by walls and watchtowers and high ramparts, stables and barracks nestled at their bases, carved seamlessly from the rock itself.

He nods stiffly. “I know,” he replies softly, and she aches for him.

“I am here, Jaime,” she continues, equally quietly, ducking her head close to his. His lips touch her cheek in a fleeting kiss. “I am here, and I am yours.”

He swallows. “I cannot do this without you.”

“I am yours, and I am here, Sire,” she repeats against his neck. “My love, my King, whatever our endeavours.” That reassures him, it seems, for he gives a heaving great sigh, his weariness entirely evident to her, but he squares his shoulders and tilts his chin up proudly, sitting tall and straight upon his mount, and the stallion arches his neck and pricks his ears forwards in reply, and Fortune allows children to reach out with pudgy, soft hands and touch his gleaming coat in awe, a contented rumble sounding with every caress, making the children scream and giggle with delight.
Jaime chuckles in response and turns back to her, twisting in his saddle, green eyes gleaming, a brilliant grin upon his face, and her heart accelerates. In the single instant in which he lowers their arms and disentangles their fingers, when she realises his intent, able to read it in the intensity of his expression, she attempts to inhale shakily, before realising the utter futility of her effort as he cradles her skull to bring her into a searing kiss, somehow still managing to guide his horse with his knees as he does so.

Cautiously, and then with greater abandon, she brings her left hand up to his cheek (she is not so courageous as he to let go of the reins entirely) and then tangling her fingers with the golden hair at his nape, responding ardently, distantly recognising that the calls of Hail the King! have increased once again. His lips are soft and heated on hers, and she mewls into his embrace, wishing they were alone (wishing they were not on horseback!) and he growls his pleasure into her mouth. “My lovely one,” he continues privately, speaking against her lips, “by the gods, you alone give me hope.”

She is stunned, dazed, vulnerable at his words, gazing back at him with glimmering eyes, but he only drifts a discrete caress across her cheekbone with his thumb and she sighs against his palm, in awe at the sheer life he radiates. I love you, she thinks dimly, speechless, and he only looks at her tenderly, tangling their fingers once more, before turning his attention back to his horse, cantering more nonchalantly than before and she has to laugh, a touch disbelievingly, smiling so widely her cheeks begin to ache. She feels light, and where before the crowd had unsettled her, she at last begins to allow herself to enjoy it, to savour this welcome as befits it, as they continue their journey up through the fortified courtyards until at last they clatter through the Singer’s Gate and see the Rock in front of them, at the far side of the immense inner courtyard that is the mountain’s heart, aboveground, at the very least. It is an octagonal structure with the gleaming golden dome above for its roof, with the traditional square curtain wall wrapped around its outside, and what she finds curious is that there are no windows that she can see, nothing apart from the defensive archer’s slits that are scattered throughout the fortress. It appears verily draped in Lannister banners, the only discernible ornament to these austere, beautiful facades, and she bites back a smile. She remembers Jaime explaining that there is nothing civilian above the ground, and she fears the Rock to be a cave, a dank hole, but now that she is here she cannot see how that would be.

Her husband helps her dismount, and then there is the logistical chaos of settling four thousand cavalry in, but her conclave and the soldiers are being shown to their bunks by the local garrison, a veritable army of stable-boys leading the mounts away to the stables.

“Coz, Ser Addam,” Jaime calls, and his kinsman and general turn towards him. “Settle everyone here, and then come and find us in the study in the Den, where I’ll expect a full logistical report. Full conclave in the Golden Hall in three hours, Sansa? We can introduce everyone then.”

“That sounds reasonable,” she agrees, wrapping both of her hands around his upper arm.
“At once, Sire,” his bannermen respond, bowing and then whirling around.

“Come, lovely one,” he continues, “I have much to show you.” She follows his lead gladly, more gratified than she can express to see him in such high spirits, and together they enter the Lannister ancestral seat, their sigils at their sides, the fortified doors opening at Jaime’s nod, before closing behind them. Now that she is closer she can see that the facades are decorated in a manner similar to the Lion’s Mouth gate; carved reliefs embedded with jewels and accentuated with gold leaf. There are apricot tress and vines and lions basking playfully in the sun, though their eyes, glittering emerald and sapphire, are ever watchful.

Whatever she had expected, it was not this. Inside, the long gallery that she suspects opens out under the curve of the dome is all is dappled golden light and elaborately carved columns and gentle fountains and golden mosaics and stained glass, depicting ancient Kings of the Rock, long since fade into the mists of the past and yet frozen, golden brows furrowed and emerald eyes fierce, into glass and gold and stone. Here and there she deciphers a name (Loreon and Tybolt and Gerold and Tommen and Loren) inscribed into the mosaic. She turns to the King of the West in amazement, taking marvelling steps forward upon polished flagstones.

“Look up,” he suggests quietly, amused.

She does so, and gasps.

“But it is solid rock!” she exclaims.

“Twenty feet thick,” her husband agrees. “Look more closely; look at the way the light moves.” So she does as he says, craning her neck, scanning frantically, attempting to decipher this riddle, but the golden light dances about in too tangled a web for her to follow.

“I don’t understand,” she breathes, torn between utter, incredulous amazement and an uncomfortable feeling of stupidity.

“Casterly Rock is hewn from the mountain itself, not built upon its top,” he explains eventually, his tone laced with a wistful, melancholy sort of reverence. “There are natural fissures in the rock, like the gaps in a tree canopy, that allow the light through. The difference is that here, the architects and glass artisans used gold-laced glass to direct and augment and control it by filling each fissure with diamondglass. Many people think that the Lannister wealth comes from the gold and silver mines, and that is true, but only in part. For we also mine in these mountains this glass-like
material, the most unbreakable material that exists. It cannot be melted; not even by dragon fire for it was forged in the very heart of the earth where the fires burn even hotter still. It can only be worked, carved and set. Visenya, the Conqueror’s sister is meant to have said that not even Balerion the Black Dread could have destroyed this fortress, for though rock might blacken it cannot be burnt, much less melted.”

“It is beautiful, truly, Jaime,” she breathes, looking about appreciatively, feeling with joy the weight of his ardent gaze upon her.

“I had hoped you might come to love my home as I love it,” he offers, slightly uncertain, and her heart twinges at his nervousness.

“Jaime,” she sighs, stepping closer to him, “I already do.”


“Because you do,” she replies simply. “Because you are proud of it, of its beauty and architecture and cleverness and sophistication. Because it is and always has been your home.”

He gazes at her dumbfounded, his jaw slack, and she tenderly shuts it with a gentle palm, laughing lightly as he wraps his right arm around her waist in response, pulling her entirely against him, his eyes glimmering with unshed tears. “You honour me,” he murmurs against her crown, his voice hoarse and tight.

“And you flatter me endlessly, my love,” she replies, pressing a chaste kiss to the line of his jaw, reveling in the way his arm tightens around her in response. “Now,” she continues softly, “I believe you have more to show me?”

“Indeed,” he answers, his voice rich and smooth once again. He leads her intimately, fingers tangling, arms and legs brushing, a whisper, a declaration in these silent halls in which time seems suspended, his face turned towards hers. She sees no servant as he leads her down the colonnaded hall, past alcove after alcove with extravagantly decorated suits of armour and mosaics and fountains, the water as black and as fathomless and in the pools of her weirwood in Winterfell. The flagstones, too, she realises when she glances down, also have filaments of gold and reflective diamondglass running through them.
And then the space opens out, as she had privately predicted, to a circular chamber twice the size of the throne room in the Red Keep at least. It is the quiet that hits her first; solemn and heavy, reverent. The domed, soaring ceiling of the Rock rises above her head, glimmering with gold mosaic and dappled light, golden arches supporting the perfect curve. White shafts of light fall as though from the heavens through the still air, cutting the place into a sharp, geometric, dappled contrast between dark and light. Sculpted pools of black water outline the central dais, and upon the dais, a throne of golden stone, carved with lions rampant and snarling, the dappled light giving them life, and to the left side, another throne, so snowy bright she has to avert her eyes until she moves closer.

She turns a curious gaze upon her husband, who shrugs. “I know we agreed that we would not rule over each other’s lands, but you are my wife, you are my Queen Consort, and I wanted to make you feel welcome here.”

She stills, floored by his generosity, by his consideration, and she gapes at the white stone chair, extending trembling fingers. Her head snaps up. “So you inlaid mother-of-pearl carved into my direwolf and weirwood leaf pattern into the stone?” She asks, incredulous. “Jaime…” she shakes her head. “This is too much, this is far too much.”

His arms come around her immediately, and she sinks into his touch, weary, trembling, blinking back sudden tears. “I am not so naive as to think that one gesture can erase the past, but I know you have no particular fondness for apartments decorated in Lannister colours and styles, and I wanted to show you: this is not the Red Keep, and I am not about to demand that you forsake your own colours and styles when in my lands.” He knows her so well - her heart seizes at the thought, her mind trips over the notion - and his words, spoken so tenderly, so cautiously, do indeed threaten to break her composure entirely, and she raises her head to look upon her husband, to revel in the evident attention he bestows upon her. She trembles, struggling for words, her hands twisting in his crimson cloak. “You are too good to me, my King,” she whispers eventually against his chest.

“My King?” he wonders, carding a gentle hand through her russet hair.

“These are your lands,” she replies lightly. “My King,” she adds, impishly, her spirits rising.

“And you are my equal, which means that this - ” he gestures at the white throne, smirking, a raffish, mischievous light in his eyes “ - is not too much.” His statement startles a laugh from her, and she relents good-naturedly, though she does not deny still being overwhelmed and having difficulty understanding why he insists on showering her thus with gifts; why he treats her so reverently. Not even her father had treated her mother in such a manner. Perhaps it is simply Jaime’s character; but she wants desperately to understand what she has done to be deserving of such a splendid gift.
Inhaling shakily, she steps back and out of her husband’s embrace, sinking fluidly into a curtsey, the deepest she has ever performed, sweeping her skirts back with her left hand, inclining her head gracefully.

“Sansa,” her husband says, stunned, and she lifts her head, their eyes lock, emerald green and sunset blue and she does not know how she keeps her balance, because his keen gaze is sharp, intent and dark and the dappled light burns his hair to shining gold, illuminates his whole frame to something dazzling and immortal. Trembling fingers cradle her chin in a tender hold. “Why?”

“I wanted to,” she breathes.

He stares at her for a long uncomprehending moment before kneeling at her side, sweeping her into his arms and standing again in a single, fluid movement, carrying her confidently to a hidden door in the rock wall, Lady and Fortune following upon silent feet, whilst her mind spins, her head against his shoulder, the material of his woollen cloak soft against her cheek. She wonders where she is being conveyed to, but she remains silent because she trusts him. She scans her surroundings with a languid sort of interest, lulled and comforted by the way her husband conveys her.

There is an atrium of white marble and a golden stained glass ceiling that depicts a man she is quite certain must be Lann the Clever, the legendary founder of House Lannister, judging by his smirking expression and golden hair and green eyes, a great bell hanging from his hand like a lantern. It hangs from the centre of the ceiling in the air over the atrium, suspended and solemn and silent. Her husband carries her down a grand, sweeping spiral staircase carved from the mountain’s gold-hued stone, though she notices it also contains pink and orange undertones, and is climbed by thorny silver-gold vines, ripe and heavy with golden grapes, for what seems like an eternity, as they go down, down, down into the depths of the light. She catches glimpses of colonnades and strange gardens (gardens in the Rock itself are a curious notion, but gardens there are) and carved doors and balconies and fountains and waterfalls and walls covered in bright, glimmering mosaics, the only constant this dappled golden light that ripples in constant movement, water upon the rock. She wonders briefly why such a technique has been used instead of frescoes or woven tapestries, and then she realises that cloth would moulder in the sea air, and frescoes too, as in King’s Landing.

Neither of them speak; she is content in his embrace and his steps are assured and eager, so she waits, turning her head to see the most of her surroundings. And finally, after what seems like twenty or thirty flights down this wide stair, she understands that they have come to the Rock’s heart, when stair and stone give way to gentle waves of seawater below, when her husband sets her slowly, tenderly upon her feet once more, his hands, one warm, one gold, lingering at her waist, a promise (whatever our endeavours) and a vow (desire begins here). She turns her body to his and he instantly divines her thoughts, appraising her heatedly with fierce, solemn eyes as she slips her right hand around his waist.
“Come, lovely one,” he murmurs, guiding her gently down a colonnaded corridor, hewn rock on one side, carved stone rail on the other, to prevent people from plunging into the sea directly below, to a set of carved oaken doors. Even here, if she did not know better she would assume herself to be in the full light of day, but she knows all the light to be funnelled and reflected through fissures in the rock, magnified with diamondglass and mirrors down through the levels. She tilts her head back to admire the warm stone sweep of this stair that seems to enable one to rise from the sea to the sky. Still, she frowns, for she has seen no servant or soldier, and thinks it strange, posing the question to her husband.

“Everyone is above,” he responds. “Either in the barracks or the smithies or in Lannisport itself, directing supplies from the city to the storerooms. Ser Daven should be able to tell us more soon.” He pauses to push open the doors which swing open upon silent, oiled hinges. “This is known as the Den,” he explains. “The private family apartments of House Lannister.” He tangles his fingers with hers. “There is still more to see, lovely one,” he continues, and his expression is so boyish and teasing with mischief and heat that she has to laugh, not knowing that the sound is carried by the water and reverberates up the stair to linger and catch upon the light and the stone like fine wine.

Before long the King of the West and the Queen in the North will have to wade their way through report after report and return to the politicking and war preparations with their conclave, but as her husband lifts her once more into his arms, determined, it would seem, that her feet indeed never touch the ground, Sansa thinks, surrendering to the languid coil of heat in her core, as he strips her of her clothing with his teeth, and lays her upon crisp silk sheets, drawing a litany of mewls and pleas from her lips with skilled, eloquent fingers and a wicked tongue and exquisite thrusts, deep and slow, that there is time yet for an interlude.

“We should rise, lovely one. We have already lingered too long.”

“I have no particular wish to do so,” she replies primly, tucking herself more closely into her husband’s side as they sprawl, gloriously naked but for their crowns upon their heads, upon the King of the West’s bed.

“Yes, I’d noticed,” Jaime retorts with a wicked grin, drifting his gaze pointedly to where their legs are tangled, essentially pinning him to the bed, and she blushes violently. His green eyes sharpen as they linger over the swell of her breasts, the dip of her slim waist and the curve of her hips, her
still-flat stomach and she bites her lip, fighting the urge to squirm under his heated scrutiny. “Gods, but you are entirely too tempting, sweet wife.”

She laughs at that, pleased and embarrassed and proud and aroused in equal measure. “Flatterer,” she rebuts teasingly against his lips, smirking at her victory when he growls and gathers her to him and rolls them so she is on her back and he is on his elbows above her, and he draws a breathless, pleading gasp from her lungs as he rolls his hips firmly against hers.

“Truth,” he replies lowly, his nose grazing hers. She twines her arms around his neck, the fingers of one hand slipping into the hair at his nape and she relishes the rumbling growl he exhales.

“Sansa,” he warns sternly.

“My King?” she blinks innocently, all the while drawing her legs slowly up his calves, his thighs to wrap around his waist and settle him more firmly against her. “I only want you.”

“Seven hells, Sansa,” he swears, dropping his head to bury his face in her collarbone and there nip at her skin, the wicked man. She can feel him against her and she writhes, to no avail. Her husband is intent upon teasing her, it seems, and she twists her fingers more tightly into his hair in breathless frustration.

“Must I beg you, my King?” she gasps.

“You do it so sweetly, my lovely one,” he smirks, before disentangling himself from her and rising, pulling on his breeches and tunic with swift movements, as she gapes at him, outraged.

“Jaime!”

He looks at her over his shoulder, his expression regretful and heated all at once. “Sansa, truly, we should go now or else we will not rise at all.”

“You would leave me unsatisfied?” she asks, her voice tight, uncharacteristically hurt, fighting the urge to cover herself.
He flinches, his eyes widen and his shoulders slump. “Never, Sansa, never - but Ser Addam and my cousin Ser Daven will already be here.”

She rubs her hands over her eyes. She is being silly, she knows. “Forgive me, Jaime,” she says. “That was cruel of me, and unjustified.” She rises and dresses with smooth, economical movements, even as her husband watches her warily, and she hates it. “It is only that I am so tired of it all, and I much prefer spending my time with you instead.”

“I know, lovely one, I know,” he replies wearily, his tones soft, extending his hand to her and she goes to him willingly, sagging into his embrace. “I feel the same.”

“Forgive me?” she asks again.

He kisses the crown of her head. “If you forgive me for teasing you?”

“Of course, my love.”

As her husband had predicted, Ser Daven and Ser Addam are already seated in the adjoining solar when they emerge arm in arm, along with Brienne and Ser Leonidas of their guard. All four leap to their feet and bow, but Jaime waves the soldiers back into their seats, his tiredness masked to all but her, and she feels guilty again. He is just as stretched as she is, just as weary, and yet she is the one who has thrown a tantrum like a child.

“What news, coz?” Jaime asks, guiding her to one of the chairs, waiting until she is seated before he sits down himself, and she shoots him a grateful smile that he acknowledges by raising her hands to his lips, and his tender gesture eases the knots in her belly.

The solar is light and expansive, overlooking a small courtyard wherein grows a single apricot tree, leaves glimmering in the ever-golden light. There is a fountain, and she sees that Lady and Fortune are both quite happy to laze around at its foot. The mosaics upon the solar walls are half-faded with age, but Sansa finds that she quite likes their softer colours, suited to the more private space that is a family solar.

“Everyone was settled in without much trouble,” Ser Daven begins calmly. “The smallfolk from the surrounding hills and from Lannisport have begun to make their way into the Rock; we should have everyone inside and safe by nightfall.”
“Good,” Jaime nods, relief flashing across his features before they become solemn once more. “How long can we hold out for?”

“A year; perhaps longer before we start slaughtering the cavalry mounts,” the garrison commander responds soberly, though calmly. “Our water supplies have been secured; and the latest crop of *shadowvines* is abundant.”

“*Shadowvines*?” Sansa interjects curiously.

“You must have noticed the vines on the staircase? and on various columns and balconies?” Jaime replies, and she nods. “In the many thousands of years that my house has lived here, much as how in the North you learned to cultivate crops in your glasshouses, here we learned how to cultivate crops under this strange golden dappled light. From these vines we make *shadewine*, a strongwine with restorative and medicinal properties. Unfortunately, it doesn’t travel well; uncork it outside this light and it tastes as vinegar.” There is something feral in her husband’s expression and she laughs inwardly.

Sansa smiles her understanding and gestures for her husband’s kinsman to continue. “We also have news of the fleet. Feastfires saw them on the horizon last night, so all things being well they should reach Lannisport and the Rock tonight or at dawn tomorrow at the latest. There was a skirmish with the Ironborn on the way, but our losses have been minimal.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“Four dead, twenty-five severely injured, seventeen walking wounded,” is the efficient reply, from Ser Addam this time. “As regards siege weaponry,” Jaime’s general continues, “we have eight scorpions in firing condition. Two more are being assembled as we speak and the forges are furiously smelting the lances for them, as well as normal arrow heads for the archers.”

“And what about sand, tar and pitch?” Her husband asks urgently.

“The eight thousand barrels of pitch originally in the storerooms of the Rock which you ordered hidden by the Lannisport garrison have all been recovered.” Ser Daven reports. “As for the tar, we don’t have as much of it as we would like, but I have all the city’s fishermen preparing burning sand as we speak, as they have been doing for the past five days.”

“How much will we have?” Sansa asks, digging white fingers into her palms.
“Enough, your Majesty, enough,” Ser Daven answers solemnly. She knows full well what use sand and pitch and tar are put to during battles, both the Blackwater and the siege at Winterfell have taught her that, but that does not stop her shivering at the thought. She thinks there is something particularly ugly about siege warfare, and these weapons must be some of the foulest aspects of such battles. But when she considers that Daenerys Targaryen has two fire-breathing dragons, well… though her instinctive horror and revulsion does not fade she is able to keep it from paralysing her.

“And anything from Deep Den? Any sign of the Dragon Queen?” Jaime presses, and Sansa stiffens, some hard knot of tension settling in her stomach as Ser Daven shakes his head in the negative.

“I expect we’ll see the signalling this evening; which would then give us two days, perhaps less, before she is at our gates.”

Her husband swallows harshly, his expression set and grim. “The moment we have news, I want the great bell rung, and I want the Rock on a war footing.”

“Understood, Sire.”

Seeking to redirect the conversation instead of allowing herself to linger upon the notion of the siege, she speaks in turn, though the subject matter is hardly any more pleasant. “And what of my uncle, the Lord Edmure?”

Jaime looks sharply at her, detecting the strain of bitterness in her tone.

“He has been well treated, your Majesty,” Ser Daven answers, a touch awkwardly.

“No, forgive me, that isn’t what I meant. He has thrown his lot in with the Dragon Queen; he means to betray us. I would therefore speak with him and the other Riverlords.”

The stunned silence that falls is heavy, almost suffocating, and she feels the bone-deep shame that not even her kin are willing to swear their fealty to her, and she viciously pushes the sentiment aside. Jaime silently slips his warm hand into hers, tangling their fingers, and her breathing settles again, the iron band around her chest loosening, though she knows he is surprised by her statement.
“That was the subject of that raven you received, yesterday,” the King of the West realises abruptly.

“It was.”

“What do you intend to do?” Brienne asks, her voice gentle, her gaze concerned, and she fights down her annoyance *(I am not something to be pitied; don’t you dare pity me, I know I am only a gentle girl, not a man, not a warrior, but I will not be pitied).*

Sansa, by nature, is not vindictive or vengeful, but she is as absolute as any other ruler. The difference is that she is more judicious in her application of ruthlessness, and that she takes no pleasure from it. Under the velvet glove there is steel, and steel endures. So she merely smiles coldly in return. “I will make my uncle and his conspirators reconsider the wisdom of their actions, without offending those Riverlords who are innocent of such plots.”

“Your Majesty, he is your uncle,” Brienne attempts, though Sansa cannot see to what end the Commander of her Wolfsguard speaks.

“I know,” the Queen in the North returns evenly. Her husband drifts a soothing caress over the inside of her wrist. “Nevertheless, this is the course I must follow.” If she wants to have any chance of keeping her throne, that is.

“Of course, your Majesty,” Ser Addam inclines his head, before passing her a raven scroll.

She takes it curiously, turning it over to examine the wax sigil, and she inhales sharply, her fingers trembling, her vision suddenly spinning. “I need my harp to decipher this,” she says hurriedly, standing. “Or failing that, any other instrument at all.”

Brienne hears the implicit command in this and rises to bow. “I’ll have it fetched at once, your Majesty.”

“That will not be necessary,” Jaime interjects smoothing, standing to offer Sansa his hand. She takes it, bewildered and no little annoyed. “Come, lovely one,” he continues, “I have something more to show you.” She follows him, suspecting that she is once again about to be draped in her husband’s theatrical generosity, as he leads her into the courtyard. Fortune and Lady raise their heads at Sansa and Jaime’s approach, before lowering them again lazily.
In a secluded corner of the courtyard, next to a stone bench and silver-gold-leaved shrubs planted to knee height is the outline of a shape she knows instinctively to be a high harp, a protective velvet cover over it. Her husband leads her to it, nodding, a private smile upon his face as she looks at him, incredulously. “It’s yours,” he says quietly. “A wedding gift.” He shifts his stance. “It was my mother’s originally, but I hoped it would please you.”

Her heart aches with melancholy and tenderness at his words, and once again she wonders what she has done to deserve it. A wedding gift - swallowing down her thoughts, she reaches for the cover and gently, cautiously lifts it from the instrument, and she inhales shakily as the harp is revealed.

“It is beautiful, Jaime,” she marvels, running a gentle hand over the carved wood, fingers caressing the strings, and she shivers with delight at the rich clarity of the sound. She looks at her husband with glimmering eyes. “Thank you, husband mine, truly. Thank you.”

“It pleases you?”

She lifts both of his hands, the flesh and the metal, to her lips, enjoying the way the glint in his eyes sharpens, the way the colour deepens and darkens. “Very much,” she murmurs against his skin, and he shivers. “I should - ” she steps back, abruptly remembering that she has a raven scroll to decipher.

“Yes,” her husband agrees quietly, amusement flashing in his eyes. “You should.”

With practiced motions, she breaks the seal and unravels the scroll, squinting at the notation scribbled in a faint hand upon the parchment, and settles herself at the instrument to play the notes. As her fingers settle upon the strings she feels her mind calm; whatever adrenaline had kicked her heart into a gallop when she’d noticed the sigil of the raven has now settled. The melody she plays she recognises after the first three notes, and her heart begins to sink. By the end of it, she is weeping.

“Sansa?” Jaime steps towards her, concern thickening his voice, echoed by the four knights in their presence. Lady trots to her side, nose nuzzling at her free hand, and she exhales shakily. “Sansa?”

She shakes her head hurriedly, wiping the moisture from her eyes with the backs of her hands. “That raven… that…” she says, attempting to collect herself, “that was from Lady Eleanor Mooton Tarly.”
“Tarly?” Jaime says sharply. “Not - ”

Sansa nods, feeling sick to her stomach. “Lord Dickon Tarly’s wife; well, his widow, now.” She moves to her husband’s side, exhaling shakily in relief as his arm comes around her waist to support her. She looks up, at the four knights’ stricken features. “She cannot be more than fifteen; she has a baby son and is with child again, and the Florents have convinced her that it would be a good idea to ride for Daenerys Targaryen’s camp only escorted by her family retainers and petition formally for restitution for her husband and her good-father’s murders. She is riding to her death, for we all know how the Dragon Queen eschews our customs.” When she continues, her voice is tight and hoarse with despair. “Lord Mooton is one of my bannermen; how do I tell him his daughter, in her hopeful naivety, is throwing herself headlong into a trap?” Her voice breaks and she buries her face in her husband’s chest. The tale of what happened to her grandfather, to her uncle, looms menacingly in the back of her mind. Besides her, Jaime stiffens and she knows he is thinking the same thing as she is.

“How would House Florent do such a thing?” Ser Leonidas asks. Sansa pales as the ramifications sink in.

“Dickon Tarly’s infant son has the best claim to the Kingship of the Reach. The other claimants are from House Hightower and House Florent.” Her mind races. “If the Lady Eleanor dies, House Florent has one less claimant to contend with, as all the chatter from the Hightower indicated they were inclined to back the Lady Eleanor.”

“They’re playing the long game,” Ser Addam surmises.

“And sacrificing a high-born girl in order to do so,” Sansa continues bitterly. “As old men and women attempted to sacrifice me. “So, to summarise; all evidence points to the Reach seceding, but descending into civil war.” But what can I do?"

“But why risk another war after years already spent fighting?” Ser Daven asks, frowning.

“Edric Storm,” Jaime says suddenly, and all gazes snap to him. “Edric Storm’s mother was a Florent.”

“Oh fuck.”
“Indeed, Ser Leonidas, indeed,” Sansa responds dryly, waving away the Lionsguard’s apology, her lips twitching, before she becomes solemn once more.

“Can we not get a raven to her now?” Brienne asks. “If you reply immediately, would it not reach her in time?”

“I cannot take that risk,” Sansa replies, her voice hollow. “The Dragon Queen is between Deep Den and here, and the Lady Eleanor will have left Horn Hill two days ago at the very least. Should she already be imprisoned or worse, if I send a raven I risk nothing less than our enemy being able to unravel the entirety of my network of spies, and that would compromise everything.” She feels ill, ill down to her very bones; she is helpless in front of another girl who reminds her so much of herself. It is more than revulsion, more than nausea, more than physical pain. *It was the white cloak that corrupted me, not the other way around,* she abruptly remembers Jaime saying. Now she understands all too well what he had meant by such a statement.

“But it isn’t too late to get a raven to the Hightower,” Jaime realises, stepping away to pace as he thinks aloud, and her heart lifts despite herself; her husband must forever be in movement. He turns his green gaze on her, intent, some fierce, feral light in his eyes that breathes life into her lungs. Perhaps they are not entirely helpless; perhaps the Lady Eleanor might yet be spared a grisly fate as the Dragon Queen’s prisoner. “To Ser Baelor Hightower.”

She doesn’t understand, but the soldiers around her seem to, because Ser Leonidas asks, “How many men can the Hightower raise?”

“The Hightower has seven legions, not counting the infantry from sworn lesser houses,” Jaime replies swiftly. “None have fought since Renly Baratheon was slain; they’ll be well rested and well equipped.”

“I’ll say,” Ser Addam permits himself a scoff, a hint of sardonic distaste in his tone. “But then of course House Hightower has ever preferred trade to war.”

“And yet their rivalry with House Florent is ancient indeed; that is why Aegon the Conqueror raised House Tyrell to Lords of the Reach and not the Florents or the Hightowers or the Tarlys.” Sansa muses. “There’s a ch -

The great bell begins to sound a song deep and urgent and mournful, and any respite is ended.
Chapter End Notes

Thoughts?
Chapter Summary

“Jaime, you gallant madman, get up off the floor, of course I’ll give it to you.”

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Properly this time! Please forgive the delay, my life has been crazy recently, but chapters should be coming more rapidly now. Thank you, as always, for your continued support and enthusiasm, it really does make a massive difference.

Also shout out to northernsky who has been, as always, a great help with general plot and characterisation!

To those of you lovely people I owe reviews to, I will get round to those at some point this weekend.

Without further ado, here's the next nice lengthy instalment!

Trigger warning: MAJOR angst.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART NINETEEN

JAIME LANNISTER
The great bell sounds low and long, a melancholy song of sword against sword, of blood watering
the stone to crimson, and salt taking root in the earth, and he freezes, his heart sinking. His wife is
pale at his side and he reaches blindly for her, his fingers tangling in hers, desperate for some
anchor, for some warmth, for some reassurance that their doom is not at hand. She returns his hold
fiercely, and he sees her blue eyes turn to ice, and then he is calling for his armour in clipped tones,
and his wife and Addam and Ser Leonidas and Ser Daven and Brienne are fastening the ties to his
breastplate, his pauldrons, his greaves and vambraces, belting his sword to his waist and clipping
his cloak to the back of his shoulder guards, even as he strides through the family apartments,
ignoring the looks of confusion and exclamations of surprise.

It should not surprise him, but his first instinct is to -

He vividly remembers, aged ten, his father cancelling his lessons with the maester one morning,
and leading him through these same apartments; past the Lord’s Solar and bedchamber, past his
mother’s music room, locked up and untouched since Joanna Lannister’s bloody end in childbirth,
past his own chambers, those of his younger brother’s, and those belonging to his sister, through
the gardens and courtyards of the family apartments until, when it seemed they could go no further,
when the way in front of them was barred by the walls of the Rock themselves and a saltwater
waterfall crashed down before the stone, Lord Tywin Lannister had bent down and taken his heir’s
face between his own hands and spoken in tones as solemn and as stern as Jaime had ever heard.

*You must promise me never to reveal what I am about to show you to anyone but your own heir,
only as a last resort. You are not to speak of this to Cersei, or to Tyrion, or to Ser Benedict or your
uncles and aunt, or your cousins. Do you understand, Jaime? You are to speak of this to no-one. Can I trust you?*

Even now, decades later, Jaime recalls with perfect clarity the weight of his father’s gaze boring
into his, recalls how stunned he’d been when Tywin Lannister had deigned to lower himself to
Jaime’s childish height. He recalls, too, how fiercely he’d wished for his father to trust him, to be
proud of him, and so he’d nodded earnestly without another thought, vowing to keep this secret.

He has never been so glad he has.

Tywin Lannister had been a hard man to love, and an even harder man to like, and even now Jaime
is uncertain he will ever untangle the mess that is what he feels towards the man who sired him, a
man who did things both great and terrible, but who was also the man who always championed
Jaime as his heir, through war and rebellion and the Kingsguard and imprisonment and the loss of
his sword hand. Tywin Lannister’s absolute certainty that Jaime would be the next Lord of the Rock, no matter what, provokes sentiments in him that he has no fathomable notion of how to address. But of one thing Jaime is absolutely certain; one thing has been the greatest constant of his life, greater even than his affections for both of his siblings which have now been torn to shreds: Jaime had always sought to have his father’s trust and respect. To be one of the honoured few that the Great Lion placed his faith in was a notion that simultaneously terrified and elated him.

Neither does he doubt that his father had successfully manipulated that desire, and by the gods has Jaime resented it over the years, but he cannot help but be grateful for that now, because it might be the sole thing that keeps his wife and unborn child safe, should the worst happen.

“Jaime?” his wife questions, her voice tight and wavering and he turns to her, cupping her cheeks, and she leans as she always does into his touch, and his heart aches with her affection. Her blue eyes are clouded with worry, a worry that only grows as she scans his face with increasing desperation. “Jaime?” Her fear is one he shares; and the thought of what he is about to ask of her, of what he has led her here to do - it terrifies him, it tears his beating heart out of his chest and dashes it to pieces, it all but drives him to his knees.

But he must ask this of her; it is the only way, and so he swallows past the gravel in his throat and straightens his shoulders, ignoring the weight of his armour. “Through the waterfall, you’ll find a hidden door, carved into the stone. There’s a groove at about shoulder height, a concealed latch.”

“And beyond the door?” she trembles.

“A path,” he replies. “A path that will lead you and our child to safety; it leads all the way around the coast to Feastfires, from where you’ll be able to take a ship North.” He doesn’t know how he has the strength to say the words, but the thought of her at the mercy of Daenerys Targaryen leaves his belly roiling with fear.

She is shaking her head, silent tears falling down her cheeks, and his chest tightens. “No,” she whispers. “No!” With a strangled cry, she pulls him to her, burying her face in the crook of his neck, repeating her refusal again and again, and he fiercely squeezes his eyes shut against his own tears, returning her embrace, attempting to memorise the feel of her form under his touch, inhaling sharply the sweet fragrance of her hair, of her skin. He will need the memories of her love to face the dragons.

“Sansa,” he murmurs against her bright hair, “Sansa, lovely one, if this is what I suspect, if Daenerys Targaryen is truly at our gates, then I must know you and our child are safe. I cannot fight if I am worried about you, do you understand?” he continues vehemently. “Should the worst happen, you must live. Meet our fleet; they are at this moment between here and Feastfires; meet our fleet, and catch Daenerys Targaryen by surprise, trap her between the Rock and the open sea,
but more than that, you must live. Our child must live. Do you promise me?"

His wife, his valiant Queen in the North, is now almost incoherent with distress, but she raises her head to look at him, and the naked despair in her expression all but fells him. She inhales sharply, wiping her grief away with a vicious swipe of her hands. “I will do as you ask of me, my love, my King,” she murmurs against his mouth. “I promise, we will be safe.”

“Thank you,” he slumps, weary with relief. “Thank you, lovely one, my wife.” He pulls her more closely to him, leaning forwards to rest his forehead against hers, breathing deeply, finding solace in this mere act, drawing desperately upon the sense of calm he only feels with her, relying upon it to give him faith, to give him courage.

The bell tolls again, more frantically, and both of their heads snap up, horror reflected in each other’s expressions. “I love you, my Sansa,” he gasps out. “I love our child.” Another sob racks her frame and he touches his nose to hers in a question that she answers by melting against his armour-clad body, sinking her hands into his hair and claiming his mouth in a bruising kiss. He drinks deeply of her, winding her soft body around his, tasting the salt of their tears, vaguely realising that she is murmuring her love for him against his lips, with every shuddering breath she takes, and it is over far too soon, but the Queen in the North does not release him, instead tangling her fingers more vehemently into his hair.

Her eyes flash from water to sunset to ice. “You will command our armies and you will come back to me. You will come back to me and to our child. You will come back to me.”

She will not countenance any other outcome, and he will do everything to make sure she has no need to, and so he replies as he did before he led a cavalry charge against the Dothraki outside Riverrun. “I have everything to fight for and everything to come back to.” He lifts her hands to his mouth to press kiss after kiss to her trembling fingertips, to her palms, and he focuses upon the feel of her gentle caressing thumbs upon his cheekbones, upon his jaw. Visibly attempting to restrain herself, she traces his brows, the straight line of his nose, his lips, and this feels too much as though -

His armour feels far too heavy, far too tight and he is suffocating and he cannot help himself, cannot resist drawing her back in to claim her lips with his, again and again and again; for she breathes life back into his lungs and in her embrace he is alive and he must be mad to tear himself away from her and he is clinging onto her like a half-drowning man clinging to driftwood. She is the only thing preventing him from sinking to the depths as he did once before upon the Blackwater Rush. He still remembers seeing the light fading away, remembers being betrayed by the weight of his own body and armour, and he remembers why; he remembers the fire and the screaming and the screaming of men being cooked inside their armour; smoke and flesh and ash and metal twisted together.
He remembers Daenerys Targaryen.

He remembers why he has no choice.

He remembers why there is no choice.

There is nothing to do but fight.

With a shuddering gasp he steps away from his wife, hating the way she wraps her arms around herself to stop herself from shattering like glass upon stone. He wishes, most desperately, that he did not have to leave her here, where she will be safe, where he can be absolutely certain that she and their child will both live. His sigil Fortune moves past him to Sansa, who sinks a hand into the great Lion’s fur as though it is the only thing keeping her upright, and he shudders as he almost feels the ghost of his wife’s gentle touch upon him.

“Fortune will stay with you, Sansa,” he says, hardly knowing how he is able to speak.

Her brow furrows. “Do you - do you not need him at your side?”

“He is exactly where I need him to be, guarding my heart and my future,” he replies, and that makes his lovely, sweet wife the Queen in the North blush and laugh through her tears.

“Then keep Lady with you, Jaime,” her tongue curls in her habitual way around his name, and the familiar sound comforts him. His wife’s sigil nudes at him, and he gently strokes the direwolf’s russet fur, so similar in colour to his wife’s long hair that he might almost trick himself into believing his wife is at his side; but he marks carefully his wife’s reaction to his touch of her direwolf, and he vows himself to do it often to comfort his wife, to assure her of his safety.

“Sire -” Addam ventures, and Jaime nods sharply in response.

“I know.” They truly can tarry here no longer, and he sweeps an eloquent, final gaze over his wife, wanting to brand this last image of her, this last memory of the lady he loves, into his mind for eternity. She is standing near the crashing waterfall, Fortune impassive at her side, a forlorn figure, the fall of her shining hair doing little to obscure the misery carved into the tense, unhappy lines of
her face. But her lips are red and swollen, and he cannot help but linger upon the warming thought of her kiss, heated and passionate and nothing short of glorious. She returns his gaze just as expressively, lifting her chin in defiance, and this reminder of her faith in him and her singular bravery gives him the courage he needs to turn to Brienne and issue the commands he must give. “You will stay with my wife; and we will call the rest of the Queen in the North’s Wolfsguard to her as we find out what in the Seven Hells is going on.”

Brienne bows. “We will keep the Queen safe,” she says.

“I know you will, my friend.”

And then he strides away (it is the most unnatural thing in the world, he thinks, to turn his back on his wife), his jaw clenched, and his good hand resolutely brushing Lady’s fur, as he and Addam and Ser Leonidas and Ser Daven dash to the nearest of the water-wheel powered lifts. He remembers, Tyrion, once upon a time, regaling him with the tale of his jaunt upon a similar work of engineering to reach the top of the Wall, and then he shoves the memory from his mind. He has no desire whatsoever to think of his little brother at this juncture.

For the protection of the Den, no lift goes down to this most precious of levels, and so he needs must race up a flight of the grand staircase that he had so joyously carried his wife down only a few hours before; now, it seems like a lifetime ago. The lift itself will take them all the way up to the very heights of the Rock, to the top of the Seastair, so Jaime can see at a glance exactly what is going on. The creaking journey takes far longer than he would like, and his companions, well sensing his tension, remain stoically silent.

His mind torments him with the situations he will find upon his arrival at the top of the Seastair; along with glimpses of a future he now doubts he will ever see. Will their child take after him or his wife? Will he clap eyes upon a burning valley and see the dreaded shadows swooping in the sky? Will it be a son or daughter? Will he hear the screams of the small folk as they scramble for cover in a futile attempt to protect themselves from the flames? He hopes their child will have Sansa’s laugh for he considers it the purest sound he has ever come across; more valuable to him than all the gold and silver and emeralds and rubies mined in Lannister caves. Will he see the great pendulum swings of trebuchets flinging rocks upon an invading horde? Will he see flashing arakhs come swinging down upon merchants and serving girls, upon those civilians unfortunate enough to not yet have reached the sanctuary of the Rock? Will his lovely one see her beloved North again and revel once more in the sight of the snow falling? Will he be met with the sight of trees being felled and transformed into siege towers? Will Sansa teach their child to swim in the steaming, silent hot springs of Winterfell’s Godwood, or will their child learn in those foaming seas Jaime himself learnt in as a child in the shadow of the Rock? This is far from his first siege. Will he be suddenly hit with the stench of burning pitch and the sharp rattling-fire of a scorpion volley? Will his child ever return to the West and know these lands and meet the Dragon Queen in battle? Will he see Daenerys Targaryen stand opposite him once more upon a field of fire and rip the world to pieces before his very eyes? Will their child be wrapped in a bloody cloak and laid at the foot of the Iron Throne? Will his wife crumple to the desolate ground, her eyes blank and glassy, her bright
hair soaked with blood and such thoughts make his head spin, his vision go white -

The shuddering jolt of the lift halting and the doors being thrown open wrench him from the demons in his mind and back into the present. Gritting his teeth, doing his best to mask his shuddering breaths, he strides out onto the Seastair, the Rock’s topmost watchtower that provides them with an unimpeded view of the sea, the bay and the surrounding land alike, connected with ramparts and battlements that encircle the whole fortress. He looks out into the bay, leaning his left gloved hand against the stone, peering through the carefully carved embrasures that are large enough for scorpion bolts to be shot through, even as behind him, Addam and his cousin Daven, well used to this manoeuvre, honed as young boys launching themselves from the clifftops into the foaming seas below once upon a time, grip his shoulders firmly, the better to pull him back to safety should the need arise.

Most of the conclave is already gathered in the watchtower, and he addresses them with a curt, “My lords, what news?” but not before ordering his wife’s remaining Wolfsguard back down to the Den to protect the Queen in the North. Lords Royce and Glover nod their approval for this measure, and look curiously at Jaime’s being accompanied by his wife’s sigil instead of his own. But Lady is a welcome and needed reminder to Jaime that his wife is safe (she is safe and hidden and no-one who does not already know where she is can find her and she will live). He repeats the mantra over and over again in his mind, taking solace and strength from the words. She will live. She must live.

It is Lord Lefford who replies in tones thick with confusion, handing him the spyglass. “There is a ship in the bay which readily acknowledged the demand for identification, Sire; but the sequence was not one any of the signallers recognised.”

It is a bit awkward, but Jaime soon finds a way to balance the end upon his golden hand as he scans the bay, and now that Lord Lefford points it out to him, Jaime indeed sees the crimson sail of the ship currently weighing anchor out in the bay near Lann’s Lookout. “Just the one ship?” he frowns, a queer feeling settling in his stomach, something he is not entirely certain how to parse. It is as a prickling on his skin, some unsettling impression of vague familiarity.

“Aye, as you see, Sire,” Lord Crakehall answers with a gestured bow.

Jaime paces in confusion, handing back the spyglass. “This sequence was recorded?”

“It was, Sire.” Lord Ledford turns to bellow, “boy, bring me that sequence!” and a young lad clothed in the simple tabard of an apprentice signaller appears moments later, a piece of parchment crumpled in his fist. He bows nervously to his King, and Jaime impatiently unfurls it, squinting at the scribbled shorthand.
It takes him a minute to make sense of it, and his stomach twists again. “Seven Hells,” he breathes, staggering with shock, and Lady, ever helpful and attentive, bounds forward to hold him upright.

“Sire?” Ser Leonidas steps forward, his sword hand already moving to draw his weapon, but Jaime only waves it away.

“This is the private sequence belonging to mine Uncle Gerion, whom the family entire had believed dead these past years, dear gods,” Jaime explains, almost to himself. “We believed him dead; my father searched for him for years on end, sending out couriers and diplomats and sellswords, to no avail. It was as though he had been wiped from the face of the earth, and yet he lives and returns after all this time?” His breathing is harsh with shock and black spots waver in front of his eyes. “We believed him dead…” he does not know what to feel or think or do but he has not learnt caution for nothing, and the thought of his wife and unborn child means he will take no chances. He cannot help but consider his uncle’s return at such a juncture suspicious, especially when he recalls the great, genuine affection Gerion Lannister held for the young Tyrion.

Has Tyrion, with his quick wit, somehow persuaded Gerion of the righteousness of the Targaryen cause? Jaime remembers Gerion and Tyrion bonding over the tales of dragons, all those years ago. They both possess a fascination for them, they have the souls of adventurers: the only difference between them being that Gerion was actually able to act upon the desires of his heart, whereas Tyrion was limited to written accounts of them, and it has made his little brother bitter and cynical, Jaime knows. If Tyrion cannot have adventure he can at least have Casterly Rock, and all this to spite their father.

“Well, my lords, it appears we are not in need of a parley, yet,” he rejoins with a somewhat sardonic twist of his lips.

“Are all highborns this grim?” Bronn interjects with his habitual, nonchalant disregard for keeping his mouth shut. Ser Leonidas muffles his snort of laughter and Jaime shoots his sworn shield a half-hearted glare. He has been a soldier, a knight for decades; he knows well enough the black humour of the fighting man, but he considers, not for the first time, that he may be giving the sellsword too much leeway.

“Sire, what are your orders?” It is his cousin Ser Daven, this time, though he looks similarly perturbed, who ventures a question.

His commands are falling from his lips before he is immediately aware of them. “Signal for him and his ship to be allowed entry. Ser Daven, you will meet him at the Lannisport Harbour Gates, and you will take an escort with you and you will search both him, his crew and his ship, you will
confiscate any weapons, any ciphers they may possess, any fireworks and the like. Only then will you allow him entry into the city and to the Rock. If it is truly him and he means our realms no harm, then he shall have a place upon our dais at the feast in the Golden Hall tonight.”

Ser Daven bows.

“You believe him to be in league with Daenerys Targaryen?” Ser Leonidas frowns.

“No,” Jaime replies. “But I have not discounted the possibility that he might be sympathetic to Tyrion.”

“Surely he -” Addam exclaims his disbelief.

“I know. Nevertheless, I will take no chances, not when we stand on the brink of a siege.” He scrubs his left hand over his face, wearily. “Now, my lords, if you don’t mind, I must go and inform my wife the Queen in the North that we are not under immediate threat,” he continues, sharply turning on his heels, back towards the lift, his Lionsguard behind him, and Lady at his side, gently nudging his shoulder with her nose. “We shall reconvene at two hours past dusk for the conclave, and then we shall dine.”

“A moment, Sire!” It is Ser Daven again, and he turns back, suddenly vexed. Is it too much to ask that he be able to make his way back to his wife?

“Speak quickly, cousin.”

“There is a young man I have promoted to lead the military engineers,” his cousin begins, unfazed by Jaime’s terseness. “I think you will be interested in what he has to show you.”

“Indeed?” He raises an eyebrow before nodding sharply. “Bring him to the conclave then.” He pauses to incline his head to the lords and then makes his way back to the entrance to the lift.

Still dazed, he vaguely hears the doors of the lift closing and then the whirring of the waterwheels and clanking of the pulleys that accompany their descent back into the depths of the Rock.
It is Ser Leonidas who eventually breaks the silence. “Will Lord Gerion be offended or amused, Sire, to learn that we thought him Daenerys Targaryen?” He voice demonstrates his discombobulation, and his comment is not particularly humorous, but Jaime, leaning tiredly against the wall of the lift, releases a burst of hysterical laughter, a vicious, snapping relief of tension, and soon finds he cannot stop.

_We all thought him dead_, he thinks, nigh on choking, laughing so hard tears spring to his eyes. _Father turned the world upside down for him and he is alive and he has returned now to the Rock? What madness is this?_ he slides down the wooden side of the lift so that he is sitting on the floor, ignoring the clanking of his armour, ignoring the discomfort of the back of his cuirass pressing against his spine, his legs splayed out in front of him like a child’s, and his Lionsguard turn towards him in alarm, but Lady is faster, coming to rest her furry head in his lap, and he compulsively brings his left hand up to stroke her head. His hysteria subsides slightly as he becomes aware of her pleased rumbles, and then he shivers, biting back an embarrassing groan of pleasure as he vaguely feels his wife reciprocate by pressing soft kisses to Fortune’s face, and the gentleness of her muted touch that he is somehow far too aware of at the same time, as always, never fails to settle the racing, thundering, bolting beats of his heart, and the spinning nausea fades slowly.

He does not speak to the direwolf as they descend, but he keeps his fingers tangled in the luxurious russet fur, and he gradually feels his sanity return, though he is simultaneously restless and exhausted; his emotions tangling as he struggles to make sense of the latest series of events, this series of events which he considers ridiculous and yet far too close for comfort to what he has come to understand are his worst nightmares. His heart is pounding as though he has just come off the battlefield, but in his mind there is none of his habitual cold clarity that serves him so well during a cavalry charge or a duel. Instead he is reeling with relief and terror and disbelief, and always there is that little voice in the back of his head exhorting him to take his pleasures where he can, to _live_ and revel in every moment, for he has already cheated death far too many times, and far too closely, for his luck to hold out indefinitely, it seems.

The alternative, of course, is that he is still far too rattled by the afternoon’s events to be thinking with any semblance of coherence.

He longs for his wife with a bone-deep desperation that frightens him.

Had the great bell been rung for anything else, for anything but the confusion caused by the use of a long-out-of-date signalling sequence, Jaime knows that he would now be on the defending end of a siege, and likely wading in blood. He is far too conscious of having escaped death by the skin of his teeth, as when Bronn knocked him off his horse at the Blackwater to prevent him from being cooked alive, as when he’d slain Aerys the Mad and the pyromancers before they could set alight the caches of wildfire.
Only in the presence of his wife, their limbs tangled together and his hands drifting absently through her glorious hair, does he feel any semblance of peace at all.

Lady rumbles her annoyance at being ignored by him, and he smirks as he resumes lavishing the direwolf with the attention she so vociferously demands, groaning exaggeratedly as the sigil shifts her body weight on his frame, but the greedy thing only lifts her head to look steadily at him with liquid golden eyes, and Jaime sighs his capitulation. Lady settles immediately, with a look that can only be termed smug, and he can only shake his head. The presence of the Queen in the North’s familiar is a great comfort to him, but he isn’t about to admit that to his Lionsguard.

Sansa is curled up on their bed, changed into simpler clothing, looking far too vulnerable for Jaime’s taste, facing away from him, the faithful Fortune at her side, and she is silent except for the way she murmurs into the Lion’s mane, and though he is yet too far away, hovering upon the threshold of the chamber, to hear her words, he knows from the bright coil of warmth unfurling in his chest that she is speaking words of love and faith; words of love and faith of him, Jaime Lannister, the King of the West. He is humbled and awestruck by her devotion, by the absolute, ardent nature of it, and with a terse jerk of his chin he dismisses the seven Wolfsguard who stand vigil around his wife, swords drawn. He notes with satisfaction that whilst he was up on the Seastair, his and Sansa’s effects have been brought up, and are now scattered about their bedchamber.

It is only the clanking heaviness of their steps and that of his Lionsguard leaving them alone with their sigils in their bedchamber that rouses her, and she turns upon the sheets, a dazed, beatific smile appearing on her face as she sees him.

Fortune takes his cue to leap gracefully off the bed and stalk through the door, brushing past Lady on his way, and the direwolf follows him out. Jaime swiftly bolts the door and approaches his wife with an aching sort of reverence. The bed dips beneath his weight and Sansa looks at him as though she can barely believe he is in their chamber with her. He captures her trembling hand and lays his cheek against it.

“We’re safe?” she asks, her voice tight.
“Yes, for now,” he pauses, not knowing how to explain this strange, entirely unexpected turn of events to her.

“But?” Sansa raises an eyebrow.

“My uncle Gerion has decided he quite fancied not vanishing off the face of the earth after all,” he continues, still disbelieving, and beside him his wife stills in shock. He leans into her touch, needing her affection, her reassurance, needing her presence as a balm to his battered soul. “And I fear… given his longstanding affection for Tyrion - ”

“Oh, my love,” she sighs, leaning forward to embrace him, even as she sets efficiently to work on stripping him out of his armour, and divesting him of his boots. “My love, my King, I have faith in you, faith in your judgement. I assume you have set guarantees in place?”

He nods as she sets his breastplate aside, and he suddenly feels able to breathe again. “Ser Daven and his men will search him, his men, his ship for weapons, ciphers, plans, anything that could be used against us, and only then will he be allowed into the Rock.”

She moves to unstrap his greaves, humming her understanding. “You intend to meet with him?”

He heaves a weary sigh. “Yes. Would you come with me?”

She smiles, answering in the affirmative, climbing back onto the bed, fluffing the many pillows and leaning against the headboard, pulling him with her, now that he is entirely divested of his armour. “Comfortable, my lord?” she teases, a hint of laughter in her tone, in her blue eyes.

He huffs, but he feels exhausted enough to fall asleep where he lies, his head in her lap as she combs tenderly through his hair, ruffling it. “Exceedingly so,” he replies in a lamentable approximation of his habitual drawl, and she frowns in concern.

“You look shattered, my love,” she murmurs, never ceasing her ministrations.

“I am,” he answers hoarsely, raw.
“Oh, my love, my love, my love,” she sighs, bending over him so that her hair falls around them, a curtain to shield them both from the rest of the world. He cannot resist tangling his fingers in her bright hair, sitting half-way up to kiss her fiercely. Her mouth opens under his, sweet and ardent, as desperate as he is, and he wraps his right arm around her waist with the intention of pulling her closer to him, and suddenly he finds himself lying on his back on the bed and she is draped over him, her breasts pressed against his chest, and he groans.

“I cannot lose you, lovely one,” he whispers suddenly, swallowing harshly. She returns his gaze with glimmering eyes. “I cannot lose you, Sansa. I cannot lose you or our child. I will die without you. I cannot do this without you, any of it.”

“Jaime…” she settles herself more closely against him, pressing her ear to his heart, and his left hand instinctively drifts through the silk of her hair as he considers the strands with something akin to despair.

“I cannot lose you,” he repeats, “and I fear I will. On the journey up to the Seastair it seemed I dreamt awake,” he continues, his voice hollow. “I saw fire, fire as far as the eye can see and flying shadows overhead and our child’s body wrapped in a battered cloak and your hair wet with blood and your eyes, your lovely eyes they were blank and glassy and - and - I - ”

Her grip on him is suddenly so tight as to be painful and her eyes flash with steel. “Make love to me,” she snarls, and he can only stare back up at her in confusion, his jaw slack. “Jaime, make love to me.”

“Now?” he asks, dazed, his ears ringing.

“Yes, now,” she snaps, quickly stripping off the simple dress she wears and flinging it carelessly onto the flagstones, and he wordlessly follows her lead, a strangled groan escaping his lips as he feels her soft skin on his. “Jaime,” she continues, her voice gentle and stern all at once, her hands cupping his cheeks. “Look at me. Look at me,” she urges him, and he does so in the manner of one looking at the sun after spending an eternity in the dark. In this dappled golden light her eyes shine like gems and he could drown in her gaze, he thinks, she is so ethereal that his chest twists.

Instinctively, his body shifts so that he is above her, taking his weight on his elbows, and he shudders with pleasure as she drags her feet up against the backs of his legs to wrap them firmly around his waist, her dainty hands still cradling his face, tenderly, gently brushing his cheekbones, his jaw.

“I’m here, Jaime,” she murmurs against his lips. “I love you and I’m yours and I’m here and I have
“You’re here, with me,” he repeats distantly, “You’re here,” and the meaning of the words crashes through him with the suddenness of a wave breaking upon the rocks and he gasps, desperately sucking air into his lungs. “You’re here, and you’re mine. Only mine,” he growls, and he sees the relief and love in her expressive eyes as he sinks slowly into her, praising how tight, how wet, how hot she is around him, and he revels in the perfection of the moment, his veins humming with light.

“Now you have come back to me,” she murmurs. “You have come back to me, my love, my king, husband mine. Mine. Whatever our endeavours. Mine.” He demonstrates his wholehearted approval of her pronouncement, his delight, by capturing her tempting mouth with his lips again, sinking more deeply into her, until he is buried to the hilt in her, and her hands drift to his neck to hold him to her, and he is most happy to oblige her demand until his chest is burning and his eyes are smarting behind his lids.

“Mine, you’re mine,” he growls against her neck, smirking at her whimpered, gasping cry.

“You must - you must stay in me forever,” she continues, almost deliriously, rocking against him.

Suddenly salacious, not entirely knowing what possesses him, he stills entirely. “Like this, you mean?” he rejoins, waggling his eyebrows.

“Oh, you impossible, insufferable man!” she snaps, but he only laughs as her glare intensifies, until he relents and begins to move again, slow, measured, impossibly deep thrusts that leave her mewling and whimpering and clutching feverishly at him, making the most delectable sounds that make him shiver with sheer bliss, and he loses himself to her, bringing both of them torturously, slowly, teasingly, to that gloriously intense, delirious end.

Afterwards, once he has rolled them over so she does not have to bear his greater weight, as they lie tangled together, her lithe, silken legs still wrapped firmly around him, keeping him inside her, soft and spent and vulnerable, she murmurs into his heated skin, against the crook of his neck, “I wish you could make love to me forever.”

Her words hit him like a hammer to the chest and he can only look at her in awe before haltingly mumbling in response, “I wish that too, lovely one.”

She smiles happily, tiredly then, before her features become solemn once more. “Today was too
close,” she says eventually, shadowed grief and fear veiled behind her eyes.

“It was,” he agrees softly, running a soothing hand up and down her back, fierce, proud satisfaction warming him as she hums her contentment. “I have never before felt the way I did on that journey up to the Seastair.”

“You had the time to think about it, to torture yourself,” she murmurs, brushing through his short hair, freely offering him her solace. “In the North we call the leave-taking of a champion before a single combat the long walk. Once a man’s armour has been donned, his sword sharpened, he must walk out into the field to face his enemy, to face his death head-on, and he is alone. Our bards sing of the peculiar state of mind some of those ancient champions fell into, driving themselves mad with thoughts of my opponent will stab here; I am slower than he, what if - what if - what if - I regret this - I wish that - and so on and so forth, and I think you experienced something similar.”

“I have never… not wanted to fight before,” he confesses. “I have realised that I now have so much more to lose, infinitely more to lose, and it… frightens me, it turns my veins to ice and I cannot move, I cannot help but be prisoner to my own waking nightmares.” He huffs his anger. He has rarely been more frustrated and disgusted with himself. He is a knight, a king, and he cannot afford this paralysis, especially not now when the prospect of a siege hangs over their heads like a sword about to fall. There is still the parley they plan to hold, of course - but he does not hold out much hope as to success.

A soft hand on his cheek turns his head so he is gazing once more at his gentle wife. “I will tell you now what you once told me: do you not think that I am afraid? But you have in me a willing partner, whatever our endeavours.”

“I have never doubted you; only myself,” he replies with some embarrassment. She is the only person he could ever imagine speaking to thus; and her devotion, her assurances, her support, her love does something to him, fills the voids and mends the fragments of his heart and soul until he feels complete. Only with her is he vulnerable thus, only with her is he brave enough to speak of fear and humiliations and only with her is he healed. “You alone give me courage.”

She ducks her head at that, but a small, pleased smile plays about her mouth. “You flatter me endlessly.”

“I speak nothing but the truth,” he responds, gathering her to him more fully to kiss her chastely, sweetly. “Believe it, lovely one.”

She laughs against his mouth and eagerly, earnestly returns his affection, and it is this - her
guilelessness, her sweet nature - that enchants him, that makes him fall for her again and again and
again. *I love you, I adore you, I want you, I choose you, only you, only ever you, and I would
worship you,* he thinks, musing languidly upon the beauty of her form. *I desire you endlessly.*

“You know, my valiant Queen,” he drawls heatedly, tracing shivers into her back, and she returns
his appreciative gaze with dark, hooded eyes, “I think you might have a point with your desire to
make love constantly - I consider it a proposition well worth attempting.”

Struggling to hide her amusement, propping up her elbows on his chest, she says, “We would
likely expire of pleasure.”

His smirk widens. “Ah, but what a way to go, don’t you agree?”

Her lips twitch, and she draws very distracting shapes upon his chest and abdomen with light,
tender fingers. “It would be, wouldn’t it?”

He halts her fingers by pressing her hand to his heart even as she looks at him mischievously. “I love
you,” he breathes. “I can never say it enough, but I love you.”

She presses a kiss to his golden hand. “As I love you,” she responds tenderly. He watches curiously
as her face shifts to something more solemn. “Do you - could it be because we are here, at the
Rock?” she wonders.

“What do you mean?”

“Your fears,” she explains. “Could they be exacerbated because we’re here? It is, after all, much
easier to imagine something going wrong, something happening to a place if you are already
there?”

He blinks, struck silent by her insight. He had already abandoned the Rock once before, and yes,
his strategy was successful as it trapped the Dragon Queen’s armies on the wrong side of the
continent and enabled him to take Highgarden quickly and with minimal loss of life. But it also
caused such devastation to his own lands that part of him does wonder if it was worth it. He closes
his eyes in shame. “I did not deserve such a welcome as the one that was given to me this morning
by the people of Lannisport,” he says eventually.
“And how did you come to that conclusion?” his wife asks gently.

“I abandoned them to the tender mercies of the Unsullied and my little brother, did I not?” he rejoins bitterly.

“But you forewarned your garrison, you informed them of your plan, and they were able to safeguard what was important; the lives of your people, their skills and talents and resources. You did not abandon them.”

He doesn’t know what to do with himself as her grave, solemn words wind their way into his heart. He grasps at them, desperately, but he still cannot entirely quell that horrible little voice in the back of his head that tells him otherwise, that tells him to remember the mountainsides covered in ash. “I - I am afraid that I am leading your people and mine to nothing more than destruction.”

“That is the risk we take, Jaime,” she replies sadly. “But you must ask yourself: is it worth the risk? You are forgetting, my love, that I was a captive too, once, and once I knew the bitterness of imprisonment, then my freedom was worth everything. I cannot go back to being ruled; by anyone, and much less by a tyrant. Should we fail, I will not let myself be taken alive.”

“Sansa!” he gasps, agonised. The mere thought makes him dizzy and nauseous to the bone. “Sansa!” he cries her name, wanting to do anything to wipe that awful, resigned expression from her features, that terribly mournful smile.

“It’s my turn to carry you, now, Jaime,” she continues softly. “And I do it willingly, gladly, because I love you, because I have absolute faith in you. In Jaime Lannister who is my husband, the King of the West, my lover, my ally, my friend. If you will believe nothing else, then believe me. Believe me, my love, when I tell you that your people love you. You were elected King, Jaime. Your people chose you to lead them; and why should they choose you if they did not believe you would do right by them? Why would they choose you, if they had no faith in you?”

He can only lift her hands to his lips and press ardent kisses to her knuckles, her fingertips, her palms, her inner wrists, too overcome to speak. “You alone give me faith, Sansa,” he rasps, once he has collected himself enough to do so. “You alone give me courage, you alone give me hope.”

“Do you not realise that you do the same for me?” her voice is soft, but no less impassioned when compared to his. “Do you not realise that you alone of all men - of all people dead or alive - bring me back to life? Your respect of me, your love of me, your defence of me - do you not realise that you are the only man who has ever treated me thus?”
“It is as you should be treated,” he growls. “You should be spoken to with nothing but the greatest of respect; you should be loved with all the reverent, ardent admiration in the world, and you should be defended to the death with everything I have and am.” He is almost vehement in his earnestness, in his desire to show her that he worships her. Wars are fought over women like her. The compliment of her affection and her loyalty is a treasure beyond price. His heart is so full of her that it seems to overflow, to spill into every gesture and every word, and he has not the least desire or intention to contain it.

“And you are the best man I know, Jaime, because you are the only man I have ever known who acknowledges his mistakes and then attempts to improve himself,” she is still blushing fiercely, even as she traces his lips with a light finger. “Believe me, my love,” she entreats him. “Believe me, Jaime, we shall conquer this together. Whatever our endeavours, we will prevail.”

“I believe you, lovely one,” he surprises himself by answering, and he is stunned by the radiant smile that spreads across her face in response. She is the sun, he muses vaguely, the brightness of mountain snow, the stunning clarity of the blue winter sky. “My valiant Queen,” he smiles, my queen of love and beauty, he thinks, and the thought surprises him, before it occurs to him that just as having Lady by his side earlier on helped, there is another tradition that might be of use. “My sweet wife,” he continues, surprised to find that his heart is accelerating and that his mouth is suddenly dry (he cannot be - nervous - can he? But yes, it occurs to him that he can indeed), “my lady, might I have your favour?”

She stills, inhaling sharply through her nose, blue eyes impossibly wide. “My - my favour?”

“Yes,” he swallows. Why this is more nerve-wracking than confessing his love to her was, he has no idea whatsoever.

“You’re serious?”

“Entirely,” he replies in a low, gravelly voice, holding her gaze.

She blushes, violently, his favourite pink stain spreading to heat her neck too. “No man has asked for my favour since my father’s tourney, when he became Hand,” she ducks her head, staring at his chest. “Forgive me, you have taken me quite by surprise; I wasn’t expecting to be asked that.”

“Men should be queuing up to be asking for your favour,” he responds, his voice even lower than it was before, and her resulting blush is fiercer still.
“And you are the only man I could ever give my favour to,” she replies shyly.

“Yes?” A broad grin spreads over his face.

“Yes!” she laughs, glaring at him without heat for his teasing. “Yes, you arrogant, insufferable man, you and only ever you!” She pushes at his shoulders, and he willingly lets her hold him there, and suddenly they are wrestling playfully, tickling and giggling like children. She aims for his ribs, he focuses his efforts upon the sensitive skin on the undersides of her breasts, and they go from childish game to something far more intense and sensual all at once, as he manoeuvres himself above her, breathing harshly, and she looks soulfully up at him, her heart in her glimmering blue eyes, so beautiful in this soft golden light that she steals the breath from him entirely.

“Yes?” he pants, attempting without success to steady his racing, pounding heart.

“Yes,” she returns, pushing gently at his shoulders once more, and it is with regret that he disentangles himself from her. And then he realises he is in a position to admire her form as she rises from the bed and retrieves his shirt from the floor to pull it over her head as she moves to rifle through their saddlebags. It falls to her thighs, the thin linen not doing much to hide her from his appreciative, heated gaze. He can only stare as she moves with the lithe grace and elegance that is as natural to her as breathing; he can only be mesmerised by the bright, eloquent fall of her russet hair and he thinks to himself for the thousandth time, *I am the luckiest of men.*

“Put on your breeches, Jaime,” she says to him over her shoulder, a laughing glint in her eyes. “I’m not doing this with you naked.”

“And why ever not, my lady?” he drawls.

“Because I will hardly be able to tell our children you were naked when I first gave you my favour; they would draw entirely erroneous conclusions,” she retorts primly, and her words make him ache, deeply.

“I don’t think it is entirely off the mark; considering I *did* ask you for your favour whilst in bed,” he grins, laughing when she only huffs at him in response.

“Put on your breeches.”
“As my sweet wife demands,” he answers raffishly, winking, rising from the bed and dressing, pulling the clothing over his hips, though he doesn’t bother with the ties. Sansa glances at him, telling him wordlessly that she knows what he is doing, and he deliberately sinks to his knees in response, and he is gratified to see her fingers begin to shake as they undo the leather straps on a saddlebag.

“My lady,” he begins solemnly, “I am but a man, a man madly, irrevocably, entirely in love with you, who has the good fortune to be your husband and ally, but only a man nevertheless.” He raises his head to look at her, and she has thrown out a hand to grasp the back of a chair; her knuckles are white, her face is pale and her eyes are wet with the sheen of tears. “Sweet wife, valiant queen, would you be so gracious as to grant me your favour, lovely one?”

“Yes, a thousand times yes,” she sputters, bursting into tears, “Jaime, you gallant madman, get up off the floor, of course I’ll give it to you.” She moves towards him, laughing through her tears, holding out her hands to him, and he takes them, bestowing reverent kisses upon her skin. Only after this does he rise to brush the wetness from her cheeks, his thumb lingering upon her bottom lip, her chin.

“Don’t cry, my love,” he entreats her.

“I am - I am overwhelmed,” she replies, smiling radiantly, embracing him, and at last, deliberately, carefully taking his left hand in her left, shy and solemn now, her thumb stroking lightly across his palm, making him shiver. With her other hand she places into his palm her favour, a crimson silk ribbon embroidered with silver thread, curling his fingers over the token.

“One of your ribbons from your gowns,” he realises, a soft half-smile upon his face.

She glances up at him cautiously. “Yes - I didn’t expect - I don’t have a real favour to give you - I hope you don’t mind.”

“Sansa,” he says, wrapping his right arm around her waist, “lovely one, it is perfect.”

Her hands flutter over his shoulders, settling upon his forearms, but her voice is still tight and girlish with uncertainty. “You are certain?”

He fights back his grimace, reminding himself to be patient. He cannot expect her to free herself of
her past torments immediately and completely; he knows only too well that bad memories have a horrible habit of lingering in the mind for years on end. He pulls her more closely so him, desperate to reassure her, and lifts his left hand once more to cradle her cheek. “Sansa, as I said: it is perfection,” he says before pressing chaste kisses to her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks, the tip of her nose, before claiming her lips. She mewls into his mouth, and any thought of keeping things shallow flies from his mind, and he indulges them both passionately and at length.

When he pulls away her eyes are dark and her lips are red. “You honour me,” he growls against her lips, completing the ritual, before claiming her sweet mouth a final time, a quick press, an affirmation no less tender for its brevity.

He steps back to unsheathe his sword and wrap the ribbon around the hilt. “Could you tie this off for me?” His wife acquiesces immediately, a soft smile playing about her lips as she strokes the ribbon, and he nods his satisfaction. *Whatever our endeavours,* he thinks, and smiles to himself.

Driven by some impulse, though he would not be able to explain it, were he asked to, he steps away and lifts the sword high, examining it, the way it catches the light. It is a monument to Lannister ostentatiousness, and his lip curls in distaste.

“Jaime?” Sansa asks, her voice strained with confusion, and he winces briefly when he considers how patient she is with him to put up with his habit of acting first and then explaining once he has begun his movement, or folly, or frenzied dash. It does not occur to him that she trusts him enough to explain his actions.

He answers her, never taking his eye off the blade; a deadly, beautiful instrument, and yet - “Do you know, my love, that that ever since it was first given to me, I have hated this thing?”

“Who gave it to you?” she asks quietly.

“My father, after I gave the blade he originally gave me to Brienne, when she went off on her quest to retrieve Catelyn Stark’s daughters.” He pauses, resolutely keeping his gaze upon the weapon; he truly dislikes thinking about the sword’s provenance. It reminds him far too pointedly of his past sins, sins he would rather forget.

“Twin blades?”

“Yes,” he confirms.
Her breath hitches and he stiffens, knowing instinctively that she has made the connection. “Joffrey.”

“Yes, him,” he spits acidly, his voice heavy with self-loathing and shame.

“If you hate it, then why do you carry it?” she questions in her habitual gentle manner, and as much as he listens, tenses for it, he can sense no hint of judgement in her voice.

He shrugs helplessly, still glaring at the weapon. “Penance, I suppose.”

He tenses as he senses her move closer to him, until she is close enough to lay a soothing hand between his shoulder blades. He stiffens, before relaxing into the contact. “Rename it,” she says suddenly, determinedly. “Rename it.”

He is so surprised he turns around, careful to avoid injuring her. “Rename it?” he repeats, entirely befuddled.

“Yes,” the Queen in the North nods. “Rename it. Do not allow him such power over your life. He’s gone. He’s dead. He can’t hurt you now, and have you not done good things too, with this blade, such as defending Winterfell from the Others? You slew the Night King with this blade, Jaime. You control its legacy now, not him, not your father or even mine.”

“And it would not offend you?” he hesitates.

She raises an elegant eyebrow. “I would be far more offended if you chose to keep the horrible name he chose for it. That was an insult. You wielding it; my husband, my ally, my lover wielding it is far from insulting to me.”

He swallows, bowing his head. “You honour me far too much, lovely one.”

She shakes her head in smiling disagreement. “No, I think not,” she continues, her voice as soft and as gentle as it ever is. “Do you have any ideas?”
“I - well, my two previous battle horses were named Glory and Honor respectively, to suit my sense of humour, but I want something less bitter, something more genuine, I think,” he begins, pausing to reflect. “Something Northron?” He glances at her in hesitant question.

She draws her brows together, pressing her lips, considering the matter, shaking her head after a moment, “I don’t think it would suit you, and the name needs to suit you.”

“I wield it for you; I always have,” he throws her an intimate glance. “From the very beginning, before I think I even knew what it meant, I wielded it for you, always in your name, somehow.”

“And now you wield it for us both,” she replies, finishing his train of thought.

“I do,” he says it like a vow, the words falling gravely, earnestly from his lips. “Yes, I do, and that will never change. Whatever our endeavours, that will never change.” The phrase lingers in his mind, curling like smoke, filling him with warmth. *Whatever our endeavours. Endever,* he breathes. “I think I shall name this blade Endever, for our private vow to one another.”

“Endever,” she muses, her tongue curling around the syllables, sounding them out, before looking at him proudly. “It is perfect.”

“I have your blessing, then?” he asks, looking at her carefully, holding the blade out in front of him, pointing the tip down at the floor.

She sinks to her knees, delicately, and his heart begins to race and he cannot take his eyes off her. “You do,” she replies solemnly, holding his gaze even as he holds his breath, hardly daring to breathe. He watches her without fully understanding as she leans forward, her bright hair falling towards the blade, and for one stupid moment he thinks she means to cut it off, before staring spellbound as she presses her sweet lips to the bare steel blade.

He had only meant to ask for her word, not for her to give him the gift of such an ancient, sacred ritual, and he can only bow his head, worshipful. He has no other deity but her.

She is a creature of spun light in that moment, of the snow and sunset, glowing, radiant, strangely weighed down with a tender kind of melancholy, and the blade seems to ripple at feel of her gentle kiss, as though forged anew in her love and blood.
When she raises her head, an eloquent, expressive look passing between them, a single tear falls down her cheek.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Predictions? All the clues are there - I'm quite deliberate about what I include - so do let me know what you think is going to happen next!

Until next time xx
Chapter Summary

I love you, Robb, and I wish I did not. I hate you, Robb, and I wish I did not.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to this next instalment! It's the longest one yet at just under 12k, so enjoy.

This was quite a difficult chapter to write; it has some scenes in it that I've been excited about and anticipating for a while, so I hope I did them justice. As always, a huge thank you to northernsky/galaxiasincognita without whom this chapter would have been impossible to write.

These next few chapters are going to be intense; we're slowly but steadily building towards one of the most pivotal scenes in the whole story, so just a trigger warning - this chapter earns the warning tags.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWENTY
In the still, quiet aftermath of those solemn moments between them, when vulnerability is intimately shared, when they speak with the murmur of a gentle touch or with the gravity of a long look, when their hearts, their very souls, o’erleap those restraints that bind them to the mortal form and meet the other with a reverent, shivering sort of delight, when every gesture becomes something sacred and weighted with meaning, that is when she realises that she has not journeyed to find love, but instead that, somehow, she has come home and found it waiting for her patiently by the hearth.

It is not merely a question of parallels in experience with her husband or a strange affinity that has grown between the two; it is that by nature they share understanding. By nature they are reflections of the other, by nature their souls are formed the same in both material and shape, by nature their hearts beat in time.

From rival houses, rivals in power and in war, rivals in influence and in differing ambition, no-one could have predicted their alliance. But that is because, Sansa thinks as she lounges languidly in bed, gently combing through her husband’s ruffled golden hair as he is still and silent, contemplative, his head in her lap, people had not looked past all the trappings and burdens their family name placed upon them both.

The lion in the cage. The princess in the tower.

It sounds like a song, a song of old, a tale of hardship and valour.

She knows from her spies that songs are already circulating beyond their borders about the Lion being gentled by the Lady, and the Lady, protected fiercely by the Lion, using her well-mannered fangs to the great displeasure of the Dragon Queen, but the dangerous truth… strips both the Queen in the North and the King of the West bare. The protection and respect and support and affection Jaime offers her means she no longer must hide her ideas, her thoughts, her heart. In his love, far from being shackled, she has found her freedom. Her freedom to act how she thinks best, and not to be dictated to either by well-meaning family members or those who would attempt to manipulate her to their own ends. Her love, she knows, has given Jaime the same.

If the songs will help to destabilise her enemy, she has no qualms with them. She is astute enough
to know that already the reality of the relationship she shares with Jaime is being embellished, is being added to for dramatic effect, and that the troubadours in the inns and trading posts throughout Westeros are performing their duties admirably, and that their work is paying off, as unsettled as she is by the notion of becoming some sort of legend.

She knows, too, that when word gets around of the naming of Jaime’s sword, as it inevitably will, this will only provide more fodder for the stories.

She’d dreamed of being Queen as a young girl, of course, but that had been before she’d garnered any understanding of what that actually meant. She’d only seen the pageantry of it all - she’d only seen what the songs had wanted her to see.

The rituals of the naming of her husband’s blade, of the bestowing of her favour and her blessing; at this moment they feel too sacred, too intimate, too private, too much like she’d held his soul in her palms, too much like making love to one another, for her to feel comfortable with such moments becoming public knowledge, as much as the knowledge would be giving the bards the kind of detail they long for; for those are the moments in the songs that linger in the common imagination. Such kinds of moments would practically assure the composing bard eternal renown.

If the Dragon Queen is defeated, in any case.

She grits her teeth. When the Dragon Queen is defeated.

She is distracted from her musings by her husband huffing out a long sigh and shifting his head upon her thighs. Her fingers still in the gold of his hair and she frowns down at him. His green eyes are half-closed, and his expression is contemplative and distant.

“My King?” she murmurs softly.

He struggles to answer her, visibly attempting to school his thoughts into coherence. “I… Ser Daven will come to fetch me soon,” he settles on eventually, and Sansa immediately divines his true meaning.

“You are the King of the West,” she responds tenderly, seeking to bolster him. She remembers her previous words to him. It is my turn to carry you. “You are married to me; that makes you the most powerful man in the Seven Kingdoms.” He chuckles wanly at that, but it wipes the despondent expression of boyish hurt from his features and so she counts it as a success, if only a partial one.
“You owe your uncle nothing at all, Jaime.”

“But - Tyrion.”

It is her turn to sigh. “Do you still wish for me to come with you?”

He considers her question for a moment before replying, and this time his tone is more strained. “The confusion caused by the manner of Gerion’s arrival… I cannot lose you - I will not risk you, I will not risk our child - not for anything in this world. Until I know, until I have seen him with mine own eyes, until I have spoken to him myself, I do not want you anywhere near him.” He finishes with a snarling, bitter ferocity that makes her heart ache.

“Of course, my love,” she says, bending forwards to press her lips to his brow. She sees the question in his gaze and forestalls him in her gentle habitual manner. “You need not fear angering or insulting me with such statements, Jaime.” She ducks her head, pushing through her embarrassment to elaborate. “I find your possessiveness of me, your exquisite care of me, your devotion to me - it is humbling, and I endeavour every day to prove myself worthy of it.”

“You are already worthy of it, lovely one,” he replies, the light in his green eyes deepening to something more heated, more intense and so entirely sincere that she shivers at it. “But I am not so arrogant as to assume that my most ardent devotion to you surpasses your devotion to me,” he continues, the beginnings of his raffish smirk twitching at the corners of his lips.

“I shall have to change my list,” she teases lightly, “you are not so insufferable after all.”

“Indeed?” His smirk widens to something unashamedly wicked, his tones curling to an easy, satisfied drawl, and that draws a true laugh from her. “I shall have to make a greater effort.”

“And now you are provoking me!” she rejoins, revelling in their shared mirth, grinning broadly.

He sits up, quite suddenly, and has gathered her to him before she quite understands what he is doing. “As I recall,” he begins with a glint in his gaze that makes heat curl low in her belly, “you quite like my provocation.” He emphasises his point by holding her waist still and teasingly grinding his hips against her so she can feel the substantial, insistent length of him, and she only giggles helplessly, mutely offering him the elegant, pale column of her neck, her hands firmly grasping at his shoulders.
She gasps his name, a breathy remonstration. “We haven’t the time now, Jaime!”

He looks steadily at her, his amusement plain. “I know that, sweet wife. No, this is something to hold in my mind as I meet with mine uncle, a delicious promise to tide me through our conclave and the feast following.”

The look in his eyes is unmistakeable, his intent clear, and she can only laugh out a shaky groan in response, her head dropping forward to his bare shoulder. “I amend my previous statement: you are now more insufferable and incorrigible than you were before.”

“Anticipation makes bedding you all the more enjoyable, I have found,” he drawls, winking unrepentantly.

Her fingers dig into the muscle of his shoulders as she attempts and fails to still her sudden violent trembling. How she will get through the next hours she has not the faintest idea.

He disentangles himself from her, visibly regretful, but as he rises he speaks again. “If I do not leave now I fear I will never be able to bring myself to do so.”

She smiles despite herself, despite the sudden chill she feels as she is bereft of him, now. “That I can agree with.”

And thus their conversation lightens, and he smiles at her even as he casts his gaze about in search of his shirt and surcoat, which he soon finds hastily discarded in a pile upon the flagstones, behind a table and chairs. He tugs on his boots, having learned perforce efficiency even one-handed, and stands, fully dressed, his countenance softening as he regards her.

“I will leave you to your frolicking, my lady,” he says with no small hint of tender mirth.

It is his particular choice of phrase that catches her attention. “Frolicking?” her brow furrows.

He gestures easily towards a door in the far wall of the bedchamber, one Sansa had not paid any attention to. “You will find everything you could require through there.”
A long, steaming bath sounds like a ridiculously attractive idea in this moment. “After the way this
day has unfolded thus far, and in light of the fact that I earlier issued a summons for the Lady
Roslin to attend me before the conclave later on, a frolic - ” her mouth twists in a wry grin “ - is
something I need, I fear. Especially since I have mine own troublesome uncle to deal with.”

“You intend to speak to Lord Edmure?” Jaime frowns his concern.

“Not alone,” she replies swiftly. “After I have spoken to the Lady Roslin, I will speak to all the
Riverlords together.” She grimaces, bitterly. “I want to see if they incriminate themselves
accidentally.”

“Confronting them directly could well backfire, lovely one,” her husband cautions.

“I know,” she nods. “That is why I have no intention of accusing them of anything; I simply want
to see if they take the bait, or if, for example, they turn on one another.”

“Be careful,” he says. “Please.”

“I will be,” she answers, rising from the bed and moving to stand opposite him so she can lift his
hands to her lips. “I promise,” she breathes. “But you must promise me the same; promise me you
will be careful in your dealings with the Lord Gerion.”

He lifts her hands to his mouth, pressing tender kisses to her knuckles. “You have my word,” he
vows solemnly.

She gapes in shock, her jaw slack and her blue eyes wide. When Jaime had indicated a that a
bathing suite (for there really is no other word for it) adjoined their bedchamber, she had not
thought he meant something like this. She wraps the red robe that was a gift from her husband
more tightly around her waist and wanders bare-footed further into the series of rooms.
The first chamber’s white and gold-veined tiles are worn smooth with age and warm underfoot. The sudden, dry heat feels thick, almost like honey upon her tongue, and already she feels beads of sweat upon her nape, no doubt caused by the small brazier of scented cedar wood at the centre of the circular room that is decorated with golden vine mosaics upon a white background, and she shakes her head in laughing disbelief. A shelf is stacked with more fluffy white cloths than she thinks she will ever use, and the ledge is scattered with more of them for her to lounge about comfortably upon. But the real prize are the series of pretty phials that somehow contain the scented oils and cream soaps she enjoys massaging into her skin and brushing through her hair when she bathes.

Not for the first time, she thinks that Jaime is far more observant than he is often given credit for, because without them ever conversing on the topic, he has realised that she never uses the rose or jasmine oils so prevalent in King’s Landing and the South, but that she prefers those richer, headier, calmer scents derived from trees or nuts and some flowers. She does not tell him that her predilection also stems from the bitter Northron winters; that tree and nut oils are capable of keeping her skin supple and soft even when a gale attempts to blow through the stone walls.

There is the almond, apricot and starflower blend she is particularly enamoured of, one of Jaime’s ridiculous gifts to her during those first weeks of their marriage in Winterfell, along with her habitual honey and ewe’s milk cream soap, and the rich amber and sandalwood oil she favours in the bitterest depths of the harshest winters. But it is upon unstoppering a phial containing a light sunset-hued oil that she truly stills in dumbfounded shock. For somehow, the scent of the godswood, clean and clear and winter upon her skin, the scent of the weirwood tree leaf itself, ephemeral, rich and subtle and sweet and nothing short of heavenly to her, has been bottled.

Harvesting the weirwood leaves requires them falling to the ground of their own accord, which only happens at the onset of a false spring, or else, she knows, requires the tree itself to offer the leaves, something which happens even more rarely, for plucking the leaves without permission is a crime against the Old Gods. Sansa herself had found her wreath one dawn after her election at the foot of Winterfell’s heart tree, and only after a breeze had carried Bran’s words to her and the carven face had seemed to her to soften slightly, had she dared place the wreath upon her head. She’d been greeted with the warmth of the spring wind catching her hair, and the ice in the pools cracking like booming thunder.

This phial is a treasure without price, and she wonders where her husband managed to find it. The scent brings to her mind every happy memory she has; of her early childhood before she became aware of how different she was to the rest of her family, of Lady, and of her husband, and she blushes, fiercely before setting the phial down again. She will ask Jaime about it, and then she will use it, but for the present moment it is safe upon the ledge.

She trails a languid hand over the vine mosaics as she ambles her way around the room and through the archway on the far side, intent on exploring the second chamber, a soft smile tugging
at her lips. _Everything she could require_, indeed. Of a similar size, but rectangular, this time, the same white-and-gold floor tiles border a sunken pool hewn into the rock, lazy curls of steam rising from the water, and the dappled golden light that is fast becoming familiar to her makes the iridescent inlay of the walls ripple and glimmer like the water itself, and as she gets closer she realises that the whole wall is covered in mother-of-pearl carved into stylised sea-shells.

It would be far too easy for her to while away entire afternoons here, she realises abruptly, but she is curious about where the far archway leads, so she carefully makes her way around the pool and into the third, and she quickly understands, final chamber. The smallest of the three, it is also the noisiest for the crashing waterfall that spans the height of the wall empties itself into the sunken pool carved from the tiled floor. The water is almost cold when she dips her hand into it, and she can imagine how pleasant it would be to cool off after the first two chambers, in summer especially.

On this occasion she thinks to confine herself to the first two chambers. Whilst they are now in the grips of the Thaw, she is not so fond of cold water as to yet bathe in it at the onset of Spring, and as she returns to the first chamber, she determines to enjoy the opportunity to rest alone with the quiet of her thoughts, and to make some attempt at making sense of the tumultuous events of the day.

As she lets the silken robe slide to the tiled floor, stripping naked, and as she pours a generous amount of the almond, apricot and starflower oil into her palm, sitting down upon the ledge, and beginning, with smooth, practiced motion, to massage it into her legs, she lets herself finalise her plan for her Uncle Edmure and his fellow conspirators, knowing that she will feel more confident once she has done so. She also has no wish to begin thinking about the more painful, earlier happenings of the day until she has sorted at least this out to her relative satisfaction.

The more she thinks upon it, the more she realises her words to Jaime about avoiding direct confrontation and getting them to denounce themselves or each other, though difficult, is not too impossible an outcome to desire. She merely has to exercise the utmost caution, and weigh carefully the stratagem and impact of every word, as she had learnt to do for her own survival in King’s Landing, and later in the Eyrie under the twisted tutelage of Petyr Baelish. She shudders and pushes the memories from her mind. He is dead and gone and cannot hurt her now.

As she pours another measure into her palms to rub the oil into her arms, now, her mind wanders back to her husband. Her heart aches and weeps and twists for him. Misplaced guilt is a sentiment she is eminently familiar with. She is far more intimate with its destructive power than she has any wish to have become. It not only twists a person’s sentiments, but also plays havoc with their memories and perceptions.

Her husband did not abandon his people; and indeed the blame for their unwarranted suffering must be laid at the feet of the conquering Dragon Queen and her insatiable greed for these lands she knows or cares nothing about. It has always been a point of confusion for Sansa: she simply
doesn’t understand how something can be desired to such an extreme, and yet without there being any desire whatsoever to learn about this something that is desired. She cannot make sense of it, but then she supposes that it is a rare Targaryen indeed who is in possession of any kind of common sense. The Targayens, Sansa muses, have long had their eyes turned far too completely towards the object of their desire that they can’t see, or simply do not care about the locked doors in their way.

And she will tell him this for as many times as it takes him to believe her.

She understands, too, only too well the conflicting hope and shame he feels. Hope, that her words, her reassurances are in fact true, and the misplaced shame that is far more difficult to dislodge than many think. It will take time, she knows, for him to believe her, just as it will take time for her to believe, instead of merely rationally understand, that she is not to blame for Ned Stark’s death, and that it is not through any fault of her own that her own brother disdained to fight for her return, for her release from her captivity.

She knows only too well what it is to be manipulated, and she swallows fiercely against the sudden lump in her throat, forcing herself instead to concentrate upon the lovely scent of the oil she is rubbing with gentle circular motions into her skin, and of Jaime’s reaction when she wears it. Neither of them can keep their hands off the other, truth be told, but when she wears this scent - well… She blushes at the thought, before laughing briefly at herself. She does not see how she could ever tire of his arms sliding around her waist, of his lips at her ear or her collarbone, his warm breath ghosting over her skin, of his head between her thighs, of the hard weight of his body against hers -

And then she realises she’s proved her point because she bites her lip in frustration, remembering that they will not be alone until after the feast this evening, which she considers far too long a time to be without his affection. She would laugh at herself but for the reason that she wants him too fiercely. Her fists clench with mingled desire and impatience in both remembrance and anticipation, and she determinedly redirects her thoughts elsewhere, or she knows she will find it difficult to stop torturing herself with her impatience.

He teases her about it often, but she sees only too clearly the reverence and happiness in his gaze that she is so willing, and she huffs in real displeasure at her inability to control her own mind, snatching her cream soap from the ledge and stalking into the second chamber, hoping that the steaming water will soothe her.

She is still far too wound up, and not simply because she desires her husband.

She’d been afraid and desperately trying not to show it when she realised this morning the kind of welcome the city of Lannisport had reserved for them and their host. She remembers the wall of
sound buffeting her so fiercely that she’d felt dizzy with nausea, scanning face after face for any sign - a twitch in the brow, a set to the jaw - that might indicate the turning of the townspeople into a demented, uncontrolled mob. And then she’d felt guilty for her seemingly over-cautious sentiments in the face of such unrestrained joy. Her husband had been wrestling with his own demons, but by turning to each other for comfort instead of locking themselves further into their own minds, they’d been able to support and reassure each other, culminating in that glorious kiss that had chased away any lingering tension from their minds and bodies, and rendered them both able to acknowledge the people’s homage with the respect it deserved.

But she’d been woefully wrong when she’d thought that the welcome they’d received would be the only thing she’d worry about. Eleanor Tarly. That thrice-damned bell. Jaime showing her that hidden path beyond the waterfall, and then the agony of waiting, of being able to do nothing but wait. And as Jaime had imagined catastrophe after catastrophe on his way up to the Seastair, so too had she dreamed her waking nightmares, curled up in the bed where only a short time before her husband had given her more pleasure and happiness than she had ever believed possible - she’d been languid and sated and somehow still wanting more of him -

She sinks more fully into the water, resolving to enjoy the way the steam rises from the surface to warm her face, the way the heat caresses her neck, and, desperate to occupy herself, to rid herself of the tension that makes her shaky with nausea, she takes the honey and ewe’s milk soap and begins to lather it gently into her hair.

Today was too close. He’d agreed, and they’d clung to each other in grief and anguish - she doesn’t know why this is different to the skirmish outside Riverrun against the Dothraki. Perhaps because there he’d already been mounted and armoured and armed, and they had had the advantage of the invading horde.

The bell caught them by surprise.

Cuddled up on that bed, she’d been straining her eyes for the distinctive sound of dragons and men screaming - but there had been nothing, only silence, the deadened kind of silence that lingers in a crypt devoid of ghosts, an absent kind of silence, the silence that waits and waits and waits for something that never will occur, a frightened, uncertain sort of silence - and that had been more terrifying still for it had given her mind leave to imagine all kinds of terrible happenings.

Her husband screaming and writhing as dragon fire melts the flesh from his bones. Shadows in the sky so great they block out the sun. The light in Jaime’s eyes fading as he falls back, slumped against a parapet, skewered in the stomach with a sword, silver armour crimson and darkening steadily with blood, his mouth twisted in a grim, mocking parody of -

She shivers, gritting her teeth. Enough. Enough. Tears prick at her eyes and she raises her knees to
her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs, attempting to hold herself together - to no avail. She
draws great, shuddering breaths into her lungs as she shatters, alone and flayed alive with grief,
muffling her sobs into silence in a habit beaten into her years before, during her captivity.

She dresses carefully, studiously ignoring the telltale redness of her eyes, concentrating on drawing
her silver brush gently through her hair in practiced strokes, averting her eyes from the mirror. The
tumult of the day means that she wants to wear a gown that makes her feel more than queenly; one
that makes her feel pretty, one that makes her feel like a woman instead of a vulnerable little girl.
Something equally appropriate for a conclave and a confrontation as for a feast, and so she chooses
the white silk, the one that leaves her shoulders bare, cut with a lower neckline than her other
gowns, with crimson ribbon ties on her sleeves. The stays in her bodice force her posture upright,
but the close-cut skirts flow like water about her legs.

She wears a thin strand of white diamonds and pearls around her neck and her habitual wreath, the
symbol of her state, upon her head, but to this she adds silver and diamond jewels, weaving metal
snowflakes and leaves and single pearls down the length of her hair, and the effect is somewhat
like carving shards of ice glimmering upon blood, eternal and ephemeral, dangerous and vulnerable
like the ebb and flow of the tides, cold and untouchable and as remote as the winter dawn, twined
with the human warmth of her russet hair.

Her skin is as pale as frost, and will be attributed, she knows, to the natural fairness of her skin
instead of her nervousness, something she is grateful for, and only now does she nod, satisfied with
her appearance.

Wynafryd Manderly’s eyes widen when Sansa opens the door and states that she is ready to receive
the Lady Roslin in the courtyard garden where Jaime earlier made her his gift of the wondrous high
harp that previously belonged to the Lady Joanna. The other member of her Wolfsguard on duty,
Ser Andar Royce, bows and leaves to execute Sansa’s command.

Sansa can’t help the mischievous smirk that flits across her lips as the Heir to White Harbor takes
in her appearance, and she tilts her head in teasing question. “I take it you approve of my attire,
Wynafryd?”
The other lady, of an age with Sansa, having sufficiently recovered, laughs warmly and follows her queen into the solar and then through towards the courtyard garden at Sansa’s light gesture. “The King of the West will not be able to take his eyes from you, your Majesty.”

Sansa’s smirk widens. “He can’t take his eyes from me in any case,” she drawls, throwing a teasing wink over her shoulder, and her Wolfsguard laughs again. Something eases in Sansa’s chest as she hears the sound. The company of ladies her own age has been something she has been severely deprived of for the last several years, and she aches to realise how much she has missed the laughing exchange of secrets whispered with gleaming, glimmering eyes, and the whiling away of an afternoon with music and embroidery and poetry competitions. When she has a spare hour, which, admittedly, is not nearly as often as she would like, she has taken to inviting the Lady Wynafryd to her solar for such respite, something the Wolfsguard had readily agreed to. On occasion the Lady Morgana Mormont joins them, and Brienne too.

She is settled upon a comfortable seat, idly strumming her new harp, not playing anything in particular nor concentrating upon improvising properly, simply listening and enjoying the singular richness of sound the beautiful instrument produces, her dark-haired Wolfsguard entertaining her with stories of what the Wolf and Lionsguard get up to when off duty. The fourteen of them have bonded rather quickly, Sansa is pleased to hear, and frequently entertain each other with all manner of games and childish pranks and bets. This lightness is soundly encouraged by Jaime’s man Bronn, she learns, who is the man most often passing around another gourd of wine or leading them in a bawdy tune, with Ser Addam the most likely to exercise a good-natured tempering influence upon them. Nevertheless, Wynafryd’s recounting of the tale of Ser Addam and Bronn lifting Ser Leonidas from his pallet in the dead of night without waking him and then setting him down again in a fragrant, fluffy concoction of discarded women’s dresses and painting his face with rouge, has her laughing hysterically in a way she has not since she was a little girl and innocent of the evils of the world.

But it is Wynafryd’s stories of the Lionsguard’s visible pride in their duties that strike her the most. She had not realised the sheer extent of despair and disdain festering like pus in an open wound in the Westermen at first Joffrey and then Cersei’s actions leading them to ruin. With Jaime, at last, they have a ruler they can be proud of, and she is amused and touched and proud when she learns the depth of the devotion he has been able to instil in his men.

She is not surprised, of course; she has seen the way Jaime leads his men, but to hear the words spoken aloud warms her heart. She is just about to reply with some laughing remark about whether Wynafryd has her eye upon anyone, considering the fact that everyone seems to be pairing off - Ser Addam and Morgana, though they are yet subtle, even Brienne and Tormund at Winterfell, when Brienne announces the Lady Roslin with a bow, and Sansa raises her head in curiosity.

Her uncle Edmure’s wife is neither particularly tall nor short, and she twists her hands in her skirts with a guarded sort of passion, remarkably pretty despite the carefully hidden anguish. Sansa notices well the signs of nervousness - the set, defiant jaw, the overly-brushed dark chestnut hair - but it is the pale, drawn melancholy in the other lady’s face, in the listless furrow of her brow and
the wistful distance in her blue eyes, that make Sansa’s heart sink. Sadness has been carved into this girl like statues are carved from stone; with a frightening permanence that leeches the soul.

“Lady Roslin,” she says evenly, setting the high harp aside.

The Lady Roslin approaches, curtseys, kissing Sansa’s extended hand with a bowed head until the Queen in the North waves her up. “Your Grace.”

“I have no use for Targaryen titles, Lady Roslin,” Sansa corrects gently, aware of how gently she must tread. She has no wish to inadvertently present herself as haughty or aloof. She needs to establish a bond of trust, and already in her head she hears Baelish’s slippery voice like dank slime upon her skin exhorting her to charm now and strike later, as Cersei or the Queen of Thorns had done - and she presses an annoyed hand to the bridge of her nose. **Begone, go. You are dead and gone and rotting in an unmarked grave; you no longer have power over me. I will not manipulate this girl.**

“For-forgive me, my Queen,” the Lady Roslin stutters, but Sansa only smiles, waving away the apology.

“It is no matter, Lady Roslin,” she replies, her voice as soft as her guest’s. She turns to the two members of her Wolfsguard. “Brienne, Wynafryd, if you could leave us.” The two women bow at once and retreat. “Come, sit by me,” Sansa invites, “you have nothing to fear, I promise you.”

The Lady Roslin nods mutely, still staring down at her dainty fingers, and sits upon the bench without a word, swallowing in such a way that Sansa knows instinctively that she is attempting not to cry.

“What have my brother and my uncle done to you?” Sansa breathes eventually, her instinctive sympathy rising to the fore, and her words, it seems, are the final crack in the ice for the Lady Roslin begins to weep, hacking, ugly sobs into her hands, and Sansa can only draw her into an embrace, stroking up and down her back, humming an improvised tune until at last after some moments her sobs subside.

The Lady Roslin looks away, embarrassed, ducking her head in shy gratitude as Sansa wordlessly offers her a handkerchief, waiting patiently for her to regain her composure.

“I am sorry - that was - I am - ” the Lady Roslin mumbles, wiping her eyes with the white
“It is no matter, Roslin, truly,” Sansa murmurs, rubbing the other lady’s back soothingly as she takes a shuddering breath. “I trust my husband’s people have treated you well?”

“Oh, yes!” she exclaims. “Not at all like the way the King Jaime was treated by - ” Her uncle’s wife twists her fingers in her blue skirts again, closing her eyes in consternation. “Forgive me, I seem to be - I’m sorry, I - ” Sansa reaches to squeeze the other lady’s hand. “I would not have blamed him at all, you know? Had your husband the King decided to chain my lord and I up in a cage as he himself was once…” she trails off, and Sansa catches the well hidden strain at the mention of her uncle Edmure. “No,” the Lady Roslin continues, her tone firming. “Please allow me to extend my most heartfelt gratitude; our rooms are comfortable and well appointed, the meals more than enough. Before, when I was brought to my birthing bed - I was so alone, so afraid - ”

her voice cracks “ - afraid for myself, afraid for my child, afraid that if it was a boy my relatives would have no more use for my husband and kill him. I thought I - I had one night with him, but we got on well, even if he was surprised that I was pretty, and I thought that I might be able to make this marriage work.” She laughs bitterly, wetly, with the crushing, despairing weight of her disappointed hopes and Sansa sighs in commiseration. “How naive I was then. He hasn’t even looked at me once since we arrived here, since the end of the siege at Riverrun, let alone touched me. He is completely indifferent to his son, and then I found that missive merely lying about on his desk. He probably doesn’t think I can read - after all, I’m just one of Walder Frey’s many annoying daughters, and one who wasn’t even successfully sold for the price of a bridge,” she continues sardonically, her tones laced with furious self-loathing. “And despite everything I cannot but care for my husband, because he has given me my wonderful son, the only thing that brings me any joy in this life. And I hate myself for it. You cannot know how much I hate myself for it.” Her voice, though lighter when her son is mentioned, is now choked and hollow and as utterly deadened as branches turning to stone in an abandoned field.

“Oh, Roslin,” Sansa sighs. “I know only too well how humiliating the whims of men can be, and I cannot tell you how sorry I am that Robb and Edmure have treated you thus.” She is far more familiar with them than she would like, and Sansa shoves the scarring recollections - of Joffrey, of Petyr Baelish, of Jon - determinedly away. All that is past her now; she is well and happy and loved and her memories have no power over her, not anymore, not unless she allows them to. And yet, and yet, it is not so simple.

“I did not know, my Queen,” Roslin pleads, almost green with nausea, pulling Sansa away from her maudlin thoughts. “You must believe me; I did not know my father and Lord Bolton intended to break guest right.”

“I believe you,” Sansa replies evenly, steadying her kinswoman, grasping her shoulders firmly. “I believe you, Roslin. You were just a girl.” Like me, Sansa thinks dimly, like me, like the Lady Eleanor Tarly - we have all been the mere pawns of despicable men and women - enough. Sansa will make it so. After so long enduring the whims of others and the world they shaped, it is time for her to shape the world into the form she wishes, for her own safety, for her own happiness and that
of the people she loves.

“My husband blames me,” Roslin replies, her voice small and tight with grief and humiliation. “My husband blames me, and I had no notion of it at all. I did not know what was going to happen.”

“I believe you,” Sansa repeats. “I believe you.”

“I would have married Robb,” Roslin states softly, and Sansa immediately knows her to be entirely sincere; it is in the earnest timbre of her voice. “I did not know him, but my father betrothed me to him, and I would have obeyed my father, little though I mattered to him. I did obey my father, little good though it did me, but I admit that when your brother came to my wedding with his wife, I was curious. I wanted to lay eyes upon the man who would throw away an army for that grand elusive thing that was love, or so he’d claimed in his embassies to my father when trying to appease him.” She swallows harshly, gathering her thoughts. “I wanted to lay eyes on the woman he threw me over for and try to understand why she was worth insulting my father; why she was worth insulting me.”

“And what was your opinion?” Sansa tilts her head, intrigued. “Tell me truly, what was your opinion?” She exerts herself to keep her voice from betraying her similar, earnest wish. She cannot deny that she, too, has pondered upon multiple occasions the question: what was so special about Robb’s wife that he broke his betrothal to Roslin? And still, always, though she is not particularly proud of it, still there is the girlish little voice in her head pleading to understand: why did you disdain me, Robb? Why did you disown me and gallivant around the West and the Riverlands instead of pressing on to King’s Landing and rescuing me? I was just a girl, and I wanted my brother to come and rescue me, the way he did when we were little. I love you, Robb, and I wish I did not. I hate you, Robb, and I wish I did not. Jaime has helped of course, and rationally she sees that it was Robb’s own decisions that led to his doom, that his undoing was his own; that he, not she, was responsible for being left in King’s Landing. Robb made the choice to ravage the Westerlands instead of blazing south and demanding her return. It will take far longer for her to believe it fully.

“He was handsome and proud in his bearing, and I thought so this is what a King looks like, this is what a man who can afford to offend looks like, or this is what a man who believes he can afford to offend looks like,” Roslin replies and Sansa is pleased to see she seems to be coming out of her shell. “But then he saw me and his shock…” she breaks off with a hollow laugh, “and that was when I realised that for all his bravado and declamations about glory and love, whatever his prowess upon the battlefield, he was just a man, with a man’s failings.”

“You were disappointed,” Sansa surmises, curious rather than offended. “A man like any other, you say?”
“Yes, but with a rather disproportionate power to hurt others through his carelessness.” Roslin pauses. “You must understand, we’d been hearing all these tales about how he was the god of carnage, a master of the art of war, a true King of Winter like in the stories of old, but all I saw was a man, a man who did not even have the decency to be ashamed for long when he realised who I was.”

“He should not have treated you thus, Roslin, you do know that?” Sansa asks, her voice gentle even though she wants to summon her brother’s ghost and rage at him and then ask him for his reasoning, and then rage at him some more. For Roslin, but also for herself.

“I know,” Roslin nods. “But do you know that given the choice between a husband with a roving eye or one who turns you away from him entirely, I cannot decide which is more painful, more humiliating?”

Sansa winces. She too, to this day can still not decide whether Ramsey or Joffrey’s actions towards her were the more excruciating, the more debasing, and she resolutely forces her mind away from such horrifying memories.

“I know how lonely isolation and cruelty can be. Roslin, you need not fear that any longer,” Sansa makes her decision as she speaks. In that moment they are not Queen and vassal but simply two young women to whom the world has been unspeakably cruel, two young women who have grasped onto the sympathy and kindness that springs from shared suffering. Sansa presses her shoulder against Roslin, and Roslin presses back in silent understanding. Sansa is out of practice with making friends, she knows, counting only Jaime and perhaps Brienne and Wynafryd amongst her close court, as true friends, but she thinks with the part of her that is still childish and innocent and believes in the good in others, that she might quite like to have Roslin as her friend.

“All the songs say you are the winter sunset itself, my Queen,” Roslin says eventually, in a quiet, tired sort of voice. She smiles at that, for Jaime calls her the winter dawn, and so the notion of being the winter sunset to her people is rather flattering. “Protective of your people, devoted in love, the Red Wolf. Beautiful, more beautiful than Cersei Lannister, more beautiful than Margaery Tyrell, more beautiful than Daenerys Targaryen. But I am not ashamed now to say that I was afraid of you, because everyone also says you look like your mother, you look like your brother Robb. I suppose I was afraid you were as careless of others as he was, too eager to please his bannermen.”

Sansa is so stunned by this speech that she cannot gather her wits enough to form a coherent reply.

“I am not afraid of you now, my Queen,” Roslin continues in the sincere, earnest, strangely determined voice Sansa is coming to realise is characteristic of her quietly stubborn nature. “You have shown me more kindness in a single conversation than I have been shown in my entire life. It is not the kind of thing I will forget.” She smooths her skirts with steady fingers, a welcome
improvement to their constant nervous twisting in the fabric, and Sansa feels no little pride that she has been able to put her kinswoman at ease, despite the unpleasant nature of their subjects of conversation.

“It grieves me to know you have been treated so callously.”

Roslin snorts, her words clipped and bitter. “Who was there, truly, to be kind to me? My mother died when I was little more than a babe. My brothers and half-brothers and uncles and nephews and grand-nephews, Perwyn and Olyvar aside, were more likely to rape me than to speak to me at all. My sisters and step-mothers and half-sisters and nieces and grand-nieces were more likely to cut my hair off in my sleep than to become any kind of true confidant. And my father… forgot my name, forgot I even existed at all most of the time. No, my only solace in life is my son’s laughter, and that is all.”

“And the Lord Edmure is distant,” Sansa finishes grimly.

Roslin laughs, a joyless, ragged sound like knives scraping over bells, full of misery and self-loathing. “He could not be more distant were I here and he on the far side of Essos.” She inhales deeply. “When I saw his letters upon his desk, I knew I had to warn you. I knew I could not let the same thing happen twice.”

“You were very brave to write to me.”

“I only did what needed to be done; I was not so very brave,” Roslin protests, her cheeks flushing pink with embarrassment at the praise.

“It was brave, Roslin,” Sansa insists, though her tone remains gentle. “Now, if I may, I would have your opinion on this dress of mine. Is it fit for a feast, do you think?”

Her kinswoman’s eyes widen with shock at the change of subject and at the informal nature of the inquiry. “It is beautiful, my Queen, but why ask me?”

Throughout the course of the conversation, she believes she has gathered the information she needs, and she likes the flashes of spirit she has seen in the other Lady’s introverted nature. “I have every intention of including you in my circle.”
She laughs lightly at the gobsmacked look upon Roslin’s countenance and rises, guiding her guest back to the entrance to her apartments. “I will expect you at our feast tonight, Roslin.”

“My Queen is gracious to invite me,” she replies, before hesitating. “What will happen to my husband and his circle? My brother Perwyn -”

“What of your brother?” Sansa is careful to make certain her inflection and facial expression remain even, ruthlessly suppressing the urge to press for what she is fairly certain Roslin will confirm; namely the list of Edmure Tully’s co-conspirators.

“Perwyn has always been a good friend of my husband’s, but I know him to be against this foolhardy plot,” Roslin replies carefully. “He was not so careless as to mention it directly, but he has been working within that circle.”

Sansa’s eyes flash. “The whole circle?”

Roslin nods her confirmation.

Sansa exhales wearily. “I have not yet decided what I will do about mine uncle,” she says. She might believe Roslin sincere and in earnest, and theirs a friendship worth cultivating, but her hard-won caution guards her from being overly loquacious with her plans. “I will tell you when I have.”

Her kinswoman sinks into a curtsey, her face brightening with relief. “You are too generous with me, my Queen.”

_Do not thank me yet, Lady Roslin_, Sansa cannot help but think. _I do not yet know what mine uncle and his conspirators will reveal; I do not yet know into what position I will be placed; I do not yet know how I might be forced to act._
She has ordered the Riverlords, including her uncle, summoned to the Colonnades, where it was habitual for the Lord of the Rock and the Kings before them to hold meetings with their advisors, according to Jaime, walking the labyrinthine, open corridors, boots loud upon the flagstones as schemes were brought to fruition whilst pacing and enjoying the view of various hidden gardens adorned with fountains and gardens and sculptures within.

She awaits them with her full Wolfsguard and Lady accompanying her - Fortune being too much the Lannister symbol for her to effectively be able to play the game she must now play. She watches carefully whom arrives with whom, which lord averts his eyes from another. Most carefully of all she watches her uncle’s circle; she is only conjecturing, of course, but she is fairly certain that said circle comprises the plot’s ringleaders; if she teases them out of the woodwork, if she is able to make them incriminate themselves, then, if the plot should have wider support, she hopes it will be enough to cow that second echelon.

Her uncle starts when he sees her, his face as pale as a ghost’s. “Niece,” he chokes.

“My Lord Uncle,” she replies primly.

“My sister spoke of you,” he murmurs, taking an aborted, staggering step towards her. “You look very like her.”

Her heart twists abruptly, and it is only through her force of will that she is able to maintain her composure. “Indeed? And tell me, my Lord Uncle, did she talk about ransoming me?” She is not about to fall apart now, even though she distantly realises that in front of her is one of the few remaining members of her blood kin, and she sees something of her mother in her uncle’s colouring and the shape of his nose.

“Yes.” The word is a hoarse rasp.

“And yet I was not, was I?” her voice is sharp now, despite her best efforts, but she is still too raw and she reminds herself sternly to tread carefully. Remember the plan. Gently. Remember the plan.

“No,” her treacherous uncle retorts. “But as I find you married to the Kingslayer, perhaps you had no wish to be ransomed.”

Her vision whitens. She stills, utterly dumbstruck, feeling as though Joffrey or Ramsey have
slapped her again. Her fingers twist in a sudden burst of furious, icy rage, hidden in her skirts as the blood drains from her face and she becomes aware that she is viciously dragging the air into her lungs, attempting to stay upright through the sudden dizziness. Lady nudges her side, and Sansa instinctively lets the direwolf keep her on her feet. She does not want to see the absolute hatred radiating from her uncle’s countenance, with every line writ deep with scorn and rage, and though she quails inwardly her chin remains raised, because by the Old Gods and the New, she is the elected Queen in the North, of the Trident and the Vale and she will not let this man though he is her uncle trample her into the ground. Some of the lords shift uneasily at the private business of her family being aired thus in public - but it cannot be helped. She will defend her decisions, and if her uncle does not like that, then -

“I am not Robb,” she whispers eventually, forcing the words over broken shards of glass that make her bleed, “and Jaime is not Cersei. If any two people have reason to hate the other it is we too, because Robb tortured him as Cersei and her son tortured me. But we do not hate each other, because we recognise that we are not our siblings.”

“Your husband,” her uncle snarls, provoked beyond diplomacy, “your vaunted husband threatened to return my son to me with a catapult.”

“And you believed him,” she returns evenly, though she does not know how she keeps her composure. “That was your mistake.”

“In marrying him, niece, you dishonoured your mother, your father, your brother and all the bannermen who died fighting for him,” he spits, and were she not so wounded she would laugh bitterly because her uncle knows indeed how to cut her to the quick. And what of the way Robb dishonoured all of his bannermen by breaking the betrothal with House Frey?

Her lords stir in outrage at this, some more than others she notes curiously, furious at the insult, to them, to her, but she holds her hand up in her habitual, elegant gesture for silence, and the Riverlords obey, albeit grudgingly. “Peace, my lords. I would hear my uncle’s words,” she states blandly. “I am a Stark of Winterfell, I am the daughter of Catelyn Tully of Riverrun, and in my realm if my people are dissatisfied with me they state it to my face. My people do not plot against me behind my back, my people speak to me - so, speak, uncle mine.” She tosses her head back proudly, her russet hair catching the golden light and gleaming. “I am listening.”

“Robb had the right idea, disowning you, sweet niece,” he snarls the words like a curse, and her left hand curls reflexively around her waist, and though nausea suddenly compounds her dizziness so that she can barely breathe, she bites her tongue, the flash of pain cutting through the fog in her mind. “You bitch, wed to Jaime Lannister.”

“He is my friend, my ally, my husband, and he has shown me more respect in the short time we
have been married than my male kin have shown me in my entire life!” She doesn’t know precisely where the words come from, but she only knows that she will not - that she cannot let this - let her uncle -

Something foul twists in his expression in response, and it sends a shiver down her spine. “Do you enjoy being on your back for a Lannister, niece?” She stiffens, hardly daring to believe he is being so crass, but she is so stunned with outrage that she is as a statue, and so her uncle continues, warming with a vicious, cruel sort of satisfaction to his theme. “I suppose you were so long their prisoner in the South that you don’t know any other way. I’ve heard the songs, we all have, heard the sniggered bawdy tales of you and the King of the West, hardly able to keep your paws off each other, going at it like the beasts you are. How can you sleep at night?” He laughs disdainfully, and the sound is nails scratching at her soul, tearing great gashes in it. She feels entirely sullied by his words, by the way he is twisting the good, pure, ardent devotion she shares with her husband into something to disdain. Beside Sansa, Brienne looks as though she would dearly like to run Edmure Tully through. “Oh, pardon me, my Queen, you don’t sleep because you’re too busy being the Kingslayer’s pretty little whore.”

Her fingers twist in Lady’s fur, and her mind flies back to her beloved Winterfell, to the hall where she and Jaime had their first conversation, surrounded by the wounded, to the ramparts where he first held her hands, to the godwood where he first held her, where they wed one winter dawn and then later came upon her as she frolicked in the hot springs - his solar in the guest wing where he first kissed her - his bedchamber where he truly made her his, and as he bolts the door behind them she is safe in his warm embrace as he melts her from winter to life - he soothes her choked, gasping breaths to something more settled, and with his affection he washes away the filth and taint of her uncle’s vulgar speech - breathe, lovely one, breathe -

She cannot see it, but in that moment, when she cloaks herself in the certainty of her husband’s ardent devotion to her, drawing strength from him, she straightens and sends her uncle such a cold, disdainful glare that he takes an involuntary step back. “I love him,” she says, her voice sounding as though it is being carried over a great distance, ringing clear in her ears like a bell, “I love my husband. I love him and he loves me, but more than that, we respect each other, we are allies and friends who defeated the Night King, and we did it by working together.”

The condescending, disgusted gleam in her uncle’s eyes tells her that her efforts to sway him are futile, though most of her lords look thoroughly scandalised and horrified, and she forces herself to think through the haze of pain, concentrating on Lady, strong and warm and comforting at her side, tethering her to the real world, and she realises that her original plan is going to have to be adapted.

Perhaps discarded entirely would be a better assessment.

Her stomach roils with nausea. What she has just thought of, what she is about to do - it is a great risk. She is eminently aware of that, and yet it is the only way she can see. If she fails, she will do
nothing less than destroy her legitimacy over the Riverlands -

But as she showed the Dragon Queen, she is not afraid of improvisation.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she fumbles to extract a folded square of parchment from her left sleeve and holds it aloft, coldly furious, gathering herself together, looking every lord proudly in the eye as she speaks. “My lords, two days ago I received this very missive, and I admit I was gravely concerned by it. It is the reason I have asked you all here this afternoon.” She begins to walk, her stride deliberately nonchalant, her agony over her uncle insulting her so grievously entirely and carefully hidden, fully subsumed behind her smooth, regal mask, only to be uncovered later in the evening when she is safe in the arms of the man she loves. “I was concerned because I thought, this must be a lie.” Her fingers tighten upon the parchment, and she softens her tones to a girlish timbre. “I cannot believe my Riverlords would be accused of plotting with the Dragon Queen against me and my husband, to break guest right once we reach the Rock.”

Her lords shift and murmur their outrage, and as she paces she watches them, not lingering upon any man for them to catch her at it. Using the sacred, incendiary words to break guest right is a deliberate provocation on her part, and she marks carefully their reactions. As she’d suspected, she does not have long to wait.

“You would accuse us of high treason?” Ser Patrek Mallister shouts. Sansa knows him to be impetuous. Hot-headed. A close friend of her uncle’s, and unless she is much mistaken, one of the men easiest to provoke into loosening his tongue a little too greatly.

“My lords, peace,” she replies evenly, cautiously weighing every word, her speech designed to soothe and appease, with its rich, unaffected tones. “I am accusing no-one of treason, I am accusing no-one of anything, because I believe this missive to be false. Indeed I believe it with all my heart to be untrue, sent to me by one of the Dragon Queen’s spies with the express intention of sowing discord and distrust in our conclave.” Her lords are so surprised by her words that they quiet immediately, and she takes advantage of the opening. “I believe this to be the grossest falsehood, because I know my Riverlords for who they are, unlike Daenerys Targaryen. I know my Riverlords are proud of their lands and their people, and care for them deeply, honourably, offering them refuge inside castle walls during times of war. I know my Riverlords to be skilled upon the battlefield and true to their word. I know them to be good men, true men, gallant men, one and all, and incapable of any treason. So we will say nothing more on the matter, my lords.”

Calmly, though her heart is thundering in her chest, she turns and begins to walk away, Lady ever at her side.

“You stupid little idiot,” her uncle replies once the lords have recovered their wits. There, she thinks, she has him now, and she turns in a smooth, slow, precisely calculated movement, her
eyebrow raised and her skirts rustling, her expression impassive, and in that moment she is winter incarnate. “You really are just the air-headed little girl your family always knew you were. If you thought I would ever allow a Lannister, much less Jaime Lannister, to hold power, you really are a fool.”

“Hold your tongue, Tully!” Perwyn Frey snaps.

Sansa remains silent, but her steely gaze darts sharply from one man to the next, and she reminds herself to be patient for just a few moments more.

“You hold yours, Frey!” This time it is Ser Marq Piper who cannot dissemble his ire, and Sansa catches the horrified glance of realisation from his father Lord Piper. The younger Piper shoves the Lady Roslin’s brother into the wall, and Perwyn Frey pushes back, narrowly avoiding stumbling into a column. The lords are becoming more vocal, more tense, and she realises from the clouded brows and stiff postures that it is only a matter of time before weapons start being reached for and punches start being thrown and the situation spirals entirely beyond her control into a brawl or a bloodbath.

Lady growls, once, so loudly and so ominously that the sound echoes upon the stone, and silence falls at once.

“So it is not a lie?” she murmurs, allowing some of the fragility she feels at the whole situation to seep into her voice, playing the injured girl. The majority of the lords have no idea where to look or what to school their expressions into, and were the situation not so dire she would laugh because the Riverlords look as young boys being scolded for stealing berry tarts from the kitchens. “You too, Ser Tristan?” she continues, catching the knight’s defiant glare.

“Indeed,” Patrek Mallister smirks, before spitting at her feet. “And we’re not ashamed of it, girlie, no we’re not, are we lads?” Her uncle spits, Sers Marq Piper and Tristan Ryger follow. The loyalists bristle, but they take their cues from their Queen, and noting that she holds herself still, they rein themselves in and trust her.

Perwyn Frey does not spit at her feet, a fact which does not go unnoticed by the conspirators.

Ser Robert Paege launches himself at the other man. “You fucking traitor! I knew we couldn’t trust a Frey.”
“Lady Brienne,” Sansa calls, almost dispassionately, “if you would be so kind as to arrest these men, I’d be grateful.”

Brienne bows, and swiftly the conspirators are bound by the Wolfsguard and forced to their knees, the other lords clearing away, looking on with a morbid, horrified sort of fascination.

“Theft Ser Perwyn,” Sansa directs, and though confused her guards follow her commands.

“You have no proof!” her uncle struggles, attempting to elbow Brienne in the stomach, but Sansa’s Daeme Commander, in her armour, easily brushes off the wild blow.

“Proof?” Sansa raises an eyebrow, before deliberately holding out the parchment, unfolding it and then letting it fall like a leaf caught in the breeze to the ground at her uncle’s feet.

“It is blank!” he exclaims. “You have no evidence.”

“I have no evidence?” Sansa returns evenly, taking a measured step back. “No evidence? My dear uncle,” she laughs, though there is no warmth or affection whatsoever in the sound, “I only have your confession, and the confession of your co-conspirators, made in public in front of your peers of your own volition. If that is not evidence then I do not know what is.”

The chained men still in a stunned sort of silence, and the moment hangs between them, heavy with glaring hatred, and she draws herself up haughtily as she stares these betrayers down, impassively, regally, as she feigns being unmoved even as she is unable to deny the fierce satisfaction mingled with heartfelt melancholy coursing through her veins as she waits for one or all of them to -

“You tricked us!” Ser Patrek Mallister shouts. “You - fucking - ”

At this, her uncle’s head snaps up, and he spits his vitriol. “You deceitful little whore!” His eyes are wild with fury and poisonous hatred, and he struggles against the firm grip Brienne holds him under.

“I merely asked you to confirm that which I already knew, and you did, uncle,” Sansa replies with a nonchalant shrug, though she knows the contempt in his eyes will haunt her nightmares for many days to come. “It is not my fault you decided you were cleverer than I, uncle.”
In the uncertain, admiring and tense silence that follows from her lords, Morgana Mormont asks, “Your Majesty, where shall we take these traitors to?” even as she whacks the hilt of her dagger against Marq Piper’s head to subdue him into unconsciousness.

“The Deep Cells will do nicely, I believe,” she answers, implacable, pretending she hasn’t seen the shiver that runs through the arrested men at her words, pretending she doesn’t hate this with every fibre of her being. “Perhaps some time to think will persuade them of the errors of their ways. Strip them of all and any weaponry and guard them well. I am not yet inclined to give them their trials at this present moment.” She has executed two men before and she would in all honesty prefer not to repeat the experience. If giving them time in a cold, dank dungeon will perhaps soften even only one of them into repentance, then locking them away will have achieved something. Besides, she learnt fairly early on in her captivity from Joffrey and Cersei and Baelish and Ramsey that there are some fates worse than death by execution.

Her Wolfsguard obey, clattering out of sight with their cargo, and Sansa turns back to her remaining Riverlords.

“I know you to be honourable men, all of you,” though she speaks softly, her voice carries a thread of the steel that runs in her veins. “I know our ancestral laws and customs; those men will receive their trials, proper trials, in time. Know that if ever you wish to speak to me, if ever you are unhappy with a ruling of mine - I will hear you. I am a Tully and a Stark and I honour my word given. I will hear you, and we will work towards a solution together. But I would ask that you do me the courtesy of speaking your grievances to my face and not attempting to poison or stab me behind my back.”

As one, her lords sink to their knees. In the eyes of some, those whose heirs were plotters, she reads mingled anguish and shame and loyalty to her. In the eyes of others she sees nothing but determination, and in the eyes of others still she sees reluctant admiration; her lords will hold her to her word, she knows, and she would have it no other way, for the covenant between lord and liege is a sacred, precious thing, and the very foundation itself of order and law. She has seen far too many kings and queens err on this point; the belief in their divinely ordained entitlement to a throne has led them to their ruin. What they had not grasped is that the covenant is a mutually beneficial relationship, and equally capable of being broken by both sides.

She also knows that her lords will not underestimate her again.

“How rise, my lords, rise,” she speaks. “I have no need of this Targaryen excess. I know you to be loyal, and I will see you at the full conclave in the Golden Hall.”
As they make their way to departing the Colonnades, she halts at Lord Mooton’s side, and asks if she might trouble him for his escort. The bannerman - he must be of an age with her husband as his brown hair is only now beginning to grey in earnest - agrees immediately, offering her his arm, and she swallows the stones in her throat at the thought of what she is about to do.

“My Lord Mooton,” she begins gently, “when was the last time you heard from your daughter the Lady Eleanor Tarly?”

“My daughter?” the bannerman stumbles, clearly not expecting such a question. “My sole remaining child? My heir?” Lord Mooton smiles, a soft, private expression, tinged with melancholy. “My beautiful girl writes to me every sennight, without fail.” His brow furrows with confusion. “Has perhaps her latest missive been by mistake placed with my Queen’s own letters? In which case I apologise most sincerely.” He sketches a deep bow, and where upon another the gesture might have been a touch too grand to be anything but subtle mockery, in this bannerman she sees only sincerity, and she bites her lip, her heart twisting painfully.

How can she tell him? How can she tell this man whose very being lights up at the mere mention of his daughter that - that -

When she is silent as they continue on their way, Lord Mooton’s genial features turn bewildered, then solemn, and then pale with fear as he realises something is wrong, that something is atrociously, horrendously wrong when even his witty, gentle queen cannot find the words to explain.

“Your Majesty?” Lord Mooton presses, his tones wavering, and she cannot bear this, the gods help her but she cannot -

“I received a letter which stated that following advice from House Florent, she has ridden with her son to Daenerys Targaryen’s camp to demand restitution for the unlawful killings of her good-father and her husband, the Lords Randyll and Dickon Tarly,” Sansa murmurs, her words heavy with compassion and there are few things worse, she thinks, than to see all the joy of a man’s life suddenly torn from him thus, because Lord Mooton staggers, his countenance frozen with horror, leaning heavily against the wall, and Sansa can only guide him gently to sit upon the flagstones as his shoulders shake. She does not have to explain to him what this means for she can see clearly enough from his eviscerated expression that her bannerman has already realised.

“My sweet Eleanor,” he mumbles, bewildered, tears running into his beard. “My grandson, prisoners of that - of that - ” he growls incoherently, and as Sansa kneels at his side she softly grips his shoulder.
“Jaime and I have already sent a raven to the Hightower,” she says earnestly, before ice forges itself in her gaze and she is implacable, her voice leaving no room to consider any other outcome. “We will get them back, my dear Lord Mooton,” she vows vehemently. “I promise, the King of the West and I will do everything in our power to bring them back safely to you.”

Sansa will make it so.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Predictions?
Chapter Summary

“Your highborn is showing,” Bronn interjects to Jaime, in the manner of a maester explaining something to a small child.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!

Apologies for the delay on this chapter; my university classes have started again so I've been very busy!

Thanks as always to galaxiasincognita for the help on this chapter.

So, without further ado -

Enter Gerion.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWENTY ONE
He is so much wearied by the unending chaos of the day that he takes the lift up to the principal gates of the Rock proper, for a climb up the great stair will bring him to his knees. He is wearied too much by having been considered a fool by both of his estranged siblings since they were all nothing more than children, and he is afraid that he is once again walking into such a situation. Considered by his younger sibling a handsome soldier incapable of the cunning of their house, nothing more than a deadly, awe-inspiring weapon, but only a weapon just the same, and considered by his elder half a heart, half a soul, half a life - he laughs sardonically to himself - blinded by love to both of their natures, and fought over like a felled deer by vultures pecking at his eyes, his hide, tearing strips of raw, bloodied flesh from his white bones, indifferent to his suffering and only wishing to claim him for their own, only wishing to crow in vindictive, satisfied triumph *My brother, my brother, mine. My protector, my lover, mine.*

And now he fears, he dreads with the deep, ashamed sort of terror that his heart will be clawed from his chest, weighed and considered and tossed to the dogs to be devoured in the name of that renegade master, Power.

But what choice has he? He is the King of the West.

He has a wife, and unborn child and a people to protect, and he hence needs must find inside his fragile, mortal flesh some strength of will and character to go on, some bolstering courage to marshal him, even in the depths of despair, even now when he feels wave after buffeting wave slap him coldly in the face, even as he choking on churning saltwater and the treacherous current tugs at his ankles, and it seems to him that a warmer, kinder wind carries upon it the soft, caressing tones of his wife to murmur into his ears and comb through his hair and trace his features, lingering upon his mouth in a sweet ephemeral kiss.

*I love you. I adore you. I want you, and I choose you, always, only ever you, beyond the ending of the world I love you -*

The words wrap themselves protectively around his battered heart and lay soothing hands upon his soul, and his resolve returns to him in the same way that cold clarity descends upon him in battle, a morning mist rolling in over the sea and cliffs, inexorable, a force unstoppable.
Rationally, Jaime understands this, of course. But belief is an altogether more tricky, slippery beast, more difficult by far to capture, as akin to the eagle as is the sloth. Sansa’s words bring him comfort - she has a singular talent for this, does his sweet wife, he has come to find - and he shields himself with her certainty, allows it to spur him to confidence and courage as the lift creaks to a halt and he strides away, indifferently through the Golden Hall where an army of uniformed servants are moving the trestle tables and benches into place for the feast later in the evening. His seneschal stands at the foot of the dais, a boy scribe following him scribbling dictated notes upon a long scroll of parchment with a feather quill as the man conducts the flurry of servants as efficiently as a general, with short, clipped directions and smooth gestures, serene and stern-faced in the centre of the chaos. All activity ceases as his presence is remarked, but he impatiently waves away the bowing and curtly orders them back to their work, a command which is followed instantaneously.

His boots seem obscenely loud upon the flagstones in the still quiet of the Hall of Heroes, and he swallows thickly past the nausea rising in his throat as he steps out of the shadow of one of the alcoves to come face to face with a kinsman he has not set eyes upon in thirteen years, his uncle, Gerion Lannister.

His breath comes fast and sharp as he takes in the sight before him, and he viciously pushes down the boyish impulse to run to his kinsman and embrace him heartily, to laugh with joy at the notion of a member of his family, so decimated by the recent wars and turmoil, a man they’d mourned for dead, returning to Casterly Rock now. The caution that tempers Jaime’s impulsive recklessness has been very hard won indeed, too hard-won for him to discard it upon a whim, as much as he might wish it.

He has so many questions swirling about in his mind that he hardly knows where to begin, now that at last the man stands in front of him, his kinsman with the tanned, weatherbeaten, craggy countenance of a seasoned adventurer, and behind him his crew, hardy men one and all, and behind them an assortment of wooden trunks, cages and boxes.

Green eyes, as green as his own, as green as the seawater of the rock pools in the cliffs in morning sunlight, find his, and Jaime frowns, scanning his kinsman’s expression, though for what purpose he knows not. His uncle’s features are impassive in any case, and just as Jaime opens his mouth to speak a greeting -

“What the fuck is that?” A sudden, chattering crash, thunderously loud against the flagstones jolts Jaime from his intentions and he whirls around towards the noise. One of the cages, covered in thick oilcloth, is shaking, and the cacophony, a cruel, laughing chatter, only increases. Around him Ser Daven and Ser Addam and Bronn and his Lionsguard draw their weapons, and then Fortune prowls past him, brushing against Jaime’s shoulder, the sigil a predator now, watchful and silent,
edging closer, sounding a low, rumbling growl, and the rattling and chattering noises halt with a sudden squawk.

But his uncle Gerion, unperturbed, saunters towards the cage and yanks the oilcloth to the floor in a single, fluid movement. “Monkeys,” Jaime’s kinsman explains redundantly.

“Yes, I can see that,” Jaime bites out, turning a baleful eye upon the ten or so animals held frozen behind the bars by Fortune’s presence. “That doesn’t answer my question. What the fuck is all of this?”

“Ah, well,” his uncle begins genially with the tones of a seasoned raconteur, “I was traipsing through the jungle in the arse-end of Sothoryos, thoroughly sick of being feasted upon by mosquitos the size of my fist and I came across this, er, colony of little black monkeys in the ruins of a temple, and it must have been the jungle fever - or something of the kind - anyway, I decided I wanted to learn their language, hence - ” he gestures his explanation, before turning towards the cage and taking from his pocket a piece of candied fruit and proffering it between the bars to the nearest monkey, who snatches it before his fellows can take it, and noisily gobbles it to the acute, chattering displeasure of the others, and Jaime winces, narrowly avoiding the urge to cover his ears against the piercing sounds. “In any case, the Sepens of the Basilisk Isles thought this was quite clever, and I was given leave to remain there a while longer.” Jaime watches as his uncle considers the beasts with the indulgent eye of a master looking over a favoured hound. “They’re quite amusing, really.”

“Of course,” Jaime replies dryly, now thoroughly wrong-footed, though he attempts to collect himself as best he can. “They can stay in your chambers, uncle - but if they begin to become an annoyance, I’ll have them shot.” Gerion Lannister appears surprised, not by the harshness of the edict, but by the fact that it comes from Jaime, and he swallows forcefully the bitter twinge upon his heart this causes - do all his kin find him incapable of being decisive? of leading instead of following?

“As you say, nephew,” Gerion replies, recovering his ease. “I must say, I was not expecting such a welcome as this. It was a bit over-zealous, all the searching and rummaging.”

“We are on a war footing, uncle, or had you not heard?” Jaime replies evenly. “You’ve sailed straight into a siege.”

“Ah, a siege?” Jaime’s uncle raises his eyebrows. “Well, bugger.” Gerion gestures to his first mate, a stocky man liberally covered in scars where his worn leather and linen rags leave his skin to be tanned brown by the sun, and one of the wooden kegs is opened. “In that case, these might be of use - careful, man, careful, by the gods, that was a gift from the Jade King, and Pell was most aggrieved that I was awarded the shipment!” Jaime’s uncle sweeps over to inspect the keg,
exhaling his satisfaction as he dips a hand to extract a handful of what Jaime soon sees is an iron-grey powder, as fine as salt. “This has many names - grey gold, the core ingredient of fireworks, the elixir of life and death… but the alchemists who invented it in the island kingdoms beyond the Jade Gates in an attempt to harness immortality call it bysshir.” Jaime exchanges an unsettled glance with his cousin. “Dampen it and it becomes useless. But strike a flint and it explodes, almost as foul as wildfire,” Gerion finishes with theatricality, and Jaime is now thoroughly unnerved, fighting the urge to shudder. Almost as foul as wildfire… he cannot conceive of such a substance.

Ser Daven, reading his King’s mood, ends the conversation with a swift, “Thank you, uncle. We’ll get this… bysshir to our head engineer; he will have some notion of how to work with such a substance.”

Jaime acknowledges this with a sharp, terse nod. “Thank you, cousin.”

“Sire, perhaps - ” Ser Addam, this time, but Gerion interrupts before the general can finish his statement.

“Sire?” he questions, catching immediately the nuances of the address. “You mean to say that the West no longer answers to the Iron Throne?”

Jaime stills in surprise. He had not thought Gerion to be so unaware of events in Westeros, and he reminds himself to caution against the stubborn flare of hope that lights in his chest - perhaps his uncle has not then encountered Jaime’s wayward little brother? “What was the last thing you heard?” He asks, gaze narrowing to emerald flint.

“That the Sept of Baelor was blown up, but no details, and nothing after,” his uncle replies, unfazed by Jaime’s tone of command. “I know that little shit Joffrey is dead.”

“Nothing further?” Jaime specifies, wanting to understand, a strange, unsettled feeling taking root in his stomach.

“Nothing further,” his uncle confirms, bemused. “The things I was hearing about Daenerys Targaryen out of Essos made me - well, I was trying to get as much information on her movements and doings as I could, and information about Westeros was much more difficult to come by, and then I was shipwrecked and held prisoner in the Basilisk Isles…” He trails off at the closed expression on his nephew’s face. “Fuck it, Jaime, what’s happened?” he asks, voice hoarse, hands scrubbing wearily over his bearded face. “It’s bad, isn’t it?” He continues, answering his own question with all the despair of a man being led to the gallows.
“It’s worse than you could possibly imagine, uncle,” he agrees hollowly, swallowing thickly, suddenly feeling all of a thousand years old. “Far, far worse.”

“You’re not merely wearing that sash because your father is absent,” Gerion realises, his expression pained and wistful.

“No,” Jaime responds quietly. “My father is buried in the crypts, laid to rest with my mother, as he would have wished.”

“Good, that’s good,” his uncle says, nodding, distracted and distant.

“Your highborn is showing,” Bronn interjects to Jaime, in the manner of a maester explaining something to a small child. Funnily enough, Jaime finds he doesn’t care for such a tone. “There have been good bits too, or had you forgotten? Doesn’t bedding your wife count as a good bit?” The sellsword continues cheerily. “Oh, that’s right - it's more than a good bit, isn’t it?”

Jaime growls in warning, but not before Gerion, as Jaime fears he might, seizes upon the man’s words with alacrity. “You’re married, Jaime? I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Aye, m’lord, he is, and to a great lady who is as beautiful as she is terrifying.” Once more, Bronn is faster, and Gerion turns to him with great interest.

“The Queen in the North is not terrifying, Bronn,” Ser Leonidas scoffs good-naturedly. “And I do not believe she would want to be seen as such.”

“No,” Bronn banters, “she’s winter itself, brave and clever and kind and fucking terrifying, except for the King here - in the King’s embrace she melts…” he pauses to waggle his eyebrows, drawing out his vowels, and Jaime notices to his dismay and distaste that a faint grin spreads across his uncle’s face, that only widens at the sellsword’s next words. “Oh, the songs that are being sung about them… there’s the one about howling and lions on the prowl that’s quite popular, despite atrocious use of - ah yes, counterpoint, that’s the word… and then there’s the one about the two of them being nauseatingly in lurve which I never want to hear being sung off-key in a tavern again in my life…”

“Enough!” Jaime’s terse intervention is enough to halt the spread of guffaws at Bronn’s engaging, exaggerated manner of storytelling. “I know I can’t stop you singing the songs but do not mention
them again in my presence, or in my wife’s.”

“Sire,” Bronn bows, a touch mockingly, but Jaime merely huffs in annoyance.

“I am all anticipation,” Gerion drawls, not quite managing to erase entirely the smirk from his features.

“She is with part of her conclave for the moment; she will be joining us for the full conclave in the Golden Hall,” Jaime explains evenly, and it is with difficulty that he manages not to show his audience what it costs him to restrain himself thus. “I will introduce the two of you at the feast this evening - I imagine you will wish to wash the travel from your skin, uncle.”

“I do, thank you, nephew,” his uncle replies affably, before his expression turns solemn once more. “I think I shall bathe and then descend to the crypts to pay my respects to my brother. Are there any other sarcophagi I should kneel at the foot of?”

“Only Myrcella’s is here; the rest are in King’s Landing,” Jaime brings himself to answer eventually, heavily, when he is no longer able to stand the horrible, horrible silence that follows Gerion’s question, Jaime’s thoughts taking him back despite his best efforts to that horrible day when his daughter - she’d said she was glad he was her father, she’d said she was glad and then she’d bled her life out in his arms and he’d been helpless to do anything; fine father that he is -

“The rest?” His uncle’s horror pulls him viciously back to the present. “The rest? How many of us remain?”

Jaime stoically enunciates the rest. “Tommen and Joffrey - ” he barely represses a shudder “ - are buried in King’s Landing, as kings. I don’t believe there was anything left of uncle Kevan and my cousin Lancel to bury - ”

“Kevan is gone?” Gerion staggers. “Are all my siblings gone, then?”

It lightens Jaime’s heart at last to be the bearer of some good news. “My aunt the Lady Genna yet lives - you will see her at the feast tonight,” he says, and his uncle sags with relief at the words. “But uncle Kevan and Lancel too were killed when Cersei blew up the Sept of Baelor with wildfire - ”
“I wasn’t in the city at the time!” Jaime retorts, unable to suppress the crash of hurt he feels at his uncle’s insult. Do they all think he doesn’t know? Do they all think that he doesn’t realise precisely what Cersei became? He knows better than all of them, better than anyone alive or dead what terrible, twisted thing she became. Only Sansa might be able to rival his knowledge. He knows full well what his twin was, what she was capable of, what she did. He has paid the price in blood and shame and heartache for his love and championing of her; he has paid the price in bitter, painful and uncomprehending recrimination for her actions that tore them apart. “I was at Riverrun, breaking the siege without a drop of blood and I ride back with the legions, just in time to see the horizon burn green.” His gaze sharpens. “And you know as well as I that it was never a case of letting Cersei do anything; she did as she pleased.”

“To your detriment, most often,” his uncle replies, his mind as well-honed as ever, it seems.

“You can take it up with her corpse in King’s Landing, then, if you are so inclined,” Jaime says tersely, desiring more than anything an end to this conversation, painful as it is.

“Her corpse? In King’s Landing? So the secession of the West was not sanctioned by her?” His uncle’s tones are softer now, though no less incredulous.

“Indeed not,” Ser Leonidas snorts, and Jaime is more grateful than he will allow himself to show for his Lionsguard’s intercession. “Cersei Lannister would have brought low these lands, so we bannermen decided to return to the old ways and elect our own monarch.”

“How did she die?” Gerion tilts his head in curiosity.

“Not well,” Jaime bites out, but his uncle either remains wilfully oblivious or deliberately seeks to provoke him, though for what purpose he cannot fathom and his gaze narrows as Gerion does everything but desist.

“She died, and you seem remarkably calm about her death, so what happened?”

“If I tell you will you cease your questioning of me?”

His uncle smirks. “What do you think?”
Jaime huffs, spitting out the words as quickly as possible. *Damn you, uncle. Damn you.* “Daenerys Targaryen poisoned her with some Dothraki herb designed to induce miscarriage. It was not a clean death.”

“And you aren’t weeping wildly over her corpse?” Even now, Jaime thinks with despair, even now his uncle considers him a fool, devoid of Lannister cunning, and the thin thread of his patience finally snaps.

“What is it that you wish to hear, uncle mine?” He retorts angrily. “That I came to my senses and saw her for the monster she was and broke from her malicious cause and rode north in an attempt to redeem myself? That for a reason I can barely fathom my bannermen elected me, and that since that moment I have endeavoured to prove myself worthy of their trust? That I slew the Night King in single combat and fell in love with and married the Queen in the North Sansa Stark? That Daenerys Targaryen is but days from here with her armies and her dragons and that she intends to lay waste to this ancient place because the West and her allies will never bend the knee, much less to a tyrant like the Dragon Queen?”

He had not realised that even his own close kin either saw him as the Kingslayer or Cersei’s puppet: the only person who had not was Tywin Lannister, and the notion is acrid and bitter as ash in his mouth indeed. It hurts, of course it hurts, and it hurts more than he expected or anticipated. His father had been the only one to ask whether people calling him the Kingslayer bothered him, and he thinks now that perhaps instead of replying with some witticism he ought to have explained that he’d done it because Aerys intended to blow up the entire city with wildfire. Perhaps, then, he and his father might have understood one another better. And Sansa, of course, is the only person he has ever met who has assumed the best of him (she fell in love with him without needing to know the full story of the Mad King) and not the worst. This is not precisely the same as what his father’s attitude was, of course, as whilst his expectations and hopes for Jaime had never wavered, perhaps his faith, Jaime now understands, in those expectations and hopes ever coming to pass had wavered.

“Simply saying *I came to my senses* would have sufficed, nephew,” his uncle replies mildly, relenting in the face of Jaime’s anguished fury, and the King of the West starts at the words. More carefully now, Gerion Lannister continues, “And what of your other sibling? What of Tyrion? You have been rather silent about him.”

Jaime laughs bleakly - by the gods, where to begin with what his little brother has been up to! “When did you last hear of him?”

Gerion frowns at the evasion but answers anyway. “I heard he disappeared in the aftermath of Joffrey’s death. Are his whereabouts still unknown?”
“Oh, no, uncle, they’re known alright,” Ser Daven replies darkly, and Gerion looks bewildered at the Warden of the East’s vehemence. “They are all too known, unfortunately.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We are two, possibly three days away from a siege by Daenerys Targaryen and her Dothraki horde and Unsullied slave soldiers,” Jaime explains grimly, wearily of this dancing around of the subject, “and Tyrion is the one leading them here. In the aftermath of Joffrey’s death, I helped him free of his cell, and he repaid the favour by putting several crossbow bolts through Father’s belly and heart as he sat on his privy.”

“You’re japing!” Gerion scoffs. “You’re japing - come now, where is he hiding?” He repeats himself, with growing urgency as he peers uncomprehendingly at the still impassivity of Jaime’s expression. “Please tell me this is a jest - this must be a jest! He would not do such a thing.”

Jaime hesitates to answer, trying to read into his uncle’s consternation anything that might help him understand upon which side of the field he truly stands - but there is nothing; whatever his personal relationship with his eldest brother might have been, Gerion is not a Lannister for nothing, and his features, to Jaime’s concern, remain entirely, resolutely devoid of what Jaime wants to see in them.

In the end, Jaime settles for responding with a tight, “he has.”

“Tyrion killed Tywin? Their mutual animosity was well known, but to become a parricide, a kinslayer, and throw his lot in with the Dragon Queen - I thought he had more sense - the tales I’ve heard of her out of Essos… truly she is a Targaryen of old,” his uncle looks shattered by this series of revelations, and Jaime cannot help but feel a sort of aching, wounded sympathy for his kinsman.

“I’m sorry, uncle,” he offers up the platitude wearily, too exhausted to retread once more in any great detail the mess that was that series of events, but Gerion is moving again instead of speaking, preferring to take refuge in action, not thought and Jaime can well see the restlessness that is the hallmark of his adventurer’s spirit, as though he has impatience running through his veins instead of blood.

His uncle is unfastening his cloak, letting it fall unceremoniously to the floor, before unbuckling a series of straps upon his chest, reaching around his back to grasp what Jaime knows instinctively is a weapon, though the scabbard and hilt are wrapped securely in oilcloth, and his left palm goes immediately to the pommel of Endever, even as around him his Lionsguard do the same, drawing
closer to him - only Fortune remains at ease, his tail still, Jaime sees out of the corner of his eye.

“Then this might be of more immediate use than I had anticipated,” his uncle continues, offering it to Jaime and he smoothly unsheathes the weapon to hold it high aloft and the blade glints and shimmers, burning like the sun in the golden, dappled light of the hall, and he knows, somehow Jaime knows in the same way Sansa knew Ice had been reforged into Oathkeeper and Endever -

“You found it, uncle?” Jaime murmurs, mesmerised by it, feeling it sing to something ancient in his blood. “Brightroar…” he whispers, awed, hardly daring to touch the steel with an outstretched forefinger, breaking into an incredulous laugh despite his exhaustion and his melancholy.

It is his uncle’s turn to be wrong-footed, no little annoyed that the opportunity for a dramatic revealing has been quashed by Jaime’s already knowing. “How did you recognise it?”

“Can you not feel?” Jaime responds, gazing as though entranced at the blade. “Can you not hear it singing? In my blood, in my heart, in my mind Brightroar sings the tales of old when the West ruled herself and knew no Targaryen invader…” He doesn’t know where the words come from as they tumble from his lips, rushing out from deep within him; he only knows, with the firmest conviction, that they are, that they hold meaning. His uncle is staring at him in consternation as he continues. “When life was life and it held both despair and hope, when man was as capable of greatness as he was of infamy and cruelty, when legends were yet flesh and blood, not as life is now but self-interest and entitlement on the one hand and desperation on the other.” He is not habitually so maudlin, Jaime knows, and he attributes it to the tense, wearying day he has had thus far.

Ser Addam ventures an explanation. “Brightroar was held by the Kings of the West, not by the Lords of the Rock. Now that we have a King again…”

“Perhaps,” Jaime answers, still examining the blade, admiring the way the light runs down and reflects off the steel, before reluctantly sheathing it and offering it back to his uncle. “Finding it was your life’s work, uncle Gerion. It is yours to wield, so long as you do so in defence of our house and in defence of the West and her allies.” Grinning ruefully at his uncle’s shock, he says, gesturing at his own sword-belt, “I already have a Valyrian steel blade of my own that holds great meaning to me. In any case I am not Ser Arthur Dayne to be able to fight as he did, wielding in both hands, not with my hand of metal, which though adequate at balancing a spear, lacks the finer qualities required to grip a sword-pommel.”

“So you have,” Gerion’s lips twitch as he gestures to Jaime’s blade, and both of them, Jaime thinks suddenly, are inordinately grateful to be able to move this conversation (strange and wearying and more emotionally volatile than he’d anticipated, though he does not rightly know what, precisely what he had thought would occur) to topics lighter and more pleasant than their predecessors.
“Does it have a name?”

“Yes,” Jaime replies softly, the first true smile of the conversation appearing upon his face as he wraps his hand around the sword-hilt. “My sword is Endever, for the private vow between my wife and I.”

Gerion only stares at him, as though trying to piece together a particularly complex strategy for a cyvasse game.

“You’ve changed, Jaime,” his uncle replies eventually, and Jaime fights down the exhausted annoyance that is fast becoming uncomfortably habitual.

“With everything that has happened, did you imagine I had not?” Have his kin truly thought him so set in his ways that he is incapable of the slightest evolution, when all he has ever sought to become is Arthur Dayne and not the Smiling Knight? Have his kin truly thought the hold Cersei had upon him so encompassing that it would outlast even her death? He has changed, and for the better he knows, but it still hurts. It hurts to think that his family, those closest to him, have seen him as nothing more than a blunt instrument to be wielded by higher powers, without will or desire or aspiration or conscience of his own, whilst those more removed from him only saw the Kingslayer.

Things are different, now, of course. His soldiers respect him as a commander in the field, as a king as well as a man, and he has the fealty of his lords.

He has Sansa.

He believes himself a better man. He tries to be a better man. He holds his word.

He has Sansa.

And that makes all the difference, in the end. That gives him the surety to not let his uncle’s surprise pain him as much as it otherwise would have done.

He has Sansa. He loves and is loved in return, for true, and for the first time since he was raised to Aerys’s Kingsguard, for the first time since the Rebellion, for the first time since his sword hand was cut off, he feels more than whole.
His mouth is suddenly utterly dried by the appearance of his wife. He can only stare, spellbound, with an awed, reverent gaze, as she approaches him, the train of her embroidered white gown whispering upon the flagstones as she moves with her habitual, lithe, almost unconscious elegance. He realises vaguely even as his mind suddenly wonders if he is dreaming awake, that she is entirely aware of the stir she is causing amongst their conclave, a small smile, half-proud, half-embarrassed, playing upon her lips, colour high upon her cheeks. He follows the fall of her russet hair down her back, bright in the golden light of the hall, his gaze catching upon the diamond ornaments that glimmer, stars and ice against the warmth of her hair. He wants to have her alone, he thinks, still rooted to the spot. He wants to have the leisure and privacy to trace her neckline with his lips, all the better to admire the way the silk and lace frame her white shoulders, to worship the way the cut of it shows off the lovely shape of her breasts, full and high. He wants the time to savour the feel of her slim waist under his hand, the luxury of being able to drag the waterfall of those silken skirts up the deliriously soft skin of her legs -

He is so mesmerised that it takes him a moment to comprehend that she is now in front of him, and close enough to touch, close enough for him to ascertain that she is real and not a figment of his exhausted imagination, and it is with trembling fingers that he extends his left hand to caress her cheek, still half-expecting her to vanish into thin air.

She blushes shyly at his scrutiny but holds his gaze, her sunset eyes dark. “You are…” he swallows, unable to find the words, and in response she only leans further into his touch, her eyes fluttering shut instinctively, and he reads the silent sigh of pleasure in the way her frame settles languidly against his, assuaging some of the brittleness he senses in her, and it warms him to know that he can do such a thing for her.

“You like my attire, then, I take it?” she murmurs, a pleased, laughing curl to the corner of her mouth, and he does not know how he restrains himself from kissing her, then and there.

He pulls her closer to him in response, so she is firmly in his embrace, his golden hand resting upon the small of her back, her nose pressed to his shoulder, the sweet, subtle scent of her fragrance making him swallow harshly, fighting for restraint, growling his reply discretely into her ear. “You know I do.”
She shudders delightfully at the sound of his voice, laughing lowly. “We are not alone, though I wish we were.”

“Do not tempt me,” he warns her, darkly.

She smirks, raising her face from his surcoat. “I thought I already had,” she murmurs impishly, privately, her eyes glittering, and he can only choke out a laughing groan in response, dipping his head to nuzzle her collarbone, and oh, this is dangerous indeed - by the gods he wants them alone - and he is tired, he is so tired that he simply wants to spirit her away to their bedchambers and lock away the rest of the world, forever. Well, perhaps not forever, he thinks a moment later, but perhaps for a year or five, or a decade entire. “I know,” she sighs quietly, hearing his unspoken thoughts, her voice betraying her own weariness, her own disquiet, her own grief. “I know, Jaime. Just a bit longer - just the conclave and the feast. And I will be at your side for all of it, clinging to you like a limpet,” she adds teasingly, making him chuckle softly.

“My sweet, valiant wife,” he sighs, bringing her hands to his lips, his heart heavy and aching with bittersweet reverence. My lovely one. “You are a sight to gladden even…” he shakes his head, somewhat self-consciously, as words fail him once more. Her brow furrows as she moves to cradle his jaw with her elegant hands, delicate thumbs brushing his cheekbones. “I love you,” he whispers, a broken man reforged anew by her gentle touch.

From winter and frost she becomes as water at his declaration, glimmering, trembling with repressed emotion, and formality melts from her frame as she decides she doesn’t care that they are in the presence of their conclave, and throws her arms around him to comfort them both with her embrace. Faces buried in each other’s necks, the tension melts from them as he presses his lips again and again to the white skin of her shoulder, and he can feel the tiredness in her body as she leans against him.

“My strength is yours,” he says into her ear, and she trembles at his words. “It’s yours - take it.”

She is silent for a time, and he knows she is trying to gather herself enough to speak, for when she at last opens her mouth to speak against his collarbone, her tones are clipped and deadened. Her expression, were he able to see it, would be so shuttered as to be impassive. “I have ordered mine uncle and his co-conspirators locked away in the dungeons of the Deep Cells, stripped of weapons, writing implements and gold.” She pauses to clench the fingers she has loosely tangled in his hair and he fights down a low, helpless growl. “I hope some time there will persuade them of the error of their ways,” she continues, her voice cracking. “My uncle was saying such terrible things, Jaime, and rationally I know them to be untrue but nevertheless, I cannot - I can hear his voice in my mind, over and over again…” she fights down a sob, her voice becoming quieter still, whilst he fights the sudden lance of rage that surges through him. “He said such terrible things, such terrible, horrible things that I felt bathed in slime - he said those things I sometimes dream Father and Robb saying to me,” she shudders, and with his good hand he rubs her back.
“Breathe, lovely one, breathe,” he soothes, even as his heart aches and weeps and rages for her. Sometimes he thinks he would take great pleasure in raising Robb Stark from the dead simply so he can ask the noble King in the North just what in the Seven Hells he was thinking, abandoning his sister in such a way, his sister who is so infinitely precious to Jaime. What was the purpose of it all? What did it serve, locking Jaime up like an animal in a cage? What good came from abandoning Sansa for the fickle master that is gore and glory? “You’re safe, Sansa, you’re safe here, I promise, my love, you’re safe here, breathe - that’s it. Breathe with me, lovely one,” he murmurs the litany over and over again, until her trembling subsides and her breathing evens out again, until the searing rage fades once more from his veins.

With infinite gentleness, he cups her cheek with his left hand and raises her face to his, and he sees in her blue eyes both the depth of her wounds and the humbling faith she has in him, shining from her like a beacon in the night, and he can only kiss first her forehead, then her eyelids that flutter shut blissfully under his lips, then the tears drying upon her cheeks, in reverent adoration and praise.

“Thank you,” she manages eventually, kissing his palms, both the gold and the flesh, and her equanimity restored, she gazes upon him tenderly, lifting her hands to trace his temples and he sighs with tired pleasure. “And your uncle?” she continues in a gentle murmur, eyebrow raised.

“All is settled,” he hears himself reply evenly, all too quickly distracted by the way she looks at him.

“Truly?” she smiles. “Then that is good news, and I am glad, Jaime.”

It is his turn to raise an eyebrow, though he does it in teasing, lighthearted challenge. “And I had thought I was the only Lannister to make you smile,” he drawls, her good spirits lightening his.

“ Impossible man,” she laughs outright in response, and he wonders vaguely if there will ever come a time when he is no longer utterly fascinated, entirely mesmerised, by the sound and sight of her wonderful laugh. He hopes not. He wishes desperately that such a day might never come. “My impossible man,” she continues more softly, relenting in the face of his playful glare. “Other men may make me smile, Jaime. But only my husband, my lover, my King, makes me laugh.”

“Lovely one,” he swallows harshly.

His wife reads him with ease and presses a fluttering kiss to his clean-shaven cheek. “I am glad,
Jaime,” she says. “I am glad for you.”

He catches the edge of melancholy in her words and frowns in sympathy, tracing her features with a gentle fingertip, admiring the way she melts under his caress, admiring her tender generosity. He becomes hopelessly absorbed in his task, losing track of time entirely. He could perform these acts of devotion to her for the rest of his life and it would not be enough. A thousand years with her would not be enough and he remembers abruptly that there is no guarantee that he might even have another week with her and his chest seizes -

“You’ve stopped,” she murmurs against his fingertip, and he blinks. He had not even realised he’d sunk his thumb into her bottom lip and halted there - though he supposes he should not be surprised by such a thing, for tracing her lips thus has become a favoured pastime of his. Her eyes snap open. “You’ve stopped, and you are silent and still.” She scans his face, frantic, even as he shrugs, vulnerable, and he knows the precise moment she understands, because her eyes widen and glimmer. “Oh, my love,” she whispers. “Courage, my lord.”

He tries, truly. He tries to summon up the bravery that he is known for - by the gods, he is a Lannister of Casterly Rock, he is no coward, and he has no intention of becoming one at this late juncture - but he fails. He knows not whether it is exhaustion - he knows not what it is, precisely, but he fails, and he dips his gaze, thoroughly and utterly ashamed.

“No, Jaime, no,” she continues, tender as ever, cupping his cheeks, and she makes him look at her. “I have faith in you.” She is urgent, sincere, now. “Believe me.” She kisses first one corner of his mouth, then the other, a chaste, alluring press. “Believe me.” Another kiss, a proper one this time, and he can only groan helplessly into her mouth, his mind spinning at the temptation she presents. “Trust me,” she gasps, breaking the embrace. I do, he thinks, knowing it deep inside his bones, and his heart thunders it with every beat it makes. I-do, I-do, I-do, I-do.

“Courage,” she whispers again, and this time he nods, taking a shuddering breath, chuckling hoarsely as she kisses the tip of his nose, before throwing him an impish smile.

“Shall we now to our conclave?”

He raises his gaze regretfully to look past his wife the Queen in the North to see now all the lords present as well as all of the Wolf and Lionsguard, speaking quietly amongst themselves around the tables in the Golden Hall that have not yet been laid with cutlery and goblets for the feast, but set aside deliberately for the purpose of their discussions, glancing occasionally at their monarchs with ill-disguised curiosity, but nevertheless remaining patient. “They are beginning to wonder what we are doing, that is true,” he manages a smirk and an approximation of his habitual drawl, and he is further pleased to see her eyes light up with mirth.
He offers her his arm and she takes it silently, remaining firmly at his side when they come close enough to the conclave to be heard. “Good evening, my lords,” he greets them. “I hope that after such an eventful day you have been able to find some repose and refreshment, and are here now, ready to strategise before we fortify ourselves and make merry later on at the feast.”

He and Sansa wave away the answering choruses of “Yes, Sire,” and “Yes, Your Majesty,” and gather everyone around the maps spread out over the table. With a deep breath, he leans his left hand upon the map, drawing strength and comfort from Sansa’s presence at his side, her leg pressing discretely against his.

“We have two days at best,” he begins solemnly. “I have a notion of how to proceed, but I would hear your thoughts first, my lords. To summarise: we can expect our fleet tomorrow at dawn, and then we shall have our full strength.”

“You expect the parley to fail?” the Lady Morgana Mormont asks.

“I do.” He looks the Wolfsguard straight in the eye. “I anticipate a siege, and a rather lengthy one. The Dragon Queen’s disdain for compromise is matched only by the strength of her determination. She wants the West, as she wants the North and the Riverlands and the Vale. Nevertheless, she does not know these lands or our people, and therein lies our advantage.”

“If I may?” Ser Addam interjects, and Jaime motions for him to continue. “Already all the smallfolk are safely inside the Rock, already we have prepared our burning sand and pitch and tar. Caltrops are being laid into the earth around Lannisport and into certain streets of the city itself, the better to fend off those Dothraki cavalry. We have a total of ten scorpions, manned and munitioned. We can hold out, especially once you read this, Sire,” he continues in his assured manner, extending with a gloved hand what Jaime instinctively recognises as a raven scroll.

With all eyes upon him, he unfurls it to read the contents, and once he has done so, he laughs aloud and passes it to his wife. “My lords,” he says with a flourish, the exuberance of relief carrying him forwards, “I can now say with absolute certainty that we no longer have to fear the elephants of the Golden Company.”

“They aren’t going to fight for her?” Lord Royce says.

“Indeed they are not,” Sansa replies, a pleased, feral light in her eyes, having now read the missive. “I suppose you could say, to use your soldiering parlance, that they’ve buggered off home to
The guffaws that follow this - as much a reaction to the news itself, a hysterical release of tension, as genuine amusement at the notion of the dainty, elegant Queen in the North speaking in such a way - are something to be seen. Glancing out of the corner of his eye, once he has recovered from his own stunned outburst of mirth, at his wife, he understands from the curl of her mouth that it had been a deliberate calculation on her part, to break the thick, cloying tension of the meeting.

“So what now?” Lord Glover presses, folding his arms, standing stern as a rock, gaze narrowed and focused upon the maps.

“Sire, if I may?” Ser Daven interjects, and Jaime sees that he has a hand clapped upon a youth’s slight shoulder.

“Proceed, cousin.”

“This is Leonel of Lannisport,” Jaime’s cousin begins, a feral glint in his eyes, and Jaime eyes the youth with ill-concealed curiosity. He is tall and thin, gangly, even, but sea-coloured eyes are sharply intelligent beneath a mop of dirty blonde hair, with the stained fingers of an architect. “And I have recently promoted him to lead the military engineering corps of the Lannisport garrison. He has been overseeing the construction of the scorpions and all manner of siege weaponry. Speak, Leonel,” Ser Daven turns to his protégé. “Tell the King what you have been working on.”

Leonel of Lannisport bows hurriedly, his cap falling over his eyes before it is impatiently pushed back, and he unfurls onto the table an alarming number of enormous scrolls of parchment, blackened with sketches and calculations. He then proceeds, in animated, almost exuberant tones, to detail, what, precisely, can be done with a series of scorpion volleys placed just so, especially when combined with a designed contraption that shoots out at a similar velocity gargantuan lead-weighted nets. He speaks of mechanics as one would speak of a lover, with a kind of heated reverence, and Jaime finds himself simultaneously enthralled by the youth’s emotion and wincing inwardly at the descriptions.

The engineers have excavated the streets of Lannisport to turn the principal arteries of the city into trenches, arming them with all manner of elaborate, deadly weapons before covering them over with a trapdoor-like plank contraption to be released when desired. Heavy fishermen’s ropes have been soaked in vinegar and run through the streets in such a way as, when set alight, they can funnel an army entire into range of the cavalry-crushing catapults. There is even a mention of what might be done with the strange substance called bysshir, brought to the Rock by Jaime’s uncle Gerion, and how to turn the aqueducts, instruments of civilisation, into instruments of war.
When he finishes there is silence, a stunned sort of silence as the drawings of these war machines and traps conjure images, that amongst fighting men, are all too grimly, horrifically realistic. Eventually, noting the pallour of his wife, Jaime nods briskly, thanks his cousin and the youth he recognises is a genius of an engineer, dismissing the latter.

There is an unspoken consensus to wait until the young Leonel of Lannisport is out of earshot before continuing, and Jaime takes the opportunity to lift his wife’s dainty hands to his lips, to reassure her, to wipe the grimace of distaste from her face.

“If I might ask,” Lord Mooton ventures eventually, his voice grim with stoic grief, and Jaime reluctantly turns his attention away from his wife to his wife’s bannerman. “Sire, Your Majesty, what you anticipate for the parley? I do not know that I shall be able to stand opposite her with any sort of equanimity when she holds my daughter and grandson captive.” The low, fierce, murmuring stir this causes - Jaime realises abruptly that Sansa will not necessarily have had the time to divulge such news to all the bannermen - is vehement and dangerous, and threatens to rise in pitch, as ferocious as the tides that crash upon the cliffs of this rocky coast.

His wife the Queen in the North is quick to answer her bannerman’s question, and silence falls once more, tense as a coiled, cornered animal, as she speaks in clear, even tones, and Jaime can only give her his utmost attention, pressing his leg discretely back against hers. “Truly, Daenerys Targaryen is a fool if she does not realise that she is going to enter a parley after having done to Lord Mooton’s daughter Lady Eleanor Tarly - ” now Jaime sees the comprehension on the conclave’s faces, and it is a twisted, ugly thing, a thing that belongs upon the battlefield, not the council chamber - “what her father did to mine grandfather and mine uncle, namely the breaking of the sacred covenant. Daenerys Targaryen wishes to rule Westeros; it therefore follows that she should keep to our rites and customs, and chief among those is our long-held form of petitioning for restitution.” She swallows, pausing, and Jaime discretely moves to press his hand against the small of her back. “Perhaps, this time, we can use these to our advantage.”

“How so?” Lord Royce frowns.

“We plan to use the full ritual of guest-right, not merely the abridged version which is simply the presentation of bread and salt,” Jaime explains. “I doubt she knows it; it will knock her off-balance, and then proceed to the signing of a treaty, which the Queen in the North and I have drafted.” It had not been easy, discussing it upon their frenzied ride south from Winterfell, battling as they had been both physical exertion and the harshness of the elements in addition to mental and emotional fatigue, but discuss it they had, until they’d ended up with a document that is, Jaime thinks now, both thorough and satisfying.

“But you say, Sire, that you expect this to fail,” his cousin Ser Daven replies. “What then?”
“What then?” Jaime repeats. “We prepare for war, and siege. I have no wish for the Dragon Queen to enter the Rock itself, and thus we shall hold the parley in the Guildhall at Lannisport, but even as the Queen in the North and I are there, our legions shall stand at the ready. Should events unfold as I dearly hope they shall not, we shall be prepared.”

And then he proceeds to explain his strategy in full, pointing to various fortifications upon the maps, moving legion figurines around, incorporating, amongst other things, the new war machines and traps constructed under Leonel of Lannisport’s slightly eccentric leadership, and he begins to warm to his theme, encouraged by the noises of assent the conclave are making. This is far from Jaime’s first war, far from his first siege, and he is gratified to realise that the conclave have faith in his abilities as much as his legions do.

The Golden Hall shall be commandeered as a preliminary infirmary, where the wounded can be directed to this maester or to that surgeon as necessary. He does not relish the thought of this splendid hall becoming foul with the stench of blood, but he does not see another option. In the trenches that have been dug around the fortress and the city of Lannisport, Jaime imagines the bards shall find fine fodder for their songs in which men thirsting for blood revel in the gory sounds of death. Catapults and trebuchets are being assembled upon the tower-tops, in addition to the fatal scorpions.

Should they fall to war, their swords shall be sharp, their shields strong, and they shall endure. Of this he is certain. Of this he must be certain.

There can be no turning back now, after all. For better or for worse, this now must be their course.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Predictions?
Chapter Summary

It is not a taunt, precisely, and she replies pointedly, cutting his thought off before he can entirely misconstrue her - “If there were no positive traits to a Lannister I would not have married one.”

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!

Welcome to this next instalment; there's lots going on in this chapter, so I hope you enjoy it. Your comments and encouragement really do make my day, it's always such a pleasure for me to hear what you guys think of every chapter - so keep the comments coming! As always, huge thanks to galaxiasincognita/northernsky for the help with this story.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWENTY TWO
Her husband leads her by the hand into a small antechamber off the Golden Hall, noting the paleness of her features, and it is true. She may have fed Ramsey Bolton to his own hounds, but she’d retched up her luncheon as soon as she was alone, unable to block from her ears the sound of his screams, and hating that in some small part of her heart she’d rejoiced at his suffering death. She’d hated her satisfaction, felt guilty for it, felt utterly shamed and disgusted by it - she does not like pain, she never has, but it is more than merely a question, of, as her family, as many people around her over the years have said, of gentleness, of her heart being too soft, too weak to withstand the cruelties of the world. It is that she has no desire to take any satisfaction in the pain and suffering of others, even if they have made her suffer, for she believes that to do so is to sink to the level of her tormentors, and that she does not ever wish to do.

And so all this talk of siege and death and gore is doubly painful to her, and Jaime knows this, of course he does, and she gives a tired sigh of pleasure as he gathers her to him and her head comes to rest upon his shoulder. His lips ghost her forehead, his right arm holds her securely against his tall, powerful frame and his left hand cradles the back of her head, and he whispers to her what she had murmured to him before the war conclave. “Just a bit longer, Sansa.”

“I’m so tired,” she replies, fighting the sudden discomfort that even now comes with admitting what feels like a weakness, even to Jaime whom she trusts with everything without reservation - with her mind, her heart, her body, she trusts him unconditionally with her future - and still to admit such a thing, even as a whispered murmur into his collarbone, knowing there is no way for her to be overheard, even now it is frightening. It has been such a long day that she feels on the brink of collapse; she is utterly overwrought, and because she is the Queen in the North she must hide it from everyone, everyone except Jaime.

“So am I, lovely one,” he sighs, tightening his grip on her and he leads her to a small bench she has not heretofore noticed, but she sinks gratefully onto it. Her husband, not content with merely sitting at her side, swiftly manoeuvres her so she is sitting in his lap astride him, her skirts tangled in her legs, and she flushes, her hands instinctively coming to rest upon his shoulders to steady herself.

“You are insatiable,” she reprimands lightly, giggling, shivering at the way his left hand drifts under the silk of her skirts to trace his intent into her thigh.

A mischievous light glints in his green eyes. “And you would not have me any other way,” he drawls, languidly rolling his hips whilst holding hers still so she gets the full effect, and her responding laugh stutters into a mewl. The dark warmth in his gaze, the awed reverence as he looks at her makes her skin prickle with awareness, her belly twist viscerally.
“Indeed I would not,” she whispers, sighing again as he becomes bolder still, pressing teasing, worshipful kisses to her neckline, growling his approval as the arch of her back strains her bodice, exposing her to his ardent mouth. Her hands slide from his shoulders to tangle in his golden hair and when he lifts his head again his eyes are dark enough for her to drown in them and her body, her mind, her heart, her soul itself is humming with pleasure and she can only stare at him, gasping. “Husband mine, liege, lover, king, I would not have you any other way.” The words are almost painful.

He catches the melancholy, heavy note in her voice, half hidden like the echo of an old lullaby, and presses a chaste, lingering kiss to her heart, as though he might through such an action assuage the ache she feels there, and she trembles in his embrace at the depth of emotion pouring from him, a warming, comforting balm to her wounds. “You beautiful creature, when we are alone later, I vow, my love, I will make you forget all the hurts of this day.”

She cradles him to her breast with gentle, shaking hands. “I love you,” she says, the words not seeming enough to articulate coherently all that she feels. “I love you,” and she at last lets the tears she has choked down flow down her cheeks to wet her husband’s hair.

He rises fluidly at the sound of her weeping, to pull her into a standing embrace, and she presses herself against him as though wishing she could sink into his very skin, and only in his arms, strong and secure around her, does she calm enough to speak.

“I hate war, Jaime,” she murmurs into his surcoat. “I hate the suffering, I hate the violence. I always have. From when I was a little girl and I would see my father riding back into Winterfell after a hunt with a buck draped over his stallion’s withers, or my brothers wrestling in the muddy courtyard… I’ve feared it, always, and that fear has only grown as I have grown older… Though I may by force have learnt to grit my teeth at the sight of blood instead of weeping, I know now that I have more to fear because I have more to lose, because I love now as a woman.”

“Do you regret being at the conclave earlier?” His voice is soft, his eyes softer still, and her heart warms at his consideration for her wellbeing.

“I am the Queen in the North,” she replies heavily, swallowing as her husband waits patiently for her elaboration. “But I will have nightmares tonight.”

The King of the West’s reaction is swift and almost violent, extreme. “My sword ever stands between you and the rest of the world, lovely one.” He cups her cheek with his left hand so his gaze bores into hers, and she trembles at the solemn intensity she sees there. “I will keep you safe. I will keep our child safe.” He swallows convulsively, his voice a gravelled rasp. “Trust me.”
“I do,” she replies immediately. She does not need to think, of course she does not. Trusting Jaime is the foundation upon which she has rebuilt herself, upon which she has build this current happiness and her hopes for the future.

“Then trust me in this: no matter what nightmares may come, trust that I will always protect you from them. Your screams tear at my heart; you should never again have to make such a sound, and I will do everything I can to protect you.”

She kisses him then, fiercely, desperately, ardently, glorying as ever in his enthusiastic response. In his arms she can forget, if only for a little while, what duties and fears and plots and consequences await them both when they rejoin the rest of the world, and when she breaks the kiss to breathe, eyes glittering and dark, lips red, she feels some of her equilibrium and strength restored, enough at least to face this feast of theirs, and she marvels at this extraordinary power his embraces have over her.

“Will you smile?” Jaime asks, drawing a tender fingertip down the line of her jaw.

His gallantry makes her curtsey deeply again, her eyes never leaving his, and as his gaze heats and darkens once more she realises she is giving him a rather intriguing view down the front of her gown, and she cannot help the smile that spreads across her lips in response.

He laughs then, helping her courteously up again, bringing her palms to his lips one after the other, and she is lucky she is on her feet because Jaime’s cousin Ser Daven knocks and enters the antechamber, takes in the flush to her cheeks, the glitter in her eyes and the ardent way her husband drinks in her form as well as his ruffled hair, and the Lannisport garrison commander smirks.

“The two of you have just won me ten dragons each off half the Wolfsguard and Lionsguard, Sire, Your Majesty,” he informs them with a laughing little bow. Sansa does not have to look at her husband to know that he is radiating a decadent, languid sort of satisfaction - and she really needs to stop bringing everything in her mind back to her and Jaime’s lovemaking if she wants to have any chance at success of keeping her thoughts private as she has learnt through necessity over the past several years.

“Can you blame me, cousin?” Jaime answers raffishly, not entirely hiding the ardent earnestness to his tones. “Is my wife the Queen in the North - especially thus attired - not more beautiful and wonderful even than the winter dawn to which she is likened in the songs of our peoples?”
Sansa blushes madly at this, stepping closer to him, naturally slipping her hand into his so she can tangle their fingers, tilting her head so her hair falls across her face to hide her from scrutiny, but Jaime, the impossible man, uses this action as a pretext to slip his fingers under her chin to lift her face close to his. She does not need to say the words; he reads them in her eyes. *Flatterer.*

“Truth, lovely one,” he says, before stealing a chaste, sweet kiss that has he melting once more into his embrace.

“No, cousin, I can’t,” Ser Daven grins. “It doesn’t mean I can’t tell you that the feast is about to begin, and that your presences, Sire, Your Majesty, are required in the Golden Hall.” With that, he bows, spins smartly upon booted feet, and then proceeds to hold the door open wide open, an eyebrow raised jauntily.

Jaime sighs against Sansa’s lips with no little annoyance, but he nods his acquiescence. The King of the West’s equally raffish warning to his cousin makes her laugh. “Only you, cousin. Only you.”

And then Sansa stops as her husband halts suddenly, just as they have crossed the threshold into the Golden Hall itself, and she can only follow Jaime’s wide gaze with bemusement. “By the Lion, please tell me you aren’t about to do what I think you’re about to do, cousin.”

“No, I’m not.” Ser Daven replies with a straight face, before breaking into a wide grin. “Ser Addam is.”

“Oh, fuck.” Jaime closes his eyes in consternation.

“What - ” Sansa begins, before drifting off into silence as Ser Addam, holding of all things what looks to be a plain wooden staff, moves into the central space between all the long feasting tables where are sat mingling Westermen, Northmen, Valemen and Rivermen, and she tenses at the sudden, anticipatory hush.

Her husband’s hand is trembling in her own, and she instinctively tightens her grip to reassure him, even as her eyes widen as Ser Addam bangs the butt of the staff - it must have some sort of metallic tip, Sansa thinks, considering the noise it makes - three times upon the flagstones. Five thousand soldiers and bannermen rise from their benches, wood scraping upon the stone.

And then Ser Addam bellows in a voice better suited to the battlefield than the feasting hall, in what Sansa swiftly realises must be the ancient tongue of the West, “Arlan! Arlan-lancadiltar!”
“Lancadil!” the men reply as one, tankards of ale and goblets of wine raised high, and the cheer echoes off the stone, dancing off the walls.

Jaime’s grip is tighter now, and as Sansa looks up at him she realises that he is profoundly embarrassed, obviously knowing the meaning of the words she is suddenly very curious about, standing at the edge of the hall, with all the gazes turned to him, being hailed thus. Heart aching for him, she does the only thing she can - she lifts his hand to her lips, pressing long, tender kisses to his knuckles, barely registering the continued cheers of Lancadil! Lancadil! that seem only to grow as Jaime eventually leads her, dazed, Ser Daven five paces behind them, to the dais where they shall dine. Fortune and Lady appear out of nowhere and the cheers redouble again as the sigils prowl lazily around before settling at the foot of the dais.

Sansa is pleased to see their bright thrones have been lavishly furnished with cushions, because as beautiful as the chair Jaime has commissioned for her might be, she does not relish the idea of being seated for hours upon carved marble. She is pleasantly surprised, too, to see that she and Jaime will not be dining alone at high table, and from their golden hair she deduces the few people standing behind their chairs to be Jaime’s remaining family. Behind the dais, in full regalia, stand the Wolf and Lionsguard, silent and ever watchful.

Jaime gestures and the Golden Hall once again falls silent. “I thank you for your homage, my lords, gentlemen. Enjoy your feast this night,” he says solemnly, before turning his attention again to his wife, as he hands Sansa formally into her seat, before taking his own ease and seating himself. She catches the minute release of tension in his shoulders as he turns to introduce her to the rest of their table. Sansa is seated next to Lord Gerion on her right, with the widowed Lady Genna on his other side. On Jaime’s left side sits the Lady Roslin, as Sansa’s kinswoman, and then to her side Ser Daven, and then a young girl, a few years Sansa’s junior, whom Jaime introduces as Joy, the Lord Gerion’s natural daughter, at the end of the table that is decadently bedecked with joyous finery.

No sooner is everyone seated, all eyes still upon them, than Jaime takes the wine decanter in front of them and pours into small, lovely coloured glass goblets the heady golden liquid Sansa realises is shadewine, before offering her a warm bread roll about the size of her fist, and she takes it with a smile as they rip it between them. Her husband dips his bread first into the small shallow bowl of olive oil and then the one of salt, and she mirrors his actions carefully, her hand shaking at the importance of the ritual. But Jaime, always one for the grand gesture, takes it one step further and offers her his own bread, touching it to her lips, and she hurriedly does the same. He takes the first bite, his breath warm against her fingertips, and then it is her turn, and she does not know how she can stay sane, not when he is looking at her so ardently, his gaze soft and amused all at once.

But she does not have the time to ponder this because, requisite bread and salt taken, the King of the West lifts his goblet to her in a private toast. “Whatever our endeavours,” he says, a smile curling the edge of his expressive mouth, and she repeats the words, quietly, feelingly, raising her
glass to him in turn and though they are surrounded by people it feels as though they are utterly alone, and so to break the spell because she suddenly needs to breathe - she does briefly think of teasing her husband by breathing more deeply than she otherwise might, simply to let the cords of this rather wonderful tension tighten more, because she knows that his gaze will be inexorably drawn to her neckline which seems to hold a particular fascination for him - she instead takes her first sip of the *shadewine* and her expression stills with shock. She might no longer be looking at her husband but the King of the West is still looking at her she knows, his gaze a heady comfort, as he greedily drinks in her every reaction.

The *shadewine* is summer snows and lemoncakes, heady amber and crushed pines, sweet apricots and soft peaches and she gasps, closing her eyes against the prick of tears.

“Small sips, lovely one,” Jaime advises, voice low, head bent to hers.

“I…” her hand trembles as she sets down the glass again. “I felt… *everything*…” she laughs incredulously, a little self-consciously. “I... that is astonishing.”

“Take a second sip,” he suggests. “Slowly… let it linger and melt like honey nectar upon your tongue.” He drinks with her, this time, and the look in his eyes as he swallows makes her shiver as languid pleasure slips into her veins. Her own mouthful makes her eyes flutter shut at the sensation, and when she opens them again his hand is frozen, halfway to his mouth. When he sets his own goblet down his knuckles are white and his jaw is clenched, and she has to resist the sudden incredible temptation to lay her hand on his knee. He notices, of course and smirks that infuriating smirk of his that makes her wish they might be alone.

Her mouth is dry, suddenly, and she digs her nails into the soft skin of her palms. They are playing a very dangerous, highly enjoyable game, but before she has too long to agonise about this the serving boys and girls appear in smart crimson tunics to set the first course down upon the table, and Sansa relaxes, her mouth watering at the delicious scents wafting through the hall.

She looks at the dainty plate in front of her and tilts her head in curiosity. “Robert Baratheon saw it as a form of Lannisters grasping at power, so dishes were not served like this in King’s Landing, but this is the traditional way of serving food at a feast in the West,” Jaime explains, answering her unspoken question. “So we have a series of small plates so everyone eats a variety of dishes. It means the chefs have leave to show their skill and artistry and that dinner guests are still hungry enough to sample even their sweet confections at the end of a meal.” He smiles briefly. “Or that is the idea in any case.”

“Ah, Jaime…” that is the Lord Gerion, whom Sansa freely admits to being very curious about. The elder Lannister spears an enthusiastic forkful. “Scallops - it’s been an absolute *age* since I’ve had them, do you know? There’s nothing like a good Sunset Sea scallop fished in the early dawn hours
by a Lannisport fisherman. My compliments, Jaime, on such a fine table.”

Jaime acknowledges the compliment with a nod of the head and Sansa in turn cuts into her first of three scallops and takes a tentative bite, and the delicate taste, akin to sea-foam, she thinks, but more buttery and yet also rich and smoky from the crumbled wild boar bacon sprinkled on top, explodes into her mouth, and she eats appreciatively.

Beside her, the Lord Gerion appears to have launched into a convoluted tale, holding the attention of those sat on that side of the table, and she turns to listen to the man, who punctuates his words with elaborate gesticulation and enthusiastic hums of appreciation at the food set in front of him. “It reminds me of the tables set by the Sepens of the Basilisk Isles - cruel as anything, that man, and overfond of sending people off on, well, quests would be the word, wouldn’t it, though Pell disagrees. Where was I? Oh yes, the Sepens - by the Lion, I tell you truly, that man knows how to eat.”

Sansa smiles politely, still not entirely certain what to make of him. He looks at her respectfully enough, but then his eyes will slide to Jaime and a teasing look she has decided she does not particularly like comes over his face. Jaime is her husband, her ally, her friend, her lover, the father of her unborn child, and she will not tolerate jokes at his expense, not when she cannot be sure that there is not some more pointed intent behind them. Lannisters, as a general rule, she has learnt, do not understand when to stop. The only exceptions, she thinks, are Tywin Lannister - who was probably the only man alive to understand to such a great extent the primordial importance of such a thing as the line not to be crossed - and Jaime, who is so dangerous precisely because unlike both of his siblings he is capable of restraint. Cersei raged and blustered, Tyrion lamented, and vivid though such performances might have been, they were not nearly so frightening as when Jaime goes quiet, when he forces himself to restraint, a quality that has been hard won for her husband, Sansa knows. From what she knows of Jaime and Tyrion’s relationship with the Lord Gerion, he seems to have been the man to encourage their recklessness, their flights of drama, and that troubles her. It makes her tense, almost nauseous with fear as she waits for the inevitable japes.

The Lord Gerion continues, seemingly in his element, holding forth, his sister the Lady Genna listening attentively, and Sansa makes a mental note to speak to the lady at some point in the near future. Jaime will introduce them, she is certain. “…There was one occasion, where - yes, I remember, it was after the serving of the lotus flowers, which would be passed around the banqueters in the same way we pass round a flagon of ale, on the seventh day of the celebrations for the fourth decade of the Sepens’ reign, the chefs brought out an enormous roast beast, so huge it had to be carried by four serving-men - they are fond there of cooking and carving up the beast, before sewing the meat back into the skin to present it at feasts - in any case this beast was terrifying, with scaled skin like that of a snake, an elongated, ugly head and fang-like teeth. The locals, incongruously enough, call them Waddlers, for they have rather ugly legs upon which they move, bellies to the earth…” Sansa shudders at the image before turning her attention resolutely back to her plate. As she eats she takes in the contented hums and chattering of the bannermen, punctuated here and there by a boisterous laugh. Spirits are high, and Sansa, for all her exhaustion, can understand why. Their boldness has paid off, and they have reached Casterly Rock safely, before the Dragon Queen and for the first time she senses that things might not be so entirely
hopeless as they have been in the past.

The cheering at her and Jaime’s entrance had been a surprise, nevertheless, to say nothing of the toast. Turning quietly to her husband, she asks him privately what the words with which they have been hailed meant. Though he controls his facial expression well, the tips of his ears burn. “I - it means hail the Lion! Hail the Lion - we shall hail him! and the response is we hail him.” He swallows. “I was not expecting such an honour.”

“I know you were not,” she murmurs sympathetically, the shadow of an idea forming in her mind, before their conversation is interrupted once more by the ballet of the serving boys and girls removing their plates before setting down in the centre of the table two enormous soup bowls. The scent of chestnut soup with roast duck rises from one and she hurriedly presses a shaking hand to her mouth. “Jaime,” she continues urgently, “chestnuts - ” and he immediately signals for them to move it away from her, and she sighs with relief as she is served a small bowl of blandissory instead. “Thank you, husband mine.”

He lifts her hand to his lips in response. “Of course.” Out of consideration for her he has chosen the blandissory too, though she knows he is not overly fond of it. Lord Gerion’s choice of the chestnut soup gives her the excuse to turn towards her husband and engage him and the Lady Roslin in polite conversation, and the remainder of the soup course passes very pleasantly, in the same way that a frothy gown of silk and lace feels very pleasant against one’s skin, at least until a dry exclamation - “Really, little brother, now you exaggerate!” from the Lady Genna makes her turn in surprise.

The Lord Gerion is still telling tales of his time in the Basilisk Isles, it seems. “…One guest must have been addled in his mind for he refused his portion of roast waddler, and this caused the Sepens to fly into such a rage that he became as purple as his scale headdress was vivid green, and ordered all of his foreign curiosities like myself to the centre of the feasting hall.”

“Yes, yes, all well and good, Gerion, but how did you come to be there in the first place?” The Lady Genna waves her hands impatiently between slurped mouthfuls of a second bowl of soup, and Sansa exchanges an amused glance with her husband. He rolls his eyes and her heart leaps to see the return of his playfulness.

Undeterred, Jaime’s uncle answers his elder sister and sole remaining sibling. “Curiosities - well, to be honest we were more of a band of unfortunates with enough ill-luck to land upon the shores of the Basilisk Isles, though Pell and I have more pride than to call ourselves either curiosities or unfortunates. I myself was not precisely shipwrecked - but after turning home from, well, I don’t suppose it matters, really - I encountered a storm that damaged my ship too greatly for me to leave the Basilisk Isles immediately, and thus I was taken into the service of the Sepens, where I remained for the next few years.”
“Indeed.” The Lady Genna’s voice is sharp and drawling, with a hint of condescending amusement that illuminates all too suddenly and clearly the dynamic of the siblings, for the Lord Gerion scowls at her in response like a five year old, and she can’t help but chuckle to herself, deciding that she finds Lord Tywin’s sister more entertaining, and certainly more formidable, than Lord Tywin Lannister’s younger brother. “The adventurer concerns himself with waddlers and green headdresses and - whilst the rest of House Lannister was fighting and dying! Impressive indeed.”

Sansa jolts, distracted from the Lannister siblings’ argument, as Jaime presses his calf against hers and she shoots him a warning look, to which he responds with a devilishly innocent expression, and suddenly - well, not suddenly because she has felt this way since she spoke to her uncle in the afternoon, however much she attempts to ignore it - she wants nothing more than to be alone with her husband, and the teasing, impossible man will not stop *provoking* her.

She supposes the way the two of them look at each other must be common knowledge, and their conclave has certainly been good-naturedly indulgent with them about it - stalwart, curmudgeonly figures from her Northron conclave, especially, who wink at her when they see the reverent, ardent respect Jaime treats her with in public - but when Jaime’s uncle notices this latest interaction the elder Lannister waggles his eyebrows obscenely, in a move reminiscent of Tyrion, and her blood turns to ice.

“Tell me, nephew, how long have you been wedded to your lady? I can see why you chose her, though she is perhaps a bit young for my tastes.”

Jaime stills so entirely he might have been made of stone, and the high table falls into a sudden, suffocating silence.

“Tell me, Lord Gerion,” Sansa smiles with enough honey in her tones to sicken Margaery Tyrell, “do you know the story of my second husband?”

The man blinks in bewildered surprise, his jaw clicking shut.

Her smile turns bland. “No matter. I’m certain that my conclave will elaborate on the subject should you care to ask. Ah, I see the next course is here - if you would excuse me whilst these lovely serving girls explain this wonderful dish to me.” She turns in her seat, gesturing at the young girl, who blushes, but at Sansa’s encouraging nod, details the dish. It turns out to be salt-cured cod with pine nuts and shadowvine raisins, and Sansa thanks the young servant gently, before continuing to address the Lord Gerion in a deceptively even tone. “Before Jaime and I wed, we were already friends and allies.”
She frowns, making a sudden decision, mind whirling, and stands, goblet in her dainty hand, and the Golden Hall falls into expectant quiet. Improvisation has not failed her before, and she hopes it will not in this instance, because she thinks to show Gerion Lannister precisely who he is dealing with. “My Lords, Ladies and gentlemen of the West, of the North, the Vale and the Riverlands, I cannot tell you how happy I am to be here at Casterly Rock.”

Cheers greet her words, dying down when she begins to speak again. “It has been a long, hard ride from Winterfell, and I must thank Ser Daven Lannister for organising such a splendid welcome. Jaime and I are most grateful, cousin.” She pauses before continuing, her cadence becoming more thoughtful. “As in the West, in the North we too have our ancient feast rites, and if you will allow it, my lords, I would share it with you now. Feasting holds a special place in all our hearts; it is when we might all come together and engage in conversation, eating good food and dancing by firelight long into the cold dark nights, and so in the North, before Aegon Targaryen banned such sacred customs three centuries ago, it was customary to say the following: *ath-attarrys athymur, lys heldartheyn gleyd!* which means *by the winter ice of our veins, light the hearths merry,* to which the response was *gleyd-eldartheyn,* or *merry-hearth!* I discovered these rites in old parchments in the library at Winterfell as a young girl. I asked the Maester about them, and was told they had been outlawed by the Targaryen Kings - well, no more! And so the North thus thanks the West for such a feast. *Ath-attarrys ayythmur, lys heldartheyn gleyd!*” She holds up her goblet, and the bannermen and soldiers and even the high table rise to their feet and call together *gleyd-eldartheyn.*

The solemn, shining admiration she reads in her husband’s gaze warms her as he speaks the ancient language of the Kings of Winter in a proud, deep voice, and her eyes glimmer. She does the only thing she can. Even as he toasts her in her ancient tongue, so too she toasts him in his. “*Lancadil,*” she murmurs privately before taking a careful sip of the potent *shadewine,* joyously relishing the pleased, ardent light in his green gaze as she does so.

After that the dishes seem to come far more quickly - crab cakes with coriander and spring onions, crunchy and golden on the outside, steaming hot and soft on the inside, grilled lobster served with a white parsley sauce and a hard cheese and bread crumb crust that is so rich she can only manage a few succulent bites, whilst the bannermen and soldiers are served great bowls of steamed mussels in a white wine, onion, garlic and parsley broth to great cheering - she gathers it is a Westerlander favourite - and then vegetables, white beans with a wild boar bacon crumb, rich and buttery and smoky, sautéed glasshouse greens with spiced pine nuts, and she eats a little of everything.

She does not speak, content to steal more than the occasional glance at her husband, to let her calf linger against his, to feel the warmth of his leg even through the leather of his boot and the silk of her skirts, and to let the conversations around her continue without her interjections. Jaime is similarly quiet, though she hears him snort when his uncle returns to what appears to be one of his favourite topics, namely the waddler-beast.
“So we’re kneeling upon these coloured tiles, looking up at the Sepens as he twirls his green moustache - they dye their hair in the Basilisk Isles - and he orders us to take his shaking guest upon a waddler hunt. That was the occasion upon which Pell, the sneaky thing, tied my boot-laces together, and I did not notice until about to set forth, all bedecked, upon the waddler hunt, only to fall upon this fine nose of mine and eat a mouthful of mud…” As Gerion recites his tale with all the insouciant arrogance she supposes comes naturally to a buccaneer, Sansa wonders how much of it is real and how much is exaggerated for effect. “Pell came back with two waddlers, but I returned with only one, you see, which was most aggravating…” he continues, and Sansa turns her attention to the sweet courses.

Jaime knows she has a sweet tooth; her fondness for lemoncakes is no secret, and she is curious to see what confectionary is traditional in these parts. She is not disappointed, for she finds out that it is customary to serve a hot, semi-sweet dish before serving a proper sweet plate. In minuscule blown glass bowls, decorated with gold veining in what Sansa is fast recognising as a typical glassmaking technique of the West, they are served a rich zabaeon, yellow from the egg yolks and the saffron, frothily poured over a spiced poached cherry preserve. In summer, Jaime explains, it is served with fresh berries instead of preserve, and she agrees that it must be a delightful thing. Whilst high table is served the zabaeon, gargantuan loaves of cakes the size of a cart wheel, fortified with liqueur in the baking, studded with candied fruit peel and raisins, that Jaime explains can be made months in advance, are carried out by the servants for the enjoyment of the bannermen and soldiers.

She cannot hide her astonished delight when the zabaeon is replaced with a pretty sweet plate of dainty cubes of winter apples roasted with a dark honey glaze and a pine nut garnish, rounded off with honey and rosemary cakes. There is honeyghast, too, a sweet liquor cordial with ghost-pale violets floating in the honey-coloured wine, served in glasses even smaller than the shadewine goblets. It is potent stuff, and Sansa finds even a thimbleful of the honeyghast serves to send violet-tasting sparks dancing through her body. But the truly incredible thing is the miniature marchpane lions and direwolves that prowl around a landscape of coloured marchpane mountains and caramel rivers, with oversized, glittering marchpane snowflakes in lieu of treats. The landscape requires six servants, directed by the pastry chef himself, a merry man with red cheeks from the heat of the kitchens and elegant, artist’s fingers, to carry it into the Golden Hall on a palanquin, and they set it down in front of the high table to enthusiastic clapping.

Jaime stands, holding out his hand and Sansa takes it, fingers curling, as he leads her from the dais so she can have her pick of the marchpane creations. She finds herself reluctant to eat something so aesthetically beautiful - truly it is a work of art, she thinks, and the pastry chef standing in front of her whose jovial frame belies the hope in his eyes that she will enjoy this confection is to be commended - but she daintily selects a snowflake, taking a small bite, enjoying the way it crumbles and melts upon her tongue, and she shakes her head in pleased appreciation, fighting the temptation to lick her fingers. She breaks off a small piece of the snowflake and offers the marchpane to her husband. She is not so bold as to touch it directly to his lips but his left hand grasps at her elbow before sliding up her forearm to take gentle hold of her wrist and guide her hand so he can take the sweet with his teeth from her fingers, before kissing her palm.
There is a confidence to him here, she realises, after the turmoil of the day. More than a confidence, a lightness, and from the glint in his eyes she knows that he is deliberately reigning in his playful inclinations, but not completely, for he makes some vague, grand gesture with his right arm that she doesn’t know how to interpret, but his seneschal clearly does for the man motions to a small group of musicians sitting to the side of the dais, and they begin to play a lilting traditional melody - a dance, to be precise.

And so, as the marchpane landscape is being grazed upon by conclave and soldier alike, Jaime guides her to the centre of the Hall, his left hand holding hers, before he halts, and steps back a pace, letting go of her, before bowing theatrically, even as she gazes at him, belatedly curtseying deeply, elegantly in reply.

She inhales sharply as she suddenly finds herself closer to her husband than she has been all night, his right arm wrapped securely around her waist, the metal reassuringly comforting and cool upon her back, and both of their left hands held above their heads, fingers tangled. She is far from displeased, but she is curious at his actions.

His gaze locks with her, mesmerisingly green, green like a forest in summer, and his words steal the breath from her as though he’d covered her mouth with his in an ardent kiss. “We never did get a wedding feast, did we?” His grip on her tightens. “Much less a dance.” Her heart overflows with love for this man, who knows her well enough to surprise her with the courtly traditions she has loves since she was a little girl. She cannot explain how much it means to her that he revels in the more frivolous part of her; only with him has she felt so entirely loved, so loved for all of her.

And then it seems they fly, feet barely touching the ground, and she is dizzy with joy and laughter and relief and everything around them seems to blur. The colours, the noise, the music, the raucous laughter, it all fades and her world narrows to the colour of his eyes and the intense promise of his expression, the strength of his arm around her waist and the solid warmth of his body against hers. She feels, alive, rejuvenated and she does not need a mirror to know that when the musicians finish playing the song she is smiling radiantly, and that Jaime is very reluctant to let her go, custom dictating that now they needs must dance with others.

Thus it is that Sansa finds herself cautiously dancing with Lord Gerion as the King of the West extravagantly leads his aunt the Lady Genna in a stately circuit of the hall. She studies the older man carefully, noting the weatherbeaten face and the tanned skin, before deciding to be direct. She has no more patience for the game tonight.

“You are surprised to find Jaime here, much less as King of the West,” she states baldly as her partner guides her into a turn. “You are surprised to find me here, as his wife and ally, and as Queen in the North.”
“I am.” He blinks. “The Jaime I knew is not the one I see before me.”

She raises an eyebrow, though not unkindly. “Is it not so inconceivable that his recklessness as a youth might be tempered by his experiences?”

He frowns, his tone thoughtful. “How do I explain this? That Cersei and Jaime were irrevocably tied together?”

“If you call sustained manipulation an irrevocable tie, then yes,” Sansa replies. “I can understand the curiosity about mine and Jaime’s marriage; to anyone who knows the history of our Houses, the question of how we came to be friends, allies and yes, married, is certainly an interesting one. But it is also private. It is my life and my husband’s, not yours. Torment him, provoke him on the subject, and I will not be responsible for my actions.”

“What makes you think I will?” He challenges, his hand flexing between her shoulder blades, and she fights down a shudder. Only Jaime touches me. Only ever Jaime and I hate this. But as Queen in the North I must dance with mine and my husband’s bannermen.

She smiles tightly. “You are a Lannister - and more to the point a Lannister in the same way that Cersei was a Lannister, in the same way that Tyrion is a Lannister. Either you do not know where the line is, or you do not care, because nothing matters so much as your own personal satisfaction of besting your interlocutor.”

“You do not have a very high opinion of me, Your Majesty.”

She answers his directness with her own brand of candour. “No, not at the moment. No I do not.” She raises an eloquent eyebrow. “Prove me wrong. How did you find Brightroar?”

The adventurer sighs, before nodding to her and beginning his tale. “I set out from Volantis; I had to buy slaves to replace my mutineer sailors - the cowards, one and all, but I was wealthy enough to free them and pay their wages in arrears - I am a Lannister after all, and I should have been ashamed to not be able to pay my men correctly for their honest work - you see, Your Majesty, there are some positive traits to a Lannister - ”

It is not a taunt, precisely, and she replies pointedly, cutting his thought off before he can entirely misconstrue her - “If there were no positive traits to a Lannister I would not have married one.”
He nods, conceding the point, and continuing, with more grace this time, “And so off we sailed, into the Smoking Sea where the saltwater is yet thick with ash, and the mists make one cough and one’s eyes burn - but I was determined. We scoured every island, combing the charred rubble, until after months of searching, eyeing warily the mountaintops for the tell-tale belch of flame that would indicate an eruption and thus an immediate notice to vacate the surroundings.” Sansa represses a shiver at the mention of fire wreaking havoc. The images her mind had conjured earlier in the afternoon of the Dragon Queen burning everything in her path to ash are still too raw for her to think, much less speak upon the subject with any sort of equanimity.

“Do you wish to hear the rest?”

“Continue, if you would, Lord Gerion,” she replies evenly. She does not know him nearly well enough to trust him with how she feels, and somewhere she doubts that she ever will.

“We stayed far away from the greyscale colonies because my researches would have made mention of Brightroar had it been in a place that was still inhabited. In the end we found it in the ruins of what must have been a palace or temple in a city long since abandoned.” He warms to his theme, his voice modulating into the seasoned tones of a master storyteller, and despite her wariness of the man himself she finds herself able to enjoy this recounting. “Our boots echoed upon the silent stone to be where no man had lived for centuries, it was cold and nearing sunset and we were thinking of making camp for the night, so we entered this half-standing edifice in the overhang of the cliff, and as we were clearing the ground to bed down for the night, amidst rubble and the bones of man and animal alike, the hilt still clasped by a skeletal hand, half hidden by debris and shadow I found it - just like that, in a dank, dark corner of a ruin, guarded by skeletons.”

“Rather by happenstance, then?” The man’s adventures seem so fantastical to her, so exotic and implausible, but she does realise the same could be said about direwolves and sigil lions and dragons and White Walkers, and so she finds herself quite liking that such a monumental discovery happened in such a prosaic circumstance.

“Exactly,” he sighs theatrically. “I rather fancied needing to duel some swashbuckling buccaneer, or pitting my wits against an evil ruler in order to claim our familial heirloom. Well, the duelling and the evil rulers came later, as I found out…”

“Everywhere, it seems, there is no shortage of bloodshed and tyranny. The Seven Kingdoms is no exception,” Sansa states, allowing some of the weariness she feels to slip into her words.

For an answer, the Lord Gerion elaborates upon his same point, maintaining an elaborate formality of manner that Sansa decides is at least in part feigned for effect. What she cannot decide is whether that effect is to charm or to aggravate. Certainly her husband’s uncle has aggravated her more than charmed her, but she does notice that the bannermen are eagerly eavesdropping upon his
tale-tellings. “But imagine this, to stumble upon the revered blade only by sheer luck and chance - I tell you, I was most aggrieved at the time for I thought myself robbed of my legend, but I later came to rue such sentiments. I’ve since had my epic of an adventure twice over at least, and I cannot tell you how fine a thing it is for me to be home at last! To feel again the warmth of this golden light upon my skin, to look around me and see the looming grandeur of the Rock after so long…”

That, at least, is a sentiment she can find no fault with, and as he bows to her at the end of the dance before delivering her back to Jaime, she replies gently, “Welcome home, my lord.”

And as a walks off into the crowd, her husband’s uncle begins another tale, arms slung around a rather discomfited Ser Addam and a fiendishly smirking Ser Bronn, “… and then there was the time Pell stole my crew when we were racing down the river into the Sothoryian jungle… I had my revenge soon enough though, because Pell’s crew mutinied and came to me, not that that lasted long once they discovered that the rum barrels had been refilled with water in the place of grog - Pell’s handiwork again - and so they jumped ship returning to Pell… but I won the Sepens’ approval on the issue of that quest, as I not only presented him with some rare gems, but also with my cage full of monkeys - rather more interesting compared to a standard looting of silver and tarnished gold plate that Pell returned with…”

“What did you think of mine uncle?” The King of the West whispers into her ear, as he leads her back to the dais, knowing her well enough that would like to sit down after being in such exuberant company.

“I have not yet made up my mind fully,” she demurs quietly. “He is an interesting character, yes. But I do not trust him not to provoke you with ill-considered japes.”

He smiles, though there is more than a touch of bitter melancholy about the corners. “My valiant Queen, my sweet wife who is my greatest advocate and defender.”

She yawns through her answering smile, her head tilting to rest upon his shoulder, and her husband, ever attentive, suggests they take their leave. “Can we?” she asks.

“Of course, lovely one,” he responds, and signals to Ser Daven and to Ser Leonidas and Brienne. “We will be taking our leave now,” he says to them, and they bow their acknowledgement. Fortune and Lady rise from their lazy lounging about, causing a stir amongst the now very raucous bannermen and cavalry soldiers. Looking around, she realises that she must be the only lady yet remaining, for the Lady Genna and the Lady Roslin along with the girl Joy Hill have already departed. “My Lords and gentlemen, enjoy the rest of the evening!” he shouts to enthusiastic cheers, songs, and table drumming with tankards, goblets or failing either, bare knuckles.
“Make me forget, please make me forget,” she gasps tearfully as soon as they are alone in their bedchamber, the doors bolted for the night and their sigils and guards without. He winds her around him in response, his golden hand reassuringly tangled in her hair, his left hand at the bottom of her spine, warm and wonderful, pressing her to him as he slants his lips over hers in an ardent, consuming kiss. She responds with a hysterical desperation that frightens her, and she vaguely is aware that she is frantically repeating the words _make me forget please please please make me forget Jaime make me forget_ -

“I have you,” he rasps, equally intent, before kissing her again, and this time she sinks into his frame, he the only thing holding her upon her feet. “I have you, lovely one, I have you,” he repeats, and the words sink slowly into her skin, her blood to beat there a pounding tattoo. Another kiss, and her leg wraps around his waist as he carries her to their bed fully clothed, her dainty shoes slipping from her feet to the floor.

She watches through teary, blurred eyes, dazed, feeling uncomfortably cold without his touch upon her, as he disrobes, carelessly pulling off surcoat, boots, shirt and breeches, before clambering onto the bed to hold himself above her, leaning on his elbows, and she can only stare breathlessly up at him, caught in the fierce gaze he bestows upon her, struck silent at the way he moves, awed and proud and giddily pleased that a man as magnificent as he is should be hers and that she should be his.

She reaches for him, _needing_ him, yearning for him because only with his weight on her, his skin touching hers, his scent enveloping her does she feel safe and warm and alive and loved and able to live in turn.

“Look at me, lovely one,” he growls, and her eyes immediately snap to his. “I have you. I have you. Look at me. Sansa - only at me. The rest of the world does not exist. Look at me.”

“Make me forget, Jaime, please make me forget - ” she pleads, reaching up to tangle her dainty, elegant fingers in his golden hair, and he consumes her as she arches into him, arches into his every touch and kiss, mewling, gasping, writhing when he indulges his fascination with her neckline by trailing ardent, open-mouthed kisses on the sensitive skin of her breasts just above the silver-white
cloth of her gown.

Her mind spins with the pleasure he sends humming through her veins - *oh, I love you* - that only intensifies as he lifts her breasts free of her bodice with a triumphant groan before he lowers his mouth to her again, wet and hot and wonderful upon her soft skin. By the time he gradually moves lower, kissing his way down her body, his mouth warm even through the fabric of her gown and she trembles and sighs as he pushes up her silken skirts to slide his hands, one warm and one cool, teasingly, agonisingly slowly up her thighs, she is mewling deliriously.

The world tilts again behind her eyelids as her skirts bunch at her waist and her husband lifts her white legs over his shoulders, her toes skimming his spine, as he begins to press teasing kisses to her inner thighs, and then higher still, murmuring against her skin a litany of praise that makes her blush hotly, and surrender fully to his ardent, skilled affection. Tongue, lips, even a teasing graze of his teeth, and she bucks into his mouth, her breath hitching and breaking upon his name, for he is the only thing in this world that is fine and true and real and he takes her fear and her pain and like an alchemist he turns it into pleasure, winter and honey and golden above her, between her legs and humming in her veins.

“Let go,” she hears him say, his voice a deep, decadent velvet that washes over her like sunlight. “Lovely one, let go. I have you. I have you.”

And so she does. She breaks with a whimpered, strangled cry, melting to life and peace for him to put back together again, and when the wonderful haze of pleasure fades to a deep, languid satisfaction and she opens her eyes, blinking, her breathing harsh, he lays at her side upon their bed, smoothing the hair from her face with slow, tender movements.

His mouth curves into an amused, teasing smile. “Look at you, lovely one,” he drawls, his fingers lingering upon the line of her jaw. “The picture of beautiful ravishment… and all mine.” She blushes hotly as she suddenly realises precisely what he refers to, and his smile widens. “Look at you… this dress of yours is my favourite, I believe,” he continues, and that makes her laugh because she cannot deny that she’d chosen this gown also because of the effect she’d hoped it would have on him. His gaze rakes her hotly from head to foot, and she is proud and happy and embarrassed and aroused all at once.

His reaction is more than she could ever have hoped for, but the bodice pulled low in this way is beginning to pain her, as are the tight sleeves, and so she sits up to cast an impish look at her husband over her shoulder. “Will you unlace me, husband mine?”

His eyes darken still further and he is quick to acquiesce, and the business of divesting her of this gown is one he teases out with his left hand, so much so that she has loosened the ribbons on her closely-cut sleeves entirely before he has finished with the ribbons at the back of the garment. He
takes his time, caressing her breasts with his golden hand as she attempts to take down the
glimmering ornaments in her hair which have somehow survived his amorous attentions thus far
without falling out.

She savours this simple action of taking down the ornaments from her hair as he watches, rapt with
attention, and she rejoices in the mundane ordinariness of the act, leaving his embrace briefly and
reluctantly to place the ornaments safely upon the dressing table, for she does not relish being
pricked by a hairpin in the midst of making love to her husband. The dress she places carefully to
drape over a chair.

Task complete, she laughs happily at the impatient way he gathers her to him, arranging her to his
liking, upon her back with a knee held up over his shoulder and the other leg wrapped around his
waist, her hands resting demurely on either side of her head, and she flushes with embarrassed
arousal at the way he has opened her to him in a way that to her mind seems obscene, as he braces
himself above her, and she feels him hard and ready against her thigh.

“I am going to claim you now,” he informs her, drawling, and she blushes hard at the blatant
promise she hears in his words, in the dark intensity of his voice.

“I would like that,” she replies breathily, giddily even, and her anticipation turns to sheer bliss as he
sinks into her, so excruciatingly slowly that she can read easily upon his face the effort to restraint
he is making, and he surprises her because she’d thought he would match her earlier frenzied pleas
with speed, but instead he does the opposite.

Her position thus means she feels him in a way she has not before; he fills her exquisitely, hot and
thick and long, impossibly hard, and she smiles radiantly with the joy of it, as his body covers hers
entirely, his mouth urgent upon hers, and then he begins to move. Slowly, torturously, exquisitely
slowly, each thrust almost too much, ardent and tender and absolute, with the kind of barely
restrained ferocity she simply melts for.

“Be patient,” he huffs, and she clutches at him, moving her hands to map the musculature of his
shoulders, his back, as he incrementally increases his pace, the surest way to drive her delirious
with longing, kissing her jaw, her neck, her lips, licking and thrusting his way into her mouth with
his tongue, mimicking the movements of his hips. “Surrender to me. Yield to me. Move with me.”

Yes, she thinks, yes. She rolls her hips, meeting him perfectly, relishing, glorying in the feral groan
he makes. I yield, I surrender, I trust... everything, I am yours. Yours to have, yours to claim, yours
to take, yours to love. And then any semblance of coherence is lost as her mind again begins to
spin and she is nothing but instinct and pleasure as he drives her on with every deep, long thrust,
with the overwhelming power and beauty of his every movement, as he leads her to that inexorable
peak with the assurance and intensity she finds so alluring.
Again and again and again he moves, rendering her breathless, until she breaks and flies and he roars his completion, his weight heavy and solid and perfect upon her. She loves that sound, she thinks when she realises again that she has a mortal body and he is spent and protectively wrapped around her. She loves the way he is the truest version of himself when he makes that sound, and that he shows it only to her. It is something infinitely precious he has trusted her with, she knows, how similar he is in fact to his sigil the lion.

She is drowsy now, limbs languid and heavy, her ear listening to the steady beat of his heart as his fingers card through the lengths of her hair in what has become a habitual movement for him, one that brings a giddy little smile to her lips whenever she thinks of it. He has pulled the bedcovers over them, and she revels in the simple pleasure of being able to cuddle up to his splendid form.

“I am happier now, my love,” she murmurs, sighing blissfully as she feels his arms tighten their embrace around her in response. “I like surrendering, I find.” She likes being able to entrust her wellbeing to another in such a way. The assurance that he will take care of her as she will take care of him is a fundamental tenet of their relationship, but she had not known she could enjoy such a thing - the relinquishing of any and all responsibilities - in bed.

“Sleep, then, lovely one,” he replies, gentle and tender. “I have you.”

And thus, she sleeps, safe and happy in the arms of her lover, her husband, her king.
Chapter Summary

“You will be the death of me, lovely one,” he groans.

“But I do not want to be your death,” she says sweetly. “I would be your life as you are mine, if you would but let me.”

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone,

Welcome to this next instalment. It's the longest chapter yet, so I hope you enjoy it! As always, thank you to galaxiasincognita/northernsky for the help with this chapter.

I have also begun writing up my process notes for this story; they'll be in the corresponding appendices because there's too much to fit into an end-of-chapter note, and those for the first chapter are now up, so if you want to know more about how my brain puts stuff together, feel free to have a read and tell me what you think.

Merry early christmas to those of you who celebrate, and happy holidays to the rest xxx

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART XXIII
When he wakes his wife slumbers still in his arms, and though he has thought this every single morning that he has woken to having her thus in his embrace, he still cannot believe his luck. He hopes the day never comes in which he takes her for granted. The previous day was long and arduous and filled with emotional extremes in a way he thinks his days rarely have been, and he does not deny that he needed the rest as much as Sansa.

From the way the golden light fills their bedchamber he surmises that it is already some time past dawn. As he has not been awoken by Ser Addam or a member of his guard with an urgent raven, or because they have still meaning leagues to ride, he allows himself to enjoy this luxury, this rare gift which is the notion of lying languidly in his bed with his wife, unhurried. He allows himself to wake slowly, to think, to sink back into the comfort of this featherbed and allow himself some rest from the turmoil of the past days.

Since that day when he came across his wife frolicking in the hot springs of the godswood like some playful spirit, the day before they left Winterfell, he has not truly had the time to think, for so much has happened and so quickly. With his wife safe and sleeping he allows himself to parse his fear and his shock. He realises there is probably more to come; he is not naive enough to think the Dragon Queen will sign their treaty at the parley without sustained, difficult negotiations at the very least.

Sansa soothes him and encourages him in a way no-one else ever has, simply by his being in her presence, and sometimes he thinks she does not realise the enormity of what she does for him. Kindness is not something she parcels out; it is an intrinsic part of her gentle nature, and something he marvels at. After everything she has endured, and it has only made her uphold more fiercely the virtues of kindness and gentleness. Selfishly, greedily, he stands at her side, taking with open arms everything she so generously offers him, giving her in return all the ardent, passionate, reverent admiration he possesses. He feels as though it is spilling from him, a virtuous wound. To love and protect and admire and respect and work with her, whatever their endeavours; that is the vow he made her, wholeheartedly, absolutely.

She shifts in his arms, her wonderful, mesmerising hair caressing his skin and he grins. He had hoped, of course, that they would be compatible in bed - but this; this is more than he could ever have dreamed or imagined. It is not merely the physical act that is so pleasurable, or the emotional intimacy with her which is an intimacy that is as new to him as it is to her, but that as they discover more about the other, that even their preferences align.
Her surrender last night was glorious, he thinks. A thing different entirely to her trust and faith and love which though he still cannot quite understand why he has it, he knows that he has, that she has given it to him, and to him it is a treasure to value more highly than all the riches of his ancestral seat of Casterly Rock itself. But her surrender - that she had not only given him her surrender, but that she had enjoyed it - it speaks to a very private part of him, a very fundamental part of him, one he has oddly felt rather unsure about. He has always been dominant in bed, and as the more experienced out of him and his wife, there has been an element of that since the beginning, an element of him guiding her. With Cersei, her capitulation had always been and felt very different, as the final part of their combative, competitive bedsport. It had never entirely felt like a true surrender with Cersei, principally because it had always felt as though she was humouring him.

Sansa, by contrast - Sansa had surrendered, and surrendered completely, eagerly, guilelessly. He had not consciously thought before to test the idea with her; the words had simply slipped out in the heat of the moment because he’d seen how weary she had been, and he had wanted her no longer to worry. He had desired to take all of her cares upon himself and give her if only for those moments some respite. He had tried his utmost to get her to stop thinking, and only feel, to surrender to him. And she had. And the beauty of it, the trust she had shown, it had been so incredible as to make his heart ache and twist. It had humbled him. Awed him. Cracked open his chest, his heart and made it weep with euphoric joy.

He has never felt more unworthy of her.

He has never adored her more, never loved or wanted or admired her more as in that moment. The way her eyes had glimmered as she’d looked up at him, the way she’d been pliant and soft and utterly without inhibition, warm and utterly his, as lovely as the dawn, as fluid as water, wrapped around him, the alluring sweetness of her kisses, the silk of her skin against his.

She stirs against him then, blinking open sleepy eyes, smiling brilliantly and his heart somersaults in his chest. Her soul glimmers in her sea-coloured eyes, radiant and happy and languid still with the warmth of slumber.

“Good morning, lovely one,” he says quietly, tangling the fingers of his left hand into her lustrous hair.

She presses a sweet, chaste kiss to his sternum before returning his greeting. “Good morning, my king,” she murmurs, sighing happily as he begins to card his fingers through her hair, lingering in the way he knows she enjoys upon her temples, drawing gentle circles there upon her skin. “This is nice.”
“You had no nightmares,” he comments, and she raises her head solemnly.

“Because of you,” she replies seriously.

“I want you always to dream of happy things. Only ever happy things.” It is perhaps naive of him to hope for that, but he wishes it for her, he desires it for her because she deserves no less.

Amusement glitters in her eyes. “With you that is a distinct possibility.”

“Oh, is it now?” he drawls, drifting caresses down her back, enjoying the way she trembles and sighs at his touch, ever alluringly responsive. She touches her nose to his and he groans, pulling her more firmly into his embrace so he can indulge them both in this. One press of her lips against his and he is lost to her sweet taste and scent, to her gentle touch, the feel of her soft breasts against his chest. Their legs tangle and where he was tender with her he is now ardent, tasting deeply of her, winding her form around his. She reciprocates eagerly, enthusiastically, smiling into the kiss, and when at last he regretfully breaks away to breathe her cheeks are flushed and her eyes are as bright as her lips are red.

“Teach me,” she says breathlessly. “Teach me something that will please you.” He blinks in shock, dumbfounded by the sudden onslaught of images his mind conjures up at her words.

“You already please me, Sansa,” he replies. “You are more than I ever could have dreamed, lovely one.”

“I know that, Jaime,” she blushes, idly tracing patterns onto the skin of his shoulders. “But I… we both liked last night and I… what else do you like? There must be more?”

He grins at that, tipping his head back onto the pillow. “I did say it was only the beginning, didn’t I?” he smirks ruefully, before continuing more seriously. “Yes, I liked last night very much, and I am more pleased than I could ever explain that you did too.”

“I knew you liked it when I surrender to you,” she says impishly.

“Only in bed,” he specifies. “And only because you wanted that too.”
“I know,” she replies gently, before turning pensive. “It is a part of your character, as part of mine is that I enjoyed that surrender - but only with you. Only because I knew you would cherish it, not abuse it. Only because I know you would look after me.” She is melancholy now, and his heart twists.

“You have always wanted to be looked after, lovely one.”

“Yes,” she says, ducking her head.

“Don’t be ashamed of that, Sansa,” he replies fiercely, cupping her cheek with his left hand, gently tilting her head up to look at him, and the vulnerable look in her eyes is a sword to the stomach. “Never be ashamed of that.”

“I sometimes think that if I did not want that my father would still be alive, and that I am selfish and weak to want to be looked after,” she chokes on the words, closing her eyes against her tears and he feels the shame radiating from her and he wants to run everyone who has made her think thus through with his sword.

“Being able to love in such a cruel world, Sansa - it does not make you weak. It makes you the strongest, most admirable person I have ever known. Vengeance is easy. Violence is easy. Believe me, I have learnt that. Love? Love is difficult. Kindness is difficult, especially when you are surrounded by cruelty and loneliness.”

“I have always been lonely, I think,” she sobs, giving in to the tears, wetting his neck, and he can only hold her tightly, reassure her with his words and his presence and his touch and his love, even as her misery and her words break his heart. “Except with you I have always been lonely, for my whole life I have been lonely until I fell in love with you, Jaime.”

“Oh, lovely one,” he sighs, tears pricking at his own eyes, and when he continues his own voice has become an uneven rasp because he knows, he knows precisely how she feels because he has experienced the same for much of his adult life. “From the day I became the Kingslayer I have been lonely. The disdain, the cruel remarks, the judgement, you never get used to it. There is always some jagged edge of your soul that the words catch upon and it makes you bleed. And then I was imprisoned, chained up in a muddy cage, and when I finally returned to King’s Landing - well. Though I was surrounded by people I was lonely then too. Do you think me weak for wanting your love? For revelling and needing and cherishing the care you give me?”

“No!” she replies, horrified. “Of course I do not.”
“Well then,” Jaime continues, raising an eyebrow gently. “Why should you and I be different in that regard?”

She stutters. “But I am a woman. And Northron women, they… do not wait to be rescued. They fight their attackers.”

“They fight their attackers, yes,” he snorts. “And then they die. They go out in a blaze of glory like their men and then what is left? Can you truly say that you would rather feel nothing at all? That you would rather become a killing machine? I would think that would mean the monsters would win, if that were the case.” He frowns, wanting desperately to convince her of the truth of his words but not knowing how. “Sansa… I admire your fortitude, I admire the fact that you have endured. That despite everything you have kept your ideals of kindness and care. Those monsters have not destroyed you, and so long as you are the gentle, loving, kind, clever lady I know you to be they will never be able to destroy you, no matter what they attempt.”

“No,” she replies eventually, so quietly and shyly that his heart aches for her. “I cannot say that I would prefer to feel nothing; I love you far too much for that ever to be something I would countenance.”

“Being taken care of, Sansa,” he says tenderly, “desiring that is not something to disdain. And I like that it is something that you want,” he confesses softly. “I enjoy taking care of you, because it gives us both pleasure. You are the only one upon this earth who has ever wanted my care of you, and, my lovely one, it means - it means so much to me.” He swallows the lump in his throat, averting his eyes because her countenance is far too expressive for him to bear. “You accept that it is part of my character, and more than that, you reciprocate. You are the only one who has ever asked to care for me, you are the only one who has noticed that it is something I, too, want.”

“Then let me care for you now,” she entreats him. “Teach me something that would please you. You have given me good memories to replace the bad, and I would do the same for you, my love.”

“You will be the death of me, lovely one,” he groans.

“But I do not want to be your death,” she says sweetly. “I would be your life as you are mine, if you would but let me.”

He swallows violently. He does not deserve such a wonderfully magnificent creature as she. He brushes her cheek, considering very carefully, and she leans into his touch, eyelashes fluttering. He
does not deny that his imagination has been particularly vivid as regards his wife, but he does not want to over step the mark. Perhaps there is a way to -

“Lovely one,” he says, coming to a decision, and she looks at him, hopeful and patient all at once. “I will teach you if you promise me two things.”

“Name them, Jaime.”

“You tell me immediately if you don’t like it, and we will stop.”

Her brow furrows in confusion. “But what if you like it?”

“I could not like anything that made you uncomfortable,” he answers. He cannot allow her to think - “Promise me, Sansa,” he continues authoritatively. “Promise me.”

She bows her head at the entreaty in his voice. “I vow it, Jaime.”

“Thank you, lovely one,” he murmurs. “And secondly,” he elaborates, his tones turning mischievous, “tell me, of what we have enjoyed in bed, what have you enjoyed the most?”

She blushes the pretty blush he finds so alluring and ducks her head in embarrassment. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because,” he says solemnly, “it will help me know where to begin, what to teach you.”

“Oh,” her eyes widen. “Oh,” she flushes again and he cannot help but find in this instance her embarrassment alluring. “I - I enjoy everything we have done but if you ask me what I particularly enjoyed then I would say that I… when you kiss me everywhere, when you speak to me I love the sound of your voice - you overwhelm me. When you kiss my hands, when you move in me I - ” she trails off, ducking her head again and his stomach twists viscerally.

“My brave, brave wife,” he murmurs, making the effort to restraint. “I trust you absolutely, you do know that?”
“I do,” she replies immediately, though yet confused.

“I will guide you,” his voice deep with reassurance, and she breathes out shakily, nodding. “I would show you how I like to be touched,” he proposes, tense at the thought - he believes she will enjoy it, but he is aware that she might be intimidated by the idea. He also - he has a series of particularly tainted memories he wishes to efface entirely from his mind.

“How you - ” he watches as his innocent wife furrows her brow in confusion, and then the way her expression widens as she understands. “Oh. Oh. That would please you?”

He shifts purposefully to allow her scrutiny, looking at her, allowing the vulnerability he feels at his exposure to be visible in his expression. “Yes, it would.”

She tilts her head, sitting up in their bed. “Like how you touch and kiss me?”

He huffs out a groan of a laugh at that. “The pleasures share similarities, that is true.”

She drifts a tentative dainty hand down his abdomen and he shudders, remembering. Upon their first night together, she’d touched him like this, before they’d been interrupted by those damned ravens. Her hand drifts lower still, her touch as light as a fairy’s wing, and he jolts as she traces his hipbone.

“Like that?” she says, amazed.

He fights to stop himself from bucking his hips into her hands. He does not wish to frighten her. “Do you not remember that day in the Godswood? That you did not need to touch me for me to fall at your feet?”

There is a dazed glitter in her eyes. “Yes, I remember.”

“Keep going as you are,” he urges her gently, biting down a groan as she follows his instruction and continues her light touches, looking at him intently, watching his face, and he drowns in the blue sea of her gaze, his breathing becoming sharp. She drags tender fingertips across his hipbones and down his inner thighs and he trembles under this exquisite slow onslaught. “Touch me,” he
gasps. “Touch me.”

She does.

He cries out her name with the shocking pleasure of it. He cannot remember ever in his life being touched so ardently, so carefully, as if he is infinitely precious to her, cupped thus in her slim hand. She looks at him in amazement, wide-eyed, before moving to lay down at his side, resting her cheek upon his shoulder, still cradling him in her gentle hand. She traces the outline of him from root to tip and he hisses his approval.

“How he believed he might be capable of remaining coherent under her touch he does not know, because one touch from her and his mind begins to spin into a pleasurable haze. “Kiss me.”

The eloquent, silken fall of her hair brushing his abdomen, his thighs, is the only warning he gets before her lips press against him, and he does buck at that, his shout turning into a groan of pleasure as she daintily kisses him. Her expression now is mischievous, and instinctively he uses his left hand to show her in more detail - speech at this point being beyond him - how she can now tighten her grip on him. She does, finding a languid rhythm with her hands and her lingering kisses that teasingly, slowly, very enjoyably make him delirious with pleasure, thrusting into her hands. He murmurs nonsensical praise as she unravels him completely, and he comes undone with a roaring shout, mind and vision utterly blank.

He breathes harshly, tears pricking his eyes, spent and entirely overwhelmed.

“How Jaime?” his wife murmurs, a hint of worry in her voice.

He can only look at her, radiant as the sun itself in this golden light of the Rock, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he struggles to articulate. “Thank you,” he gasps. “Thank you, lovely one, thank you.”

She has risen to carry a bowl and linen cloths from the washstand in the corner to wash him, which she does so tenderly, sitting at his side, that he believes his heart is about to burst.

“How let me, lovely one,” he says, sitting up when she goes to wash her own hands. He takes her hand and dips it gently into the cool water, before lifting it out again and drying it with the second linen cloth, pressing kisses to each fingertip, her palm, the inside her wrist before repeating his motions
with the other hand. Her hands tremble and he looks at her, his expression vulnerably intent. “You are a marvel, lovely one.”

“Flatterer,” she replies with a blush.

“Truth,” he drawls. “That was utterly magnificent. You have given me a memory to forget all the others ever existed in the first place.”

“Memory?” she says, tangling her fingers with his.

“Yes. That was Cersei’s favourite method of manipulating me.”

“Oh, Jaime,” she sighs, embracing him from the side, pressing her cheek to his, and he wraps an arm around her. “You do that for me too, you realise?”

“Good,” he says forcefully. “Because you should know only pleasure.”

“And if I say it would please me now to eat?” she rejoins impishly, and he laughs.

“Then let us eat,” he agrees, rising from the bed to dress casually. He intends to make the most of this lull, and thus he will not be rushed. As he pulls on his breeches, wandering barefoot, he helps his wife search for her red robe which she fastens over the shirt he lends her, before placing a chaste kiss upon her forehead.

They wander out hand in hand to the small courtyard off their solar which forms part of their apartments, nodding at their guards on duty, and greeting their sigils which follow them to their breakfast table set up next to the fountain. Over quiet conversation, they break their fast upon cold roast wild boar ham spiced with honey, cherry and cloves, hard white cheese smeared with apricot jam, hot roasted apples, pine nut tarts, and the lemon and rosemary cakes that were served at the feast the night before.

They are interrupted because of course they are by Ser Leonidas bringing them the morning despatches which the knight sets down upon the fountain bench. As has become habitual, there is a stack of small parchment scrolls for Sansa, ciphers from her spies that have come in overnight, but there are also notes for Jaime detailing the training regimes of the men, the continued progress of the forges making the siege weapons, and he reads through them efficiently.
But most importantly, their fleet has arrived and is now anchored in the shallows on the north-west side of Casterly Rock instead of Lannisport, Ser Leonidas reports. The small fishing skiffs have been ferrying the men into the city since two hours before dawn.

“And all the men are settling in well?” Sansa asks.

“And all the men are settling in well?” Sansa asks.

“And all the men are settling in well?” Sansa asks.

“Indeed, your Majesty.”

“I will meet with the full conclave after I have broken my fast with mine husband and attired myself for the day and read through these reports,” she continues evenly.

The knight bows. “I shall tell them so, your Majesty.”

“Jaime?” Sansa turns to him, taking a dainty bite of the lemon cakes she adores so much. “Should you wish to join me?”

“I need to go to the cavalry grounds to train the men,” he replies, regretting that he is unable to spend every moment of every day with her, that they have duties that will part them. “Ser Benedict Broom, the master-at-arms of the Rock, wishes for my presence,” he explains, gesturing to one of the open missives lying next to his plate, “but once you are finished with the conclave you are more than welcome to watch. I anticipate spending the morning there.”

“Of course,” the Queen in the North agrees easily, before her gaze turns impish once more. “But not before you have a shave, husband mine,” she smirks.

He laughs at that. “Indeed, Sansa. You would not accept kisses from a brute, after all,” he teases, before turning his attention back to Ser Leonidas whom he senses does not really know where to look. “Is there anything else we need know?”

“The preparations for the parley in the Guildhall at Lannisport proceed apace, Sire, and Ser Addam is at this very moment with the conclave drafting the invitation for the Dragon Queen to parley, so they might have a draft ready for your approval in the coming hours,” Ser Leonidas informs them succinctly, and Jaime nods his approval.
“If that is all, Ser Leonidas?” Sansa asks, setting down her lemoncake upon her plate in order to speak.

“There is one small matter,” the commander of the Lionsguard says, a touch of discomfort in his tone. “If you recall the Lord Gerion’s stories last night, about some rival named Pell?”

Jaime frowns in confusion. “I do, yes.”

What has his uncle done now?

“Well, this Pellagea turned up at Lannisport this morning with her ship and crew, something about how the Lord Gerion stole her prize money.”

“Her?” Sansa’s mouth curls with girlish amusement. “I had wondered. Is the Lord Gerion is smitten with her? I remember it was Pell this, and Pell that, last night.”

His commander grins faintly. “Bonn has already begun taking wagers from the Wolf and Lionsguard.”

Sansa raises her eyebrows impishly. “Have mine husband and I become too predictable?”

Ser Leonidas reddens, shifting slightly. “I could not possibly comment, Your Majesty.”

The Queen in the North smiles, mirthful. “Of course not.”

“Has she been questioned?” Jaime asks, not wanting to dwell too long upon the idea of the Wolf and Lionsguard placing bets upon what he and Sansa will do. He knows the guard do it, of course, and he is disposed to allow it so long as they are discrete, and that it remains in good faith. That does not mean he wishes to speak at length upon the subject.

“Yes. And she is entirely consumed by her rivalry with the Lord Gerion. From what I gathered from her explanation it has been going on for years,” Ser Leonidas says.
“The gods save me from swashbuckling pirates,” Jaime sighs with exasperation, finishing his goblet with a single swallow. “Watch her.”

“Sire,” Ser Leonidas bows before leaving them.

Jaime groans. “This is ridiculous.”

Sansa laughs, her eyes sparkling like the sunlight dancing upon the water. “I will go and speak to her; concern yourself with your horses and your men. I shall find out what I can, and impress upon her the consequences should she try to harm any of us.” Her features become wry and melancholy. “The story of mine uncle Edmure should suffice in that respect, should it not?”

“Lovely one,” he murmurs, lifting her hand to his lips to reassure her.

“We should prepare for the day,” she says, and he reluctantly agrees, following his wife back into their bedchamber to dress, never taking his eyes from the wonderful picture she makes thus privately attired in only his shirt and her robe, her hair loose and flowing down her back. She smiles at him, discerning his thoughts with ease, pushing him gently towards the washstand which has been filled with fresh warm water whilst they were eating.

He shaves with practiced motions, standing bare-chested in front of the mirror, casting glances at his wife as she brushes her hair until it shines, seated at the dressing table. He performs his ablutions without thinking, finding comfort in the repetitive, ritualistic gestures, carefully refitting his golden hand to his mutilated arm, before dressing casually, throwing on a linen shirt and a cream coloured leather surcoat, pulling on his boots over his breeches, fastening his sword Endever to his waist.

“Enjoy your time with your horses,” she murmurs.

“I shall,” he drawls.

“I know you need it, my love,” she continues, rising from her seat to cradle his face with her gentle, tender hands. “For it is something you can control in this storm we both know is coming. Find what joy you can in those things.”

“Once I have done this,” he continues, “for I find my greatest joy in you, lovely one, my sweet
wife,” he says, gathering her to him to indulge them both in a drawn-out, languorous kiss.

“My impossible, ridiculous man,” she laughs, sending him on his way, his heart lightened by her mirth.

The stables at Casterly Rock can easily accommodate thousands of horses, and along with the sparring fields the stables have been the place where he has felt most at home. Certainly that was the case as a young boy, when the best part of any day was after he’d finished his morning lessons with the maester and his father, at which point he would eagerly race to the stables to feed his pony carrots and learn to ride and spar. Under the experienced, watchful tutelage of the master-at-arms Ser Benedict Broom, who is still in his post to this day, yet spritely though his hair has long since faded from a straw-gold to white, Jaime had learned first to care for his pony, to feed and brush the animal properly, to bond through games and tricks, when he had been barely more than a toddler. He’d been in the saddle for the first time by the age of three, and riding independently by the age of four, learning first directions, turns, starts and stops, before progressing to the various gaits. The first time he’d clicked his tongue and squeezed his heels as directed by Ser Benedict to urge his pony into a trot, Jaime remembers having thought that because he was bouncing around so violently he was in danger of rattling his head clean off!

An innocent, childish, ridiculous thought of course, but it had been frightening at the time. Frightening and strangely exhilarating because then they’d progressed to the canter, then the gallop, and then jumps, before beginning to learn how to joust and tilt in the yard, charging wildly at a straw-stuffed dummy, taking his turn with the other squires, the aim being one day able to progress to real swords on horseback.

Some of them had been merely going through the motions, but Jaime had been fascinated, watching the grown knights at the charge, but also in the arena practicing the cavalry arts of war, that beautiful and deadly dance. So much so that at the age of ten Ser Benedict had deemed him ready not only for his first destrier, but also to begin learning the hallowed art of training his own warhorses, as every Lord of the Rock had done before him.

His first destrier had been one of his father’s mounts originally, retired from the jousting circuit,
with the light grey-white gleaming coat and intelligent brown eyes and the proud, slightly concave nose typical of Lannister horses. That horse had been unflappable, impossible to fool, with the bravery and the stamina and steadiness of spirit Jaime has learned a man must look for in a warhorse. Without that horse teaching him what a correct preparatory coil for a capriole felt like, for example, Jaime would not be half the horseman he is today, he knows.

He makes his way to the private wing of the stables, where the family mounts are kept, lost in his memories, nodding at the stable boys going about their work, at the cavalry captains tacking up, reaching out occasionally to stroke a horse’s velvety muzzle.

He finds Ser Benedict sternly watching the stable boys bring some horses in, some out, placing blankets over their hindquarters, rubbing them down, tacking them up. One horse pins his ears to the back of his head, refusing the bit of the bridle, raising his head high above the boy’s reach, and Ser Benedict strides calmly into the stall and shows the boy how to coax the animal into accepting the bit by slipping his thumb gently into the corner of the horse’s mouth.

Jaime waits until the master-at-arms has finished his task before addressing him. “Ser Benedict,” he calls warmly, grinning as the old man looks up to pin him with sharp eyes.

“Sire,” the man bows, and Jaime quickly waves him up. It gladdens Jaime’s heart to see this most trusted retainer of his house still on good form, still as keen as Jaime remembers him being. Ser Benedict had been a constant for him, growing up. He’d known that whatever quarrel there had been between Cersei and his father, and later between both of his siblings, or all three of them, Jaime could always come to the stables or the sparring grounds or the cavalry arena and Ser Benedict would be there to set him to work on his form or on his capriole. When Jaime spars or rides he doesn’t have to think upon the tangled mess that has been and is still House Lannister, his younger brother now being on the other side of the war.

“Tell me everything,” Jaime says. “How have my horses been?”

As soon as he’d known the Dragon Queen had begun her offensive upon the Westerosi mainland, he’d sent his younger horses back to the Rock, not seeing the need to maintain his full stable in King’s Landing. Then, when he’d hatched his plan to let Tyrion capture an empty castle, even as the soldiers and servants stationed in his ancestral home had simply melted into the fabric of civilian life in Lannisport, the cavalry herds had been driven as they habitually were most summers into the mountain meadows, high in the Westerlander mountains. Due to a strange quirk of geography and climate, the Lannister herds run wild upon the mountain plateaus during periods of mild weather as young horses, which teaches them the high-stepping, sure-footed gait they have become renowned warhorses for.

When the brief, fierce winter winds had come the stable hands had rounded up the herds and
stabled them for the duration at Deep Den and Sarsfield and the Golden Tooth, principally, and so keeping them safe from the Unsullied rampage, either in those fortresses or high upon the mountain plateaus.

Of course the knights and Lords of the West are formidable cavalry soldiers, but due to the stud at Casterly Rock funded privately by House Lannister, many of the most skilled captains in Jaime’s cavalry companies are men who began as young stable boys, were given a trade and a passion to become cavalry captains, loyal only to House Lannister, and their horses are trained beyond the skill of an ordinary knight.

As his father did before him, Jaime has trained multiple destriers at the same time, ever since he was considered old enough to do so. He has had two horses killed in battle in the past year, once against the Dragon Queen and once against the Night King, and as a consequence he finds himself now with only three horses he is prepared to ride to war: his bay which he gifted to his wife, the grey-white stallion given to him by the Queen in the North, and a second grey-white Lannister stud stallion which it pleased him to name Magnificence. That is rather too few mounts for a King, he finds, and especially a King about to go to war as he wagers he is about to. He had also in his stable in King’s Landing a young three-year old filly named Mischief, daughter to Magnificence, which he’d recently introduced to the saddle before his jaunt north, but she is nowhere near ready for the battlefield, not for four or five years at least. So he is left with a second bay and a second black, seven and eight years old, which, depending upon Ser Benedict’s report, he can think seriously about introducing to the battlefield within the next moons, though he would prefer to leave it another year unless circumstances force his hand. With the impending siege; that might well happen.

Ser Benedict chuckles. “Mischief is well named. She’s been bucking everyone off, me included.”

Jaime frowns thoughtfully. “She’s never bucked me off.”

“That horse is clever enough to only let her rider upon her back,” Ser Benedict smiles.

They pass a stall with a lowered door, and Jaime’s attention is caught. “Red!” he exclaims, and the grizzled pony pricks up his ears and nickers. “Yes, you recognise my voice, don’t you, old friend,” he murmurs, stroking his first pony’s neck, sinking his fingers into the short, fluffy mane, smiling wistfully as his golden hand is nudged by a whiskery nose, something glad and melancholy all at once swelling in his chest. “He is being well cared for in his old age?” As a young boy, Jaime had thought there was almost nothing so fine as his pony having the rich blood bay coat to match the crimson of his house, and so he’d been granted his wish by his parents.

“He’s master of the stables here,” the master-at-arms replies fondly, snorting. “And doesn’t he know it.”
It lightens Jaime’s heart to know his oldest childhood pet and friend is still there. “I’ll come back later, don’t worry, Reddy, I’ll be back.”

Somewhat reluctantly, they make their way from the stables proper to the cavernous arena which is four times the size of the parade grounds in King’s Landing at least. Fragmented shafts of golden light illuminate the arena in much the same way as the rest of the Rock is lit, softening the brown sand upon the ground. Already there is a calm, purposeful sense of activity; stable boys are lunging horses under the watchful eye of their elders, other soldiers are mounting up and carefully warming up their horses.

A sizeable section of the arena has been portioned off for Jaime’s use, and he does not have to wait long before his horses are brought out, trotting spiritedly, the stable boys concentrating to keep up. After pushing the two horses he and his wife rode from Winterfell to Casterly Rock he will not exercise those two this morning, leaving the two warhorses to rest and recover from the strenuous march and skirmish at Riverrun.

“Mischief first, I think,” Jaime says to Ser Benedict, watching the way his horses move. As the youngest she has the most energy, and also the least knowledge of how to channel it effectively. Thus, he directs the other three into the principal arena with the other soldiers and horses. “Don’t lunge or long-rein Magnificence,” tells the stable boy assigned to the stallion. “He’ll eat you alive. Just let him have a bit of a wander around, without getting in the way of the others who are actually working. Focus on alignment with the other two,” he pauses to address the most senior Lannister cavalryman. “Captain Vylarr!” Jaime calls. “Could you take my darks and work them on your line?”

The man turns in the saddle and easily trots his proud white mount over to his King. “Welcome back, Sire,” he says, bowing from the waist.

“Thank you, Captain,” Jaime replies, the sentiment entirely genuine. Despite the circumstances, it is good to be back here. He gestures to his horses. “Could you work with them whilst I train my filly?”

The cavalry captain agrees at once, taking their leading reins with a practiced hand, accepting a schooling whip from the stable boy with the other so the three horses now stand side by side, shoulder to shoulder. The two young dark stallions protest at this, stamping and snorting, jostling each other, but the Captain Vylarr brings them back in line with a sharp word and a flick of the leading reins, even as the elder horse whinnies at them in reprimand.

Conundrum settled, Jaime finds himself alone in the arena with Ser Benedict standing next to him
and the young Mischief snuffling impatiently at his pockets. He taps her lightly on the nose, a reminder. “Manners, girl.”

“I would start her loose, Sire, let her remember you before anything else,” Ser Benedict suggests and Jaime nods, unhooking the leading rein from the young horse’s halter, and Mischief prances away immediately, ears pricked, accelerating to a wild gallop, whinnying, before crashing to a halt in front of the boundary, and whirling around to begin again, energetically galloping in circles, cutting quickly across the centre, once, twice, three times, and Jaime lets her do as she likes.

He merely stands in the middle of the arena, watching the filly carefully, the quick back and forth of her ears, the flaring of her nostrils in curiosity, the high, proud carriage of her head, the powerful ripple of muscle beneath her skin as she takes in her surroundings, bucking joyfully. This carries on for some time, and he matches his horse’s exuberance with calm confidence. He knows this dance. He marks once more the fluid, high stepping nature of her gait, and enjoys the momentary swell of satisfaction. He’d been right to breed Magnificence, because Mischief has inherited her sire’s extraordinary talent for movement.

Mischief slows to a canter, and the filly is no longer so unrestrained. She begins to circle closer to Jaime, and he sees her strides collect and then lengthen, collect and lengthen again as it takes her fancy. The ear on the side closest to him begins to twitch in his direction, but he yet does not do anything more than follow his horse. The whole point of this exercise is that the horse must come to the rider, relaxed and willing to work. She slows to a trot, shrinking the circle, and begins to drop her head to relax her neck.

Only when the filly is trotting with her neck fully extended does he speak to communicate his approval and encouragement in gentle tones. At his voice Mischief slows to a walk and breaks the circle to halt in front of him, liquid brown eyes calm. “Good girl,” he murmurs, running a hand up and down her neck, “Well done, Mischief.”

He spends a few quiet moments in communion with his mount, until man and horse inhale and exhale together. He strokes her neck and muzzle once more before stepping away from her shoulder, Ser Benedict handing him a schooling whip to hold in his left hand, which he points at her hindquarters.

Mischief’s reaction is immediate; she steps away from him to circle again, this time at a walk, inside ear twitched towards him, ready for his commands. He clicks his tongue twice, and the filly trots easily, neck arched. “And halt,” he says, stepping towards her shoulder to reinforce the order. The young horse obeys, and they continue in this vein for some time, trot, halt, trot, halt, walk, canter, walk, halt, canter, halt, until Mischief prances on the spot with coiled energy. He showers the filly with affection, even as Ser Benedict tacks her up efficiently, and they repeat the exercise once more before Jaime vaults carefully onto her back.
He walks her around the arena, loose reined, as Ser Benedict directs the stable boys to set up a series of upright poles spaced five horse-strides apart.

“Begin at the trot, Sire,” the master-at-arms suggests, and Jaime nods his agreement.

The exercise is to weave evenly between the poles, without horse or rider losing their balance and stumbled; a prelude to the higher art of the pirouette, and used with young horses to increase their agility, and with young riders to increase their reflexes and sense of balance. Jaime remembers being required to do such a relay race with the other squires as a boy, and he smiles briefly at the memory, before setting Mischief into a trot, turning her by shifting his weight from side to side in the saddle, thinking it a good idea, as she is to be a warhorse, that she learn to obey signals that do not originate from the reins, for more often than not, upon a battlefield, a knight must release the reins in order to fight.

She completes this willingly enough, and thus Ser Benedict proposes Jaime do the same at the canter. His filly does the exercise, but refuses point blank when the difficulty is increased once more and halts are incorporated between each pole, simply cantering fluidly on.

“Mischief!” Jaime growls, “Enough.”

Mischief flicks her ears in response, and Jaime works the bit of the bridle with the reins until he feels her cede and arch her neck. He’d expected this young horse to test him, but Jaime is nothing if not persistent and they do the exercise again, successfully, this time.

She begins playing up afterwards, refusing to stand still, and so Jaime dismounts, satisfied rather than frustrated. He has achieved that which he set out to do in this session and he realises when Ser Benedict passes him a gourd from which he drinks eagerly that they have been working for some time. Mischief is only a baby, really, and he is pleased her attention span has lasted this length of time.

Jaime rubs his left hand once more over her velvety muzzle, before motioning her away, commanding the stable boys to bring her back to the stables after they have rubbed her down properly with clean, dry straw to dry the sweat beneath the saddlecloth and girth as well as to make sure she doesn’t become stiff.

In the time between Mischief is led away and Magnificence is brought round and the temporary barriers between Jaime’s part of the arena and the rest are taken down, Jaime shares his
impressions of his filly with the master-at-arms, discussing what went well and what could be improved in the next session. It is an enjoyable conversation, one that strikes Jaime because he realises he is speaking once more of the future, something that in all the tumult of the past months he has not really allowed himself to do at any great length. He has been afraid of the future, Jaime realises, not because he fears what it might bring, but because he fears that it might not come to pass at all, and that is a dagger to his heart. He wants so desperately to have a future in which he can train Mischief, for example. A future in which he and Sansa have the family they desire, in which they rule over their realms peaceful and prosperous.

Magnificence is brought to him, and as he mounts the noble animal a great sense of comforting familiarity settles over him like a warm cloak over his shoulders. Ser Benedict vaults into the saddle of one of his own horses, an experienced grey stallion who surveys the arena as calmly as his rider. At Jaime’s nod, the master-at-arms bellows, “The company will prepare the line!”

All the cavalry present in the arena stop whatever exercises they are doing and trot smoothly over to Jaime’s side of the arena, forming loose ranks. Jaime canters Magnificence into place in the centre of the first line. Training young horses is not easier than training experienced warhorses, but it is a very different thing. Upon the battlefield cavalry need to maintain synchronicity beyond an initial charge, and this is what in Casterly Rock with this stud House Lannister has traditionally done so well. Formation is part of it, of course, but it is not the only thing. Ser Benedict had told Jaime as a young boy to think of the cavalry in much the same way he thinks of how various forms are linked together in sword-fighting, as a kind of dance, as a kind of sequence put together to ensure maximum efficacy, and the vivid description has stuck in Jaime’s mind, all these years later.

Thus, just as in sword-fighting the various forms - thrust, parry, block - to give a basic example, are first taught individually before being combined, so too are the advanced cavalry forms of controlled rearing and jumping and kicking, before being combined in particular sequences for use on the battlefield, to avoid the thrust of a foot-soldier’s spear or javelin by rearing up and then striking the forelegs down upon the shaft to snap the weapon in two and disable the enemy, for example.

A much more impressive and difficult manoeuvre is euphemistically referred to amongst the Lannister cavalry captains as clearing the air, in which the horse collects, coils its energy to launch itself off the ground, jumping into the air before striking out powerfully with the hind legs, ideally at about the height of a human’s head, used to devastating effect to prevent a cavalryman from being overrun by foot soldiers when the cavalry is in a looser formation in the latter stages of a battle.

All the Lannister cavalrymen, and Jaime included, learn to memorise these sequences which are then practiced with the destriers, until the animals are skilled enough to do them as does occasionally happen, within their own individual stable stalls, performing the strides upon the spot instead. For that reason the individual stalls are far larger than to a layman might appear necessary at first glance. To perform the sequences correctly alone is difficult enough, but the element of formation renders it more difficult still. But it is a series of manoeuvres that when performed
Jaime knows that even in his absence, even when the herds were hidden on the high mountain plateaus and at Deep Den and the Golden Tooth when the Unsullied came through, the captains would not have entirely halted their training, and Jaime hopes he will not embarrass himself, for as King, he is the man who needs must call the commands.

“The first!” Jaime calls in his best battleground voice, deciding to at least begin with the sequences in order. And thus, squeezing his heels, he sets Magnificence into a collected canter, checking the straightness of the line out of the corner of his eye, and beginning to count in his head the strides of his horse. Whilst drilling, the individual movements of the sequence are called, but not in battle. In battle the signalling flags and lanterns perform the office of relaying commands.

“Five, and strike,” he shouts, counting the five collected strides to prepare for the half rear and powerful, javelin or arm breaking strike of the front hooves. The shock of the landing reverberates through Jaime’s bones, and he’s grateful for being able to call orders because it means he can’t clench his jaw and thereby break his teeth. Then a further five strides, and “half-about-left,” he continues, pirouetting the stallion smoothly half-ways to the left, the animal curling around his left leg to do so. Three strides now before the “half-half-about-right,” a pirouette half-ways to the right doubled, to end up on the right diagonal and not the straight. Another strike, and then, ten strides, clear the air, land, brain rattling inside Jaime’s skull, heart pounding, full pirouette, close the line so each captain rides boot to boot with his fellow, collect the canter again for momentum, then charge at the gallop for the length of the arena, collect again to the canter, wheeling back around for another length of the space.

The horses become more difficult to control as the sequence goes on, and Magnificence is no exception, shaking his head to jangle the bit, snorting, and when collecting after the charge Jaime finds he must exert himself to get the stallion down to the coiled canter that is the preparation for another sequence. The line holds, Jaime notes proudly, the horses and riders collected even though adrenaline beats wildly through their veins, and that final collection is not a lessening of momentum as might first be thought, but rather a further coiling of the spring to unleash devastation upon the enemy.

They go through four more sequences before Jaime, sweating uncomfortably in his surcoat, calls a halt to the drills. He thinks, laughing inwardly to himself, that his stallion is in better shape than he is, ears pricked, his gait smooth and energetic, expression something that can only be termed smug, and he dismounts, praising the warhorse profusely for his efforts. Magnificence reciprocates by butting his head gently against Jaime’s shoulder, and the King of the West reaches up to scratch his destrier’s ears, pleased.

He feels more settled now, far more settled. Not equally at peace to what he finds in his wife’s embrace, but nevertheless fortified enough to take on the remainder of the day, and thus he claps
Ser Benedict upon the shoulder to bid him farewell, knowing the master-at-arms will review the morning’s training session and compile extended notes upon how to proceed in the future, and that takes yet another weight off Jaime’s chest, knowing that he can trust those around him to do their jobs properly.

Thus, he proceeds back to his apartments and, seeing his wife has not yet returned, peels his sweaty clothes from his body and wanders into the bathing suite to wash himself, enjoying the heat and the steam, before finishing off with a quick plunge under the cold waterfall to wake himself up.

For the first time in longer than he can remember he finds himself with time to spare, and he is oddly disconcerted by that fact. It feels strange, too, for his wife to be absent, but he does not have long to mull this over because Fortune, sensing his sudden agitation, comes to his side, and Jaime draws comfort from the purring rumbles his sigil makes as he sinks his left hand into the furry mane, sinking down into a comfortable chair and extending his legs in front of him.

He takes the midday meal alone with the Queen in the North, secluded in their little courtyard, throwing Fortune and Lady the occasional scrap at their feet. He gestures for his wife to serve herself first of the flaky pastry pie steaming hot with the scent of cherries, apricots, dates and succulent chunks of wild boar loin. There is also vegetable pottage and to finish, more of the marchpane sculptures from the feast, all washed down with a carafe of watered wine.

They sit opposite one another, her slim calves pressing innocently against his boots, laughing, conversing, exchanging heated, lingering looks and they have barely finished eating when she becomes restless. She is tense, and the look in her eyes has shifted from desire to apprehension.

“Lovely one? What is it?” he asks, confused, a tendril of fear beginning to sink claws into his heart. “Has something happened?”

She looks at him, distressed, and he is out of his chair and kneeling at her side instantly, cradling her face with both hands. “Lovely one?” his voice trembles.
“No… I’m not… nothing has happened… only - I - ” she falters, blushing, and her fingers tremble as she leans into the tender way he cups her cheek. “I have - I have made something for you - a wedding gift,” she explains hurriedly, twisting her fingers in her skirts. She laughs self-consciously. “Well, more than one gift, in truth. I finished the last part this morning and I had not realised - I want you to like it. I want desperately for you to like it.”

He draws her into an embrace, stunned. Stunned and moved beyond belief. “Lovely one,” he rasps hoarsely. “Oh, lovely one. Anything that you have made for me I will treasure as the priceless gift that it is, made by your hand and your love, this I know as a fact.” He kisses her forehead, her nose, her cheek and she arches into him, melting. He had not thought - he had never expected -

“May I show you?” she murmurs shyly against his shoulder.

“Please do, sweet wife,” he replies sincerely.

She leads him in response into their solar and then into their bedchamber, halting at the foot of the bed to take out of a carved wooden chest a package wrapped in crimson velvet cloth as well as a small wooden box. “Open it,” she urges him, girlish, innocent anticipation glimmering in the sunset colour of her eyes. “Open it.”

He finds her enthusiasm entirely too charming, and does as she bids him do. Inside the cloth wrapping is a doublet of crimson silk and velvet, embroidered with roaring lions rampant in thread of gold, burnished to roaring life, and he swallows unsteadily. Her love for him is in every perfect stitch, in the amount of time she has spent doing this. “I should be proud to wear such a splendid garment,” he rasps. “Thank you, my sweet, wonderful wife.”

She smiles, a shy, chaste thing. “You are pleased with it?”

“Well,” he replies lowly.

She is too far away from him, he decides, and so he gathers her to him once more, sighing with pleasure as her soft, supple form sinks against his, as he inhales the sweet, delicate scent of her hair, nuzzling her cheek, and growling helplessly when he realises she is wearing one of the perfumes he’d gifted her, one that seems formed especially to send him wild with desire. Tears prick at the corners of his eyes, and he can only hold her more tightly to him. “I love you,” he murmurs, “I adore you, I want you, you perfect creature.”
She chokes out an embarrassed laugh. “Flatterer.”

“Truth,” he replies fiercely, and the absolute tone in his voice makes her head snap up in shock. “Truth,” he repeats. “You are perfection, lovely one, and so too are your gifts.” He trembles, overwhelmed. “I cannot remember the last time I was given a gift made by the hands of someone I loved,” he continues, more softly, his chest painfully tight, and only when his wife guides him to sit upon their bed does he realise he is shaking, that his hands are shaking, that his whole frame is shaking violently.

“Jaime, Jaime,” his wife says urgently, “love and defender of my life, Jaime, I’m here, breathe with me.” She is curled into his side and he wraps an arm tightly around her waist, doing as she bids, listening to her gentle voice, concentrating upon the feel of her slender ribcage rising and falling under his touch, attempting to match her. “I’m here,” she keeps repeating, until eventually he subsides and his breathing returns to normal.

She leans her forehead against his and he sighs. “Sansa - I - I - thank you. Thank you.”

“I did not think an embroidered doublet would - I did not mean to upset you.”

“I am moved, Sansa,” he replies, his tongue feeling as though swollen in his throat, and words feel entirely inadequate to enable him to express the entirety of the overwhelming emotions he feels crashing through him. “Not upset. Never that. Only immensely humbled,” he continues in tones of reverent, ardent admiration.

“I have more gifts for you, my love, my King, husband mine,” she says softly.

He trembles, and lets himself lie back on the bed so he is staring up at the ceiling, feeling as though he is a marionette whose strings have been cut. Her generosity astounds him. The depths of her affection for him steal his breath. “You will undo me with so much love, Sansa. I do not deserve this.”

“You do,” she replies passionately, “you do.” She climbs onto the bed properly, propping herself upon the pillows and guiding him to rest his head in her lap so she can comb soothingly through his hair and trace his features with gentle, dainty fingertips. “I know you do. Your bannermen know it and mine know it too.”
His stomach tightens with mingled anticipation and dread as she opens the small wooden box and looks down at him with glimmering eyes. She swallows nervously and his heart aches. “I wrote you letters, and poetry and songs, husband mine, to tell you how I feel about you.”

She is baring her soul to him. His wedding gifts have been jewels and perfumes and a harp, and her wedding gift to him is her soul.

“You honour me.”

“You haven’t seen the letters yet,” she demurs.

He shakes his head. “You honour me,” he repeats, fiercely, ardently.

“I don’t know why I began writing letters to you, from the beginning of our acquaintance upon Winterfell’s high moor… I did not think I would ever give you these letters at first, but then I fell in love with you and I thought you might like to see for yourself the evolution of my feelings,” she explains self-consciously.

“Sansa…” he pauses, wanting, needing to get this right. “Your wedding gifts to me are valuable beyond price. I will cherish them more than I will ever cherish the gifts of another.”

She blushes that alluring blush. “Do you - would you like to read my letters?”

“Would you read them to me?” he asks. He wants to hear her voice as she speaks the words she has written to him.

Her eyes widen and glitter, but she nods, shyly, endearingly, and plucks a letter from the box, unfolding the parchment, and she begins to read. He is appeased, soothed, lulled, loved by her voice, those gentle, caressing, mellifluous tones, and her words flood his heart with warmth to overflowing until it bleeds from him.

She gives him too much.

She gives him everything.
My Lord,

I do not precisely understand why I feel compelled to write to you, on this, the day of our unlooked-for victory over the soldiers of the dead. I do not know whether I shall ever hand you this letter, in truth. I was afraid to die; indeed I thought I would die, and I was afraid. I was afraid because at long last I had found something worth fighting for, something which I was afraid to lose. Something which I still fear I might lose. Your friendship. I cannot tell you how much it has come to mean to me. So I am writing this missive, I suppose, because I wanted to tell you how glad I am that you are alive. I did not believe this could happen; that after everything that has happened to both our houses we might become friends, but we have, and it gives me hope. I wanted to thank you for fighting beside me, for fighting the Night King. Thank you for being my ally. Thank you for being my friend.

Lady Sansa.

He smiles at that, and takes her free hand to lift it to his lips in wordless appreciation. He had turned his back upon songs - but she makes him believe again, that gallant gestures can still hold meaning, that works of art can still exist, and oh, there is no more beautiful work of art than his lovely, sweet wife. Her white hand is dainty in his, trembling at his touch, and he feels her pulse skittering under her skin as he kisses her inner wrist. She swallows, blushes, and continues.

My dear friend,

What have I done to merit such unwavering faith in me? If that sounds - it is not meant to be a criticism, truly, it is not. It is only that I find it difficult to believe. And yet if you will believe nothing else, believe this: believe that I am immensely honoured by your regard, by your defence of me, by your respect. Do you know how rare a thing it is for a lady to feel respected by a man? And you alone of all men respect me not only as a ruler but as a person - I can hardly fathom it. But I thank you nevertheless, and close now with my assurances that your respect of me is deeply reciprocated.

Sansa.

Her voice lulls him to a glimmering, hazy world halfway between wakefulness and sleep, and in that gloaming, amidst images - hopes, dreams, fragments, memories evoked by her writing, visions of the future - always he hears her voice as an anchor… when we rode out to meet that Dragon Queen, I don’t know why I was surprised that she was so small; I suppose with everything I had heard of her, tales of her ruthlessness, her impetuous nature, her tyranny, I thought she would have a more commanding presence. Instead the winter sky and high, frosty fells seemed to swallow her, to paint her into translucence… he laughs at that, admiring her turn of phrase - she has a talent for poetry, does the Queen in the North… I was afraid… but you held my hand and we faced her together, we faced her with our conclave and together we overcame her… I do not know what tomorrow holds, but I hold to our friendship, to standing side by side with you upon Winterfell’s cold ramparts watching the sunrise, to the faith of your conclave and mine. The hour grows late
and I must close; but I wish you only peaceful slumber, my lord. May you dream of the brighter days that are yet to come... and he does; he sees her with their young children upon the beach at Lannisport, patiently holding their tiny hands as they take their first tentative steps upon the sand, squealing with delight... he sees her teaching their daughters to dance in the snow in Winterfell’s godswood... he sees her smile, hears her bright laugh, and always, always her wonderful voice that is the joy of his heart... My dear lord husband-to-be, I would have no other man but you. Yours in anticipation, at dawn tomorrow,

Sansa, your wife.

She continues with her ardent, earnest, passionate letters, and he feels more keenly than ever his reverence of this bright, ethereal creature... I wish I could take your every wound upon myself and have you free of such a burden... You are my love, my life, my king... Ever thine, Sansa. The words send a thrill through him. Ever thine... ever thine... every moment in your presence is a gift I shall cherish and hold close to my heart all the days of my life... Marrying you is the only decision I have made in my life that has brought me happiness, true and unfettered and I love you. I adore you. And always that tender refrain, ever thine, ever thine...

There are laughing, gentle rebukes too, ones that make him think raffishly that he should indulge his grand, playful notions more often still: You are generous beyond belief, you ridiculous, impossible man - I did not need such extravagant jewels. You have gifted me with one of the most beautiful necklaces I have ever seen, Jaime. Never change. Please never change for I love the man that you are. I love you. I love you. I love you beyond the ending of the world.

Her resilience, her strength of character never ceases to astound him, and it is something he can only admire her wholeheartedly for. And yet in the midst of darkness and destruction and this wild, desperate hope for the freedom to control our own lives, there is a tender light, soft and intimate and only ours. You have given me a wedding night for true, and to thank you - there are no words that could ever be enough. Jaime, husband mine, friend, ally, husband, lover, king, love and defender of my life, know this absolute, unalienable truth: beyond the ending of the world I love you, I adore you, I want you, I need you. If I am not at your side my life is not life but mere existence. I cannot do this without you. I cannot do any of this without you. I have no desire to do this without you. What can I give but everything I have and everything I am to the man who melts me from winter to life and gives me the greatest happiness it is possible to give a mortal, human heart?

Her faith, her belief in him, in them, awes him. It grips his heart and makes him weep and face with courage the next day, and the next, and the next. Singing songs of old in this bitter cold as we traverse the high fells, our course south, riding close enough that our knees might touch and press against each other, the reassurance of life. All will be well. I believe that. Believe it too. There is yet heart and spirit enough left in us both to overcome whatever may come. I know it. I do. It is a fact of life. The dawn always comes. I love you unconditionally, beyond the ending of the world I love you. And all will be well.
Ever thine,

Sansa.

He is beyond thought and word and reason, beyond coherence, beyond any form of articulation save for that of his lips upon hers.

They spend the rest of the afternoon ensconced in their bedchamber, the doors locked against any disturbance, Jaime determined to honour the bearing of her soul to him by bearing his own once more to her, kissing every inch of her skin with the express intent of rendering her incoherent with incandescent pleasure. He takes his time, working her with a tender, wicked sort of ruthlessness, bringing her to her peak again and again and again with fingers and mouth and tongue and fingers once more, before covering her body with his and thrusting languidly, leisurely into her searing heat, swallowing every cry and moan with his kiss, revelling in every mewl and whimper and plea, tangling and moving in that golden, hazy light.

The rest of the world has long since fallen away beneath them, and she is the only true thing of his life, bright and ethereal, the winter dawn, achingly, devastatingly beautiful, fluid, her limbs tangling with his as they move together, sensuous sheets whispering upon their skin as she wraps herself around him.

She laughs as he traces light, teasing, drifting caresses upon the sides of her ribcage in the aftermath, squirming at the ticklish sensation, and he grins broadly, laughing with her, placing a tender kiss upon her belly where their small, fragile, precious unborn child grows, and when he looks up at his wife her sunset coloured eyes are wet with the bright sheen of tears.

They laugh, they revel, they are childlike in their playfulness, they are quiet, foreheads pressed together as they lie entangled, sated and spent. When they speak they speak only of love, not of fear and war.

With his touch he traces letters of devotion and ardent admiration into her skin. With his lips he
quicken her pulse at her sensitive inner wrist, and with his voice he renew his vows to her, and with his body he worships her. With his heart he loves her, and with his soul he reveres her.

It is only as dusk falls upon that glorious, secluded afternoon that the spell is broken and urgent knocks upon their barred bedchamber door and loud calls of their titles rouse them.

They dress hurriedly and the ride up to the top of the Seastair passes in tense silence, Jaime only half listening to Ser Addam’s strained report of the word they have finally received from Deep Den.

One hundred men held that high mountain pass, falling upon their enemies with a ferocity that stuns Jaime in the retelling. The thundering rumble of an avalanche of rocks to cut them off. A hail of arrows and their Dothraki opponents tumbling from the steep, narrow road down the rocky mountainside like toy soldiers swept to the floor by the petulant arm of an angry god. And then when Lord Lydden’s company had no arrows left they’d engaged for true, their backs to the barrage of rocks, and then had come the order to lock shields and to hold the line until the bitter end. An incremental march forwards, viciously stabbing the invaders through the slits formed for the purpose in the shield wall, each man in the first rank held securely in place, comforted by the support of his fellow in the second rank firmly gripping his shoulder, and so on until the back of the line. One pace, stab, two paces. The slow, incremental work of butchery upon the mountainside, watering the ashy ground with the blood of life. The slow, inexorable death of a thousand shallow, insignificant wounds, but still the line holds and marches on to fell the invaders, one by one. But for every two invaders slain, one of Lord Lydden’s company falls, and so their ranks are thinned, until remain only Lord Lydden and his standard bearer.

The standard is planted firmly into the ground, the badger snarling at the lion’s side, and Lord Lydden unbuckles his scabbard to let it fall there. He shares a glance with his standard bearer, hefts his shield and grasps his sword. The commander and his last man stand then back to back, and prepare to die. They look up at the sun, raise their weapons in salute, and they fight to the last drop of blood.

Silence falls, the carrion circle overhead, but the standard remains, banners flapping mournfully in the wind.

The Dragon Queen will reach Casterly Rock not at dawn, but by mid-morning the day after, Ser Addam tells them, and Jaime nods stoically.

“Ring the Great Bell.”
He is glad he and Sansa have already discussed with their conclave which envoys to send to carry their invitation to parley to the Dragon Queen, for in the face of the sight that greets their eyes he is uncertain cool heads would have prevailed. Being a parley envoy is a dangerous task; for it is not by any means unheard of for the messenger to be returned headless if such an invitation is not carefully worded enough. Send an envoy that is too important and you risk them being taken hostage - though with the Dragon Queen’s preference for incineration over imprisonment Jaime thinks sardonically that perhaps that is not something to take into consideration in this instance, though it is not actually a risk he or Sansa are willing to take - and send an envoy of too low standing and risk your enemy being offended by the gesture and equally unwilling to treat with you.

In the end he and his wife came up with the following solution which is not ideal, by any stretch of the imagination, but they had not been able to think of anything better. Only captains with capable seconds and no families had been allowed to volunteer for the task.

The Great Bell begins to toll, low and ominous, and Jaime looks once more inland, to the mountains and the horizon beyond, blurred by the darkening of the sky. As the King of the West stands upon the highest rampart of his ancient fortress, he tangles his fingers with those of his wife’s and they grasp each other’s hand tightly. As the stars begin to shine on this evening without a moon, the mountains of his heartlands shine as brightly as they do in the glare of the noon-tide sun.

In the deepening darkness, fire advances upon them, drawing their forms in raging orange and red and yellow, crackling and snapping and growing like a beast. Jaime watches numbly as the fire eats the mountains, racing down the slopes towards them, an infernal flood. The trees are screaming, the sound carrying over the valley, a high counterpoint to the deep, bone-shaking tolling of the bell. The trees scream and scream, sap boiling like blood, leaves crumbling to ash, branches withering, collapsing from within.

He is in Aerys’s throne room again. He is upon that battlefield, gazing at a second Field of Fire.

His wife moves closer to him in the horrid, garish light of the flames, and he steps behind her, the better to fully embrace her. She leans back against him, and he presses a kiss to her neck.

Her pulse is flying.

“And now, thus it begins,” she says mournfully.

Fortune at his side roars his defiance. Lady joins him, howling, pressing closely against the lion.
He is suddenly deeply grateful for the secluded afternoon with his Sansa.

He stares with mounting horror at the terrible advancing of the fires that consume greedily everything in their path, and his embrace of his wife tightens still further.

*But how will it end?*

And still the trees are screaming in the night.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Thoughts? Predictions?

Next time: the parley.
Chapter Summary

Something ancient and cold begins to crystallise in the Queen in the North’s blood, some shadow of dread lurking in a forgotten alcove of a crypt, lying in wait though for what she does not know.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Welcome to this next chapter - I apologise for the delay on it; it has turned out to be an absolute mammoth of an instalment which is why I've decided to split the chapter in two - so we don't get to the parley proper in this chapter, but I hope you all enjoy this nonetheless.

Thank you as always for your enthusiastic, encouraging comments, they make such a difference, and really are very inspiring to me. Thanks too go to northernsky/galaxiasincognita for the help with this chapter.

trigger warnings: angst and violence from the get-go, really.

enjoy x

See the end of the chapter for more notes
That night she dreams she finds herself atop a horse, galloping at the front of a Stark host, tens of thousands strong, direwolf banners racing in the wind, her hair plaited out of her face. They come upon a river one evening, and she sees the sun pale and weak and sinking into the earth behind the grey clouds. The river is fast-flowing as a torrent, a low roar in the back of her mind, and her horse prances along the muddy riverbank. Her heart is racing in her throat.

A man has dismounted his warhorse, furred cloak heavy around his shoulders, a longsword strapped to his back. A warmth settles in her chest, as familiar to her as Winterfell itself.

“Father,” she calls softly, dismounting, disconcerted to see that she wears breeches, and over them a skirt of mail that falls to the middle of her calves, but there is no time to contemplate the strangeness of her attire because the man turns towards her.

“Daughter,” he says. “Here we wait for the dragons.”

He is not Ned Stark. It is the only thought she can summon. He is not Ned Stark and yet he calls her daughter.

Though she has never met this man she knows his face, for it is carved into the statues that were for a long time her only friends in Winterfell, when it was yet controlled by the Boltons. She had paid for her filial piety with beatings, but that quiet rebellion is not one she has ever regretted.

The man standing in front of her, with dark hair and grey eyes and an expression carved with the cares of power and war and a hammered metal crown upon his brow, is none other than Torrhen Stark, her ancestor, she knows. Instinctively she knows. And there is a glint in his eyes that says he knows too who she is. She shivers in her cloak.

Before she can reply an unearthly shriek and then another, and another, tear the skies apart, and she looks up in instinctive horror as three swooping shapes force comets of fire between the clouds, tumbling and whirling and swooping, even as behind them uneasy fear runs through their soldiers’ veins like blood.

“Hold!” She calls, more firmly than she could have possibly ever imagined. “Men of the North, you will hold the line!”
“Daughter,” Torrhen Stark says, and she turns her attention to him at once. “I know they do not frighten you beyond the mustering of your courage, nor that of your brothers who aid as you do in my command of these banners.” He draws closer to cup her cheek with a rough palm, so paternal that her heart breaks with the ache of it. “I know you do not fear dragonfire, though you dislike violence, my gentle daughter.”

“Between foreign tyranny and freedom there is no choice at all. If that means I must fight then fight I will.” She does not like it at all, but it is a truth that has long since settled into the very marrow of her bones, never to be dislodged.

“Father!” They are interrupted by frantic shouts, and a young man of an age to her gallops madly up the line to where she and the King in the North stand. “Father! They have Brandon.”

A chill runs through her at the words. They have Brandon. Images fall through her mind of this boy - her ancestor, her brother - that she has no knowledge of, memories that are not hers and yet they are memories not unknown to her. Brandon hunched over sketches of walls and turrets, drawing frantically, Brandon laughing, Brandon fighting, Brandon dancing, Brandon upon that tower ledge -

Another swooping shadow, a scream, a flailing shape falling through the air, a thud, bone snapping against the rocky, muddy ground, and blood, blood to water the earth, and always the wheeling carrion cawing overhead. So long as she lives, she thinks, she will never forget the despair of that sound.

She hears another scream, and trembles. “We’ll have our revenge, Serena, don’t worry. Sister I promise you we’ll have our revenge.”

That is when she realises that the final scream was hers. “Father,” she gasps, pushing out of the younger Stark’s embrace. “Father.”

Torrhen Stark has aged centuries in the span of a single moment. “Bend the knee,” he murmurs.

“Father, we can fight them!”

“No, Rickard,” the King in the North replies sadly. “No, my son, we will bend the knee, for I cannot lose another child. Serena, Rickard, you will bend the knee.” The bleak command in his voice makes any other action impossible.
And thus, bitterly, solemnly, Torrhen Stark kneels, even as she shuffles forwards to take his hand. She does not know whose fingers shake more even as she feels the mud soak her knees.

The dragons shriek again and the sky goes black.

She is in Winterfell’s great hall, though the tapestries are not those she remembers, though a glance tells her they show the same legends Old Nan would recount. The hall is empty save for herself, Torrhen Stark and his eldest sons.

“Queen Rhaenys has brokered a marriage for you, daughter,” Torrhen Stark begins gravely.

Her blood freezes to ice. Not again, not againnotagainnotagain-

“And to whom would she wed me?”

“The Arryn - well, lord now,” Torrhen Stark replies with weary disgust.

Please gods no. Torrhen’s sons seem to be of a similar opinion, because they protest furiously.

She lifts her chin. “And if I do not wed him?”

“Then bending the knee means nothing as Winterfell burns, as the North entire burns and all shall be naught but death and ash.”

“You should have betrothed me to a Lannister or a Gardner whilst we had the chance; perhaps then an alliance of the resulting size would have made the Targaryens think twice,” she rejoins coldly.

“Yes, daughter, I should have,” Torrhen Stark replies. “But I thought it best to keep the blood of our House in the North. Will you forgive your sire’s pride?”

Her vision blackens again, and she is in the Eyrie. She is older now, and her young children clutch
at her skirts, even as her husband pleads for his life with his own younger brother, to no avail. She holds trembling hands over her son and daughter’s eyes so they do not have to watch their father be thrown from the Moon Door. That does not mean they do not hear him scream, and she looks once more for a way out, though she knows there is none. Her good-brother’s men surround her and her children at sword-point. She kneels to hug her small son and daughter to her. I love you. Mama loves you so much. Her good-brother advances, steel blade dripping the bright blood of her guardsmen, and she closes her eyes. Her children’s hearts beat frantically against her own. Mama loves you. Mama loves -

Sansa screams herself awake, Torrhen Stark’s voice ringing in her ears.

Daughter, do not repeat my mistakes and our House and Kingdoms will endure. Remember that, my daughter. Remember that, Sansa of House Stark, the Queen in the North.

“Sansa?” her husband’s voice is tight with concern. He sits up urgently, the bedclothes falling around his waist. “Sansa?”

She turns to weep convulsively into his shoulder, gasping, hiccuping for breath, her whole body shaking with terror, curling up into his embrace. My name is Sansa Stark, not Serena. I am Jaime Lannister’s wife, not Ronnel Arryn’s. She repeats the words again and again to herself, until she is no longer trembling, aided greatly by the litany of reassurance and affection Jaime repeats. Breathe, lovely one. Breathe. I have you. I have you. I love you.

Her hands clutch at Jaime’s shoulders and in his embrace at last she feels safe, his arms a shield around her, protecting her from the world she feels raw in alone.

“Do you want to talk about it, lovely one?” he offers eventually, drawing soothing circles with tender fingertips into her temples the way he knows she likes.

She shudders, and swallows her tears, and then at last begins to speak, her brows furrowed. “It was the strangest dream I have ever had, for I dreamt I was Torrhen’s daughter.” She shivers, curling more closely to her husband.

“Torrhen’s daughter?”

“I knew nothing of her - I did not even know her name, much less her age or what she looked like.” She shivers again, her voice trembling with the memory. “I know now that her name was Serena,
that she looked as I do, that she rode with her father to the Trident - “Jaime’s arms tighten around her, and she knows he has surmised where she is leading “- that she saw one of the Targaryens return her youngest brother who had been a parley envoy by carrying him in the claws of a dragon only to drop him and kill him at Serena’s feet.”

“It was a dream, Sansa,” he attempts to reassure her.

“No,” she disagrees quietly. “No, I know, somehow I know that just as I know I love you, I know that was no dream. That was a memory. I’ve no idea how, but it was a memory. Of that I am certain.”

“Did you see anything aside from that battlefield?” he asks tentatively, and it hurts her to see him so cautious with her. It is an incredible thing, of course - to say that a dream is no dream but a memory instead - and she realises that it might be difficult to believe, but it is true. In a time of White Walkers and dragons and direwolves and sigil-lions, surely memories masquerading as nightmares are not so inconceivable a notion? And so it hurts to see him forming his words so carefully, rolling them around in his mouth first as though to weigh them, to measure them, in an effort to prevent them from arguing. You have no need to be so careful with me, husband mine, she thinks. She is not quick to anger, nor does she ever wish to be angry with him. She trusts him entirely, and she knows he feels the same. Their relationship has from the very beginning been built upon honesty. But she also knows that it is a learned behaviour of his, arising from his position as the mediator of House Lannister, constantly attempting to appease each sibling’s hatred for the other.

When she replies her voice is entirely flat, entirely hollow and without inflection and her throat closes dryly the way it always does when she has spoken of her past torments. Her husband stiffens, wincing. “I know now that she was beloved of her father, that none of them wanted the marriage Rhaenyrs Targaryen brokered for her, that she lay with a man she despised, that she had two children by him, and that she was slain by her own good-brother along with her children. It will take me a long time to forget the sound of that blade slicing through the air and my - her - neck.”

“Fucking hells, lovely one,” he exclaims hoarsely, blanching.

She shivers with the mere memory of it. “But strangest of all was Torrhen himself. Somehow - I do not understand it at all - but somehow he knew who I was. He told me not to repeat his mistakes.”

His eyes glimmer in the gloom, his left hand gliding through her hair, lingering at her temples, and she sighs out a confession. “I have never been so afraid,” she murmurs. “We have so much to lose.” It terrifies her to the point of freezing her blood.
“It is not to late to surrender,” he replies, equally solemn, equally quiet.

“Do you wish to?” she frowns.

“No. I would rather die.” The ghosts she sees in his gaze as they speak of nightmares haunt him, she knows. Aerys the Mad in his throne room, and a second Field of Fire. Fire everywhere and always. Everywhere he looks there are flames.

“I do not wish to either, Jaime. I hold my freedom too highly for that.” She swallows. For the first time in her life she has love and happiness and the ability to make her own decisions about her own life as well as the possibility to do widespread good. She cannot give that up. She will not. “I am afraid. I am more afraid than I have ever been, that much is true, but I also have faith in you, in us, in our conclave and our alliance.”

“There is still the parley… and even if that fails we have significant stratagems in place.”

She curves her lips into a wan smile at that. “As I said, I have faith.”

Jaime sighs. “I do not know what to do or say to make it better, sweet wife.”

“Only hold me,” she murmurs into his skin, nuzzling at his shoulder, pressing a long, chaste kiss to his collarbone. “Only hold me, and never let me go.”

“Never,” he vows lowly, tangling them ever more closely together, and she shudders against her tears. He alone has turned touch into a comfort for her, into something primal and fundamental to her, and though she does not sleep, instead lying awake in his embrace, the pain of her dream-memory is no longer so visceral, so immediately chilling, because the warmth and security of her husband’s hold fights away the remembered horror. And yet as she stares hollowly at the drapes, exhausted beyond belief, in her ears dragons still shriek, and she is dazed by a throbbing headache, waiting in futile hope to succumb to the rest that eludes her.

It does give her one advantage, though, if she can truly call it that. It means it is far easier for her to shake Jaime awake when he begins to struggle and scream in his sleep sometime later in the night. She has never heard anything so terrible, so utterly devastating as his cries, and she shakes his shoulder forcefully in a desperate attempt to wake him. It is a night for tears, she realises with a grim, sinking heart.
He wakes with a despairing cry of her name, and awake his eyes are just as haunted as she
supposes hers are, and he holds her just as tightly, tangling his golden hand in her hair, the other
pressed searingly to the base of her spine, their hearts beating out a frantic tattoo, his tears wetting
her hair, and he gasps, nudging her nose, bringing his mouth to hers in a desperate, consuming kiss
in the darkness of the night. She reciprocates just as fiercely, just as ardently, and only when their
lungs protest the lack of air do they subside, sinking their heads wearily onto their pillows.

“Come here, husband mine,” she murmurs, the agony in his green eyes sickening her. “Come here,
Jaime,” she entreats him, and he follows meekly to rest his cheek upon her breast, the tension only
leaving his shaking frame when she begins to graze her fingers through his hair, applying pressure
to his scalp in the way she knows he enjoys, hoping to calm him, to soothe him.

She feels as he swallows painfully, and when he speaks his voice is hoarse with the spent rasp of
tears. “I was in Aerys’s throne room again. Only this time instead of watching your grandfather be
cooked alive I was - I was watching you and I was chained the way I was chained in that fucking
cage and Endever was just beyond my reach, mocking me and you were screaming and screaming
and screaming and the flames - ”

He trembles with rage and anguish and she takes his face between her hands, making him look at
her, making him focus on her, ruthlessly pushing down the bile that is rising in her throat. “I’m here,
Jaime. I’m here and I’m safe, I’m here.” She repeats the words again and again and he stares
at her uncomprehendingly and it makes her heart break and she doesn’t know what to do so she
begins to sing lullabies and ballads, staying away from the epics because she knows they will not
console him, not now, and so she sings and sings and sings until her voice almost gives out,
weeping with him, and when she kisses him he tastes of the ending of the world.

He shudders and holds her so ardently to him, so possessively that his grip is almost bruising, and
eventually his grief subsides as he manoeuvres himself beside her, and for a long time he is silent.
He is silent for so long that she half-thinks him asleep when he speaks again, a weary, gravelled
rasp. “I am searching for light but I cannot see it. I cannot grasp it. Only flames and death remain.
Where is the light?” he frowns into her hair. “Where is the light?” he whispers again, eviscerated.

She presses her palm to his warm skin, resting her hand above his heart. “Here is the light,” she
answers him quietly. His pulse stutters, and her gaze snaps to his.

“No,” he disagrees tenderly, “you are the light, you perfect creature.”

She quivers under the warm heat of his emerald gaze, dark and ardent and fierce. He is motionless
as she reaches out to brush his jaw with gentle fingertips. “There is light in you, you who are my
lord, my lover and my King. There is light in you.”

He sighs wearily, kissing her fingertips in response, the gaze in his eyes softening to something deeply moved. “When you think of - of the future, what do you see?”

She blinks at his sudden question, replying gently. “I don’t understand, Jaime.”

“I have not - ” he begins to explain, visibly searching for the words to articulate that which he feels. “I have not thought of our future at any great length because the thought that we might not have one at all makes it far too painful for me to contemplate.” His expression turns brittle. “I know that I want to be the best king that I can, that I wish to love you and be with you and make children with you, I want that desperately but I - what does our future look like?” His voice becomes hoarse, gravelled. “Give me hope. I beg of you, lovely one, give me hope again because I have none left.” He shudders and her heart aches so fiercely for him that she - “Not after that nightmare. It has taken all my hope like a leech gorged on blood.”

She knows repeating again their plans and military strength now will do nothing to console him, and so she breathes deeply, savouring the feel of his embrace, and she allows her mind to wander, to breathe life into all the half-form thoughts of what a court should be that she has had over the years. “We have a court here at the Rock and one at Winterfell,” she begins eventually, sounding out the words in her mouth as she speaks. The words taste of sunlight upon the water, a sparkling, glittering mirage. “You teach our children to swim in the sea here and I spend the afternoon drawing our family happily playing. Bards and harpists and all manner of musicians shall be drawn to our court because we will support their endeavours…”

“Knowledge shall not be confined to the Citadel,” Jaime murmurs, warming to the theme. “Perhaps if Lannisport had had an equivalent then my brother would not have felt so chained, so uncertain of his place in the world that he would end up betraying his own House. I tried, I tried so hard to protect him, to love him and it was not enough.” His voice quietens to something almost inaudible, tight with humiliation and shame. “I was not enough for him.”

“You are enough for me, Jaime, husband mine,” she replies ardently, fighting back a vicious surge of rage. “You are more than enough for me. You are everything,” she continues, shakily brushing her hands through his short hair, and he sighs at her touch, eyes shutting as he is soothed by her gentle caresses. “You are everything, you and our unborn child are everything to me.”

He brushes her cheek. “As you and our child are everything to me, lovely one.” Sansa sighs as his expression lightens to something more contemplative than melancholic. “A daughter with your smile, with your kind, gentle heart…”
“Daughters with your charm, you impossible man,” she says, fighting through the violent blush that heats her whole body. The look in his eyes, ardent and yearning and passionate, makes her wish they never had need to leave their bed, makes her wish she could stay thus embraced by him for ever. Shyly, she traces idle shapes upon his chest, upon the muscles of his shoulders and arms. “I want to give you as many children as I can,” she murmurs, before becoming playful once more. “There will come a day when you will spend more time answering your daughters’ questions about lace and ribbons than you do with your men, I warn you now.”

“I eagerly await the hour,” he laughs. “I could spend the rest of my days talking to our daughters about silks and velvets and I would do so happily because they would be ours, our children, created by our love. I will listen to the frequent displays of the musical talent our daughters will inherit from you, praise their childish - and quite frankly atrocious - first attempts at poetry, and I will watch most attentively as you teach them to dance.”

“Jaime!” She exclaims laughingly, hearing only too clearly the salacious intent behind the final part of his last sentence. “Ridiculous, impossible, insufferable man!”

“It shouldn’t come as a surprise, lovely one,” he replies easily. “I can’t take my eyes off you.” He says it the way he would state a fact - the hour of the day, what he ate for his evening meal - and it humbles her. He states it as though it is an absolute truth, and she searches desperately for some mirthful, witty response to lighten their conversation further, because she fears she is about to burst into loud, convulsive sobs - how can he love her so much?

“I know that,” she smirks. “And if I did not the dress I wore to the welcoming feast illustrated that point rather nicely.” Exhaustion loosens her tongue, it would seem, for she is rarely so bold as this.

For a response he rolls them over so she is lying upon her back, gazing up at him as he holds himself above her upon his elbows, looking at her with a heated, decadent, rakish expression in his darkening green eyes, and only then speaking in a gravelled drawl that makes her tremble. “Where did you think my interest in your clothing came from if not the way the cut of a neckline showed off most beautifully the swell of your soft, rounded breast? A bodice wrapping around a waist made to be held and embraced?” He punctuates his words with warm kisses to her skin and she giggles girlishly, mewling, dizzily arching her spine the better to press herself to his skilled lips. “I would argue that the only reason your gowns have so many buttons is to prolong the exquisite pleasure that is disrobing you,” he continues fiercely, taking a nipple between his teeth, and she laughs breathlessly, wrapping her legs around his waist in blatant invitation as he kisses her. He sinks into her in one, long, powerful thrust, and she loses herself to the wonder that is the intense, playful, consuming way he makes love to her.

Afterwards, when they are tangled languidly, sated and spent, when she is cuddled into his side and her heart is so filled with love for him that she bleeds with it, weeps with it, she inhales his scent, leather and sunlight and summer woods, and whispers into his shoulder. “I want to give you
sons too. Sons you will teach to ride and swing a sword, sons you will teach to be gallant king-knights, sons who will know as well as you how to serve the people we rule.” Only thinking about it makes her dizzy with longing; the images are exquisitely painful.

“Sons and daughters too who will never have to know the cruelty and horrors we have seen,” he replies, dragging his left hand idly through her long hair, and she bites her lip to stifle a moan. “Sons and daughters who will grow up happy and protected and encouraged, not disdained in their talents,” he hums, warming to his theme, and she wonders if he means to provoke her into a state of constant blushes as he draws more playfully, “we will be inundated with more betrothal offers for them than we will know what to do with if they have even a sliver of your beauty, of your tender kindness, of your generosity, of your cleverness -

Not to be outdone, she answers, “With your charm, you mean, my King?” and he chuckles, his cheekbones colouring. “I want that,” she says, swallowing past the lump in her throat, past the prick of tears in her eyes. “I want that. I have never wanted anything so much in the world as a family with you, my love.”

His hand tangles more firmly in her hair, warm and reassuring against the back of her neck. “I want that too,” he rasps, and when she looks at him his expression is open, vulnerable, desperation carved into the furrow of his brows. “I want that,” he repeats, his voice lowering to a growl, “and if anyone should dare deny me in that, well, they will not like the consequences.”

“It will not come to that,” she replies softly. His despair is beginning to frighten her.

“There is nothing certain.”

“But what is certain is this: we will have our peace and freedom in the end. We will have our children and they will not know the wars we have known,” she says, tracing away his frown with soothing fingertips. “And upon the mountainsides will grow once more groves of apricot and vine trees ripe with fruit… weavers shall debate with architects and glassmakers and carpenters.” Her heart soars to see his expression lighten from melancholy to wistful contemplation, something of a dreaming light in his eyes.

“And you shall have as many lemon cakes as you desire,” her husband smirks, once more fully turning his attention to her.

She laughs at that. “Our glasshouses are not yet enough.”
“If we combined Northron carpentry with Western glassmaking techniques, that might change rather rapidly, lovely one,” he replies seriously.

“You’ve been thinking about such a thing,” she realises. This is not a notion that has just at this very moment occurred to him, she can see that quite clearly.

“You adore lemon cakes, do you not?” he replies with something close to his habitual drawling tones.

Her breath hitches sharply in her throat. “Not nearly as much as I adore you, you ridiculous man,” she murmurs, fighting the sudden press of tears. She loves him. She loves him more than she has ever loved anyone else and every day she thinks she cannot possibly fall more in love with him and every day he will do something that means she is wrong in that opinion.

“I first thought of it when you mentioned that you had ordered the glasshouses rebuilt throughout the North,” he explains, his cheeks colouring slightly.

“It is a very good idea,” she replies, meaning every word. “And it occurs to me that wood and glass together might be useful in other things too, decorative pieces that would fetch high prices as well as more the mundane table, to give you an example, especially if we also combined the two with the metalwork your lands are also renowned for. Surely setting carved wood and glass and metal together cannot be so entirely different from setting jewels in metal?”

“My clever queen,” he breathes, eyes bright, and she ducks her head sheepishly. Sometimes the intensity of the way he gazes upon her is too much. He is on occasion too generous with his praise, she feels, shifting uncomfortably, stilling only when he cups her chin with a gentle grip, his fingers warm upon her skin. “It is the truth, lovely one.”

He gathers her more closely to him, so she is sprawled atop him as a blanket would be, her elbows resting on his shoulders and she blushes a sigh as he pulls the tangled bedclothes back over them both, teasingly drifting lingering caresses down her spine, before gazing lazily up at her, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth before his expression turns contemplative once more. “Sweet wife,” he rasps, “you have given me hope and faith enough for a thousand lifetimes.”

“I am glad your heart is lighter, husband mine.”

“Light enough to summon courage for what lies ahead, yes,” he admits, yawning.
“Sleep, Jaime,” she says softly. “Sleep.”

“You are more tired than I,” he rejoins. “I know you are, lovely one.”

Her gaze narrows, understanding instinctively that which he has not said. “Do not be afraid, my love. Not here, not in our bed,” she entreats him, tracing the line of his nose, his jaw with dainty, light fingertips, anything to reassure and soothe him. “Fire cannot reach us here. You are safe. I am safe in your arms. Fire cannot touch us here. Dragons cannot find us here, for we are beyond their reach.”

He does not speak in reply but she finds herself drowning suddenly in the expressive, luring green of his eyes that give her far too much, and drifts drowsily into exhausted slumber, lulled by the comfort of his embrace, the heat of his body, the protectiveness of his gaze, the ardent tenderness of his touch. *Sleep with me, husband mine,* she thinks, *Jaime…*

In the morning she is compelled to visit as she did in Winterfell the ordinary people of her husband’s realm. All of Lannisport has removed to the Rock, as well as the smallfolk from the outlying villages, so that their safety can be assured in the face of the Dragon Queen’s approach. Jaime agrees to the notion, and her spirits as she dresses with her habitual meticulous elegance are higher than she had anticipated after such a broken night. But she strangely feels almost joyous as she finishes her toast, placing a chaste kiss upon the King of the West’s cheek as she leaves their courtyard and apartments in a whisper of crimson skirts embroidered with frosty white thread in swirling shapes of winter cyclamen flowers, her husband’s chuckles at her enthusiasm following her like a memory half-forgotten and comforting.

Merchants, weavers, harp-makers and luthiers, farmers, farriers, fishermen, dockworkers, washerwomen, master glassmakers and metalworkers, seamstresses and housekeepers, cooks and butchers and soap-makers, kennel masters and shipwrights and maesters and midwives, men, women and children alike - all have been housed within the middle levels of Casterly Rock that are fitted for this purpose. There are enough accommodations for all to be situated respectably under Ser Daven and Ser Addam’s capable direction, aided by the fortress’s seneschal.
Those whose professions can be directly channelled for war have been set to work on aiding the soldiers for the Rock’s defence, and those whose professions cannot have been set to work much as they were in Lannisport for the comfort and livelihoods of the city’s inhabitants. It is unlike anything she has ever seen before: corridors in lieu of thoroughfares, apartments hewn from the rock in place of houses and buildings. But still the children dart about to run errands for their elders or play with their siblings. Linens are still strung up to dry, cooking fires are still banked, and the corridors ring with the loud shouts and exclamations of life in a city.

Sansa takes Brienne and Wynafryd Manderly with her, along with Fortune, who is quite content to pad silently along beside her, his golden mane occasionally brushing her shoulder. Such a thing is comforting to her. It almost feels as though Jaime is there with her instead of dealing again with military matters, protecting her himself as he trusts his sigil to do in his place. Lady performs a similar office for him, she knows.

Everywhere she steps there is some decorative carving upon the wall, some glinting, coloured mosaic, rippling with life in the golden, hazy light. She lets the children admire Fortune who bears with remarkable equanimity the indignity of young boys and girls grabbing curious handfuls of his mane or reaching out to touch his fur, enthralled by the colour. She speaks to the women about their needlework, about their children and menfolk, she speaks to the cooks about Westerlander recipes, taking her time, knowing from experience even in King’s Landing that a few well-chosen, kind words will go a long way. She reassures those afraid of battle, those afraid that their food stocks will not last long enough, and though she knows this is merely a beginning, she thinks it is a good beginning nonetheless.

Some of the children she meets at a luthier’s are shy at first, but she easily sinks to her knees so they can look her in the eye. “My name is Sansa Stark,” she says quietly, “and I am wife to your King Jaime Lannister. What are your names?”

“Lora,” one small girl responds, braver than the rest. “You’re very pretty.”

Sansa smiles at the earnest, wide-eyed compliment. “And you are very sweet, dear Lora.”

“The dragons are coming, aren’t they?” the girl asks, twisting her hands in her plain skirt.

“Yes, they are,” the Queen in the North replies gravely. “But you are safe here. Dragons can’t come here. The Rock and the soldiers will protect you.”
“Are you afraid?” one of the boys asks.

“I am,” she answers honestly, reaching out to take the children’s hands. “But I cannot be brave if I am not afraid.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Lora frowns, as the other children echo their agreement.

“Well,” Sansa explains gently, “when I am afraid I think of things that make me brave.”

“What things?” a second girl asks.

“I sing, or I think of the people I love,” she replies. The children’s faces light up at the thought of music.

“Could you sing for us?” One child suggests tentatively, and the cry is eagerly taken up by the others. “Oh, please, your Majesty! Please! Could you?”

“Only if you sing with me.” She smiles again at their enthusiasm. “What song would you like?”

This leads to some minutes of spirited debate between the five young children, but they eventually settle on a lullaby of the Seven which Sansa knows too, though she has not sung it in some years. She does not expect them to then scampers around the room plucking up instruments which are evidently their own from various strange corners of the workshop - a mandolin from behind a worktable, a lute sitting upon a stool, a viol left upon a step - drawing the attention of their working elders. But eventually all the children are settled and she is moved for the luthier himself, a thin man with hair greying at his temples and long musician’s fingers settles beside them with a viol and accompany the song.

She leads the children, her voice growing more assured, smiling and nodding her encouragement, and for the duration of the hymn she is entirely carefree, the music a lingering enchantment in her veins, and when it ends and silence falls her she blinks in astonishment to see she has drawn a crowd of townspeople staring at her and the children in rapt, moved fascination. She blinks again, blushing as they begin to applaud, and she rises to her feet, curtseying her acknowledgment of their praise. The girls attempting to mimic her movement brings aching, wistful warmth to her heart, and she leans down to address them again.
“Do you feel better now?”

The children nod bashfully, thanking her.

Her endeavour is interrupted by a raven brought to her by Ser Leonidas, and she pales when she sees the Stark seal stamped into the wax. With regret and reluctance she says her farewells to the common folk and makes the journey up to the Golden Hall where Jaime is discussing once more with his generals.

One look at her and he is at her side, taking her elbow in a gentle grip, guiding her to a seat apart from the men, where the two of them can speak without being overheard. He lowers himself onto the bench beside her, pressing his thigh against hers in reassurance. “Tell me, lovely one.”

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “I haven’t opened it yet. It’s from Winterfell, from Arya.”

He slips his hand into hers. He says the same thing she once said to him. “It will not read itself, sweet wife.”

She nods. “I know.”

And then, bracing herself, she breaks the seal and unfurls the parchment. Dear Sansa, it begins, and she smiles briefly to see her sister’s scratched letters inked upon the paper. Don’t worry, elder sister mine. This is not a letter to say that Winterfell has crumbled to rubble. I don’t know how to say this - other than - I never thought I would be in this position. I don’t want to marry. I never have wanted to marry, be the lady of the castle - that’s you, not me. Something ancient and cold begins to crystallise in the Queen in the North’s blood, some shadow of dread lurking in a forgotten alcove of a crypt, lying in wait though for what she does not know. The Dragon Queen sent a raven to Winterfell - for me. Well, Jon wrote it but it was her words, I know it. I don’t know what he’s thinking because the idea is stupid. I won’t do it. I’ll die before I do it. If they force me I’ll knife the boy they want me to marry on my wedding night. I won’t do it, Sansa. I refuse. I am your sister, not something to be sold off so the Dragon Queen’s pick for the Reach has leverage over you. I know you won’t let them. I can defend myself but I know you won’t let them.

“My dream…” Sansa swallows. “My dream - I - it wasn’t just a memory or a dream but I…” Her hands shake, the parchment falling through her fingers to fall to the floor, a dead leaf. They want to sell her sister. They want to sell the only sibling she has left like a horse. Jon and Daenerys Targaryen and her advisors want to sell Sansa’s little sister off in the same way that Sansa herself was sold to Ramsey Bolton - how dare they. How dare they. She aches with the rage prickling like frostbite in her blood, turns numb with it.
“Lovely one?”

“The Dragon Queen and her consort want my sister to marry an heir to the Reach of their choosing,” she replies, her shoulders stiff.

“They won’t get her,” Jaime replies immediately. “She’s your little sister. They’re mad to think you or Arya Stark would ever agree.” He lifts her hand to his lips, before continuing more softly, though no less vehemently. “And should it become necessary, the West will stand with the North in defence of your sister, lovely one. Only say the words.”

She trembles. His love, his support means far more to her - it means *everything* and she can only choke out a woefully inadequate “You honour me.”

He shakes his head. “I am your husband. I am your ally and your lover. It is no less than you are due.”

Sansa grits her teeth. “How many of the conclave are here now, in the Hall?”

“All of them.”

“Good,” she nods shortly, standing, sweeping over to the trestle tables laden with castle schematics and troop models and lords of the conclave debating with ardent animation. Jaime follows her swiftly. “Good morning, my lords,” she calls, and silence falls immediately.

“Your Majesty,” they reply, and she nods, acknowledging their salutes.

“Forgive me for interrupting, but I have just received some news that might be of interest to you all,” she commences evenly, clasping her hands together to hide the trembling of her fingers. Jaime notices, and comes to stand more closely to her, close enough that he can press his shoulder against hers in a silent show of support. “My sister Arya has written to me. The Dragon Queen is making a further play for the Reach upon her way here to Casterly Rock. Daenerys Targaryen,” she continues scornfully, “would marry my sister Arya, the Princess Stark, descendant of the Kings of Winter in a direct line unbroken for more than eight thousand years to a base-born boy she is championing for the Lordship of the Reach.”
“Pah!” Lord Glover exclaims.

“The insult…” Lord Royce glowers.

“It shows truly how little she knows about our ways and customs,” Ser Addam says.

“Either that, or it is a deliberate insult,” Sansa replies. “In any case it is ill-advised. It will only create more chaos.”

“The Dragon Queen is not known for her strategy,” Jaime quips grimly.

“But it does tell us more about the way Daenerys Targaryen is thinking,” Ser Daven points out. “At least, it tells us that she is ignoring whatever counsel she is getting, or not asking for counsel at all. By giving the Florent faction legitimacy she is laying the foundation for another civil war in those lands.”

Jaime pales at this. “It means she’s listening to Tyrion if she’s listening at all. This is exactly the kind of high stakes he enjoys playing for. Though she isn’t fully listening to him because the circumstances mean that he will have advised her either to marry the boy to the Lady Eleanor Tarly, or to let her go free, supporting the boy’s claim over hers and letting the two factions exhaust themselves in civil war.”

As Tywin Lannister did regarding the Boltons and the Iron Born, Sansa realises abruptly. But that is not what Daenerys Targaryen is doing. All she is doing is bringing chaos and fire and death, and Sansa feels the kneading, roiling nervousness in her stomach growing claws. If the Dragon Queen is only following Tyrion’s strategies far enough to make her unpredictable in the extreme, then Sansa is self-aware enough to understand that her and Jaime’s battle has only become more difficult.

“Has there been any word from the Hightower, Your Majesty?” Lord Mooton asks, desperate for news of his daughter and grandson, and Sansa’s heart sinks once more.

It is Ser Addam who replies. “There have been no ravens yet, Your Majesty, my Lord of Mooton.”
“My aunt the Lady Genna is impressed with you,” Jaime says to her as they sit down to their evening meal in their courtyard, and she smiles in pleased, bashful surprise. She had hoped that the elder lady would be favourably disposed towards her, but had not dared think that might be the case. “Word has already travelled through the Rock of your singing with those children earlier on.”

“I only wished to comfort them, to reassure them, somehow.”

“And you succeeded wonderfully, as I knew you would,” Jaime replies, grinning broadly, an ardent, earnest light in his eyes as he gazes upon her that makes her melt. With all the tumult of these past days and all the tumult to come that hangs over their heads, as threatening as an executioner’s blade, his smiles have been far too few, far too strained, except in the hazy, languid aftermath of their pleasurable bedsport, she thinks sadly. “Enchantress that you are.”

“Flatterer!” she laughs, enjoying the proud, playful look upon his face.

“No, lovely one, it is the absolute truth,” he drawls.

She chews a dainty mouthful of her succulently spiced poached fennel before replying more earnestly. “I have always thought that love is a surer route to loyalty than fear - but it is more than that,” she tries to explain, searching for the words, and she fears she is not being particularly eloquent, but her husband simply gifts her with is full, undivided attention. It is not just about wanting the loyalty of the people. She understands there is a pragmatic aspect to that duty, but that is not why she undertakes it. “I am your wife, I am the Queen in the North and it was my duty to see to the wellbeing and comfort of the townspeople.” She frowns as her mind turns to darker things. “And I know that as we both fear we shall find ourselves upon the defending side of a siege that just as you must lead the men in battle I must see to the good spirits of those who cannot fight in the field.”

“You’ve done it before, and more than once,” he replies.

“I enjoy it,” she says quietly. “Though the waiting is…” she shudders, swallowing. She has no words for the horror she had felt waiting for him to return in those awful moments after he’d been summoned by the tolling of the Great Bell up to the Seastair for the first time. She’d been frozen in
place, gazing at Fortune with an aching heart, waiting for death, waiting for the end. It had been a thousand times more horrible than the night the Blackwater burned, a thousand times more horrible than the Night King’s attack upon Winterfell.

“I know,” he answers gently, “I know, lovely one.”

“I know the waiting is unavoidable.”

“I wish I could spare you that, Sansa,” he sighs. “But I would be lying to you if I said I could. I went back to the top of the Seastair this morning. I wanted to see how close the fires had travelled. I wanted to see if they were burning still, and they were. From the top of the ramparts I could the sound of their encampment, the horses, the tents being raised, the dragons tumbling through the clouds, and beyond, beyond only fire and ash upon the mountainsides, the green trees now skeletons, black scratches upon the sky…” He averts his eyes momentarily, clenching his jaw and she reaches impulsively for his hand, to bring it to her lips, pressing lingering kisses to his knuckles, his fingertips, his palm, sighing, her eyes fluttering shut as he moves to cup her cheek in response. “Ah, lovely one.”

“But the messengers returned unscathed,” she reminds him, squeezing her fingers.

It is the only thing that means she still nurtures some small kindling hope that war might yet be averted; that the messengers had returned to the safety of Casterly Rock, horses clattering tiredly upon the flagstones, grim-faced and dusty from the road, with the news that the parley had been agreed too. They will meet the Dragon Queen and her faction on the morrow in the Lannisport Guildhall which has been fitted specially these past days for the purpose.

“The messengers returned, that is true,” he agrees slowly, wearily.

“Jaime, if this is our last night, then - ”

She doesn’t know who reaches for the other first, but all of a sudden his lips are upon hers in a harsh, desperate kiss, hands tangled in hair, the table and food forgotten as he carries her to their bed.
Dawn comes far too soon for her liking. She groans her sleepy reluctance as Jaime shifts next to her, sitting up and throwing the covers from his body. “I don’t want to leave this bed,” she murmurs into her pillow. She is quite content here, the bedclothes draped over her body, the ends caught in tightly curled fists, the warmth and scent of her husband’s body beside hers far too much of a comfort for her to willingly give him up. She leans her cheek into the caress he gives her, sighing, her eyes closing, enjoying the warmth of his palm upon her cheek.

“I know, lovely one,” he replies. “But we have no choice.” He holds out his hand to her, and she takes it instinctively, curling her fingers around his, his touch sending a pleasurable shiver down her spine. His gesture goes some way to distracting her from the leaden fear gnawing like a wild beast at her stomach and she grits her teeth, nodding her determination.

They perform their ablutions and dress and eat in a heavy silence, and she almost bursts into tears when she sees that her husband forgoes his habitual surcoat over his linen shirt, instead choosing to wear the crimson embroidered doublet she made as one of her wedding gifts to him. With a solemn look upon his face he places his crimson sash over one shoulder so it cuts across his body on the diagonal, which she helps him with, and fastened in place with Endever’s sword belt. Then the golden disk chain of office, and his crown he sets upon his brow.

“Well,” he says, holding out his arms for her inspection, “how does it look?”

She swallows, her mouth dry, her blood pounding in her ears. She wants to drag him back to bed, she wants to swoon. “You are magnificent, my King.”

His ears redden in response before he collects himself, his voice gravelled and velvet with heat. “But you are a vision to render speechless with wonder the gods themselves, sweet wife,” he replies, and she blushes, violently.

She has chosen her gown with particular care; that much is true. Midnight velvet the colour of the deepest part of the sea at dusk, the deepest, most dangerous parts of the fast-running, white-foaming rivers of her mother’s House, cut in a straight horizontal line from collarbone to collarbone to reveal her white shoulders, but not nearly so revealing a neckline as her white feast gown. A stiff bodice highlights her slim waist, whilst the skirts are cut with a bronze silk underskirt so she can ride in the garment with ease. She has embroidered hardy winter cyclamen flowers in the silver thread of House Stark, in the gold of House Lannister, and the bronze of the First Men and the Kings of Winter and the high, cold falcons of the Eyrie. His earnest, gallant, ardent compliment soothes the bitter taste in her mouth, for she has not entirely chosen this gown for her husband’s
admiration. There is more than an element of pageantry to this riding gown of hers; but that is not the reason for the bile she thinks she might choke upon rising in her throat. She has no wish to be as Margaery and Cersei were, whose gowns went beyond a display of wealth or House. Their gowns had been cut to allure and seduce, to draw the gaze of men and reduce them to panting puppies, led by the thought of the scrap of flesh between a woman’s legs. The thought of doing such a thing makes her skin crawl, makes her feel as though she is bathed in slime as she felt she was every time Littlefinger thrust his tongue into her mouth with a groan of little Cat, Cat, Cat, Cat - the same as when Joffrey would leer at her in her childish dresses and call her a whore, the same as when Tyrion would turn on her his woeful gaze, say she was too young and yet desire her still - it makes her feel sick to her stomach. And so she is afraid, afraid of men leering at her and seeing something in the manner of her dress that is not there. Her clothes are political statements, not sexual weapons; and yet she is afraid that the men who see in her only a broodmare will leer at her and make her as uncomfortable as she was in Winterfell’s Great Hall stripped naked.

“You are trembling, sweet wife,” her husband says, drawing her tenderly to him, smoothing her cheekbone with his thumb and she leans into the light touch.

“I am afraid,” she confesses quietly. “I am so afraid, and I hate that I am afraid. I am afraid to be once more in the presence of men who will leer at me, who will think it their right when it is not to look at me, to imagine they are undressing me and forcing themselves on me and I - ”

“Breathe, lovely one, breathe,” he says, rubbing her back, holding her more closely to him. “If a single man looks at you in a way you do not like they will be made to learn some manners, and if they do not then they will know my displeasure.”

“How?” she croaks, wanting desperately to believe him.

“Because I will make them,” the King of the West her husband replies fiercely. “Me, the Lionsguard, the Wolfsguard, the conclave, Fortune and Lady - we will enforce your wishes on the matter, that I vow to you. Whatever our endeavours, Sansa. Whatever our endeavours, always.”

“I love you,” she chokes out, shaking, unable to explain precisely the depth of reassurance he provides. “I love you, I adore you beyond the ending of the world,” she continues, forcing back tears, “but I am so afraid, Jaime, and I could never forgive myself if - if - something happened.” She hardly dares contemplate the notion. “If they hurt you, my King - ”

“Nothing will happen to me, lovely one,” he replies tenderly, in that rich drawl she loves so much, and still she cannot shake the vicious clawing tension tearing her body apart.
It hurts to breathe her bodice is so tight. “But you are not wearing armour!” They yet needs must wear their ceremonial cloaks, the weather being still coldly unforgiving, though every day the chill outside recedes a little. The heavy weight of them reassures her but little because the thick, fur-lined material will provide them both with only some measure of protection against a possible assassination attempt, though the thought alone of Jaime being in the presence of the Dragon Queen without armour is enough to make her blood run cold with terror. She remembers all too clearly her fears of her husband taking a sword to the neck or the chest when he ascended the Seastair - it is not that she does not have faith in her husband’s prowess in battle, because she does have entire and full confidence in him. What strikes fear into her heart is that she does not trust Daenerys Targaryen.

There is, however, no way around it. It is the ancient tradition of a full parley that those negotiating wear neither armour nor conceal their weapons. One man, one blade, clearly visible, with an agreed number of guards, is permitted by convention.

“Nor will be anyone else except the guards,” he reminds her quietly. “We will have the conclave with us as well; we will be well protected, sweet wife, and Endever and I stand between you and the rest of the world, always.”

“I know,” she exhales. “I know.” She presses her nose into his cloak, inhaling his scent, revelling in how soothing she finds the leather and sunlight aroma, and her visceral horror little by little fades.

He places a chaste, close-lipped kiss to her neck and she melts in his arms, sighing, her heart aching with his affection, her eyes fluttering shut, her hands holding his head to her as he places a line of tender kisses up the column of her neck, sweeping her jawline. “I love you, Sansa,” he says, nudging her nose with his.

She kisses him, ardently, enthusiastically, deeply and at great length, enjoying the way he growls into her mouth, reciprocating her every caress. She kisses him, dizzy and gasping with longing, swaying, his arms around her the only thing keeping her upright. She kisses him until her burning chest forces her to break it to breathe. When she pulls away his eyes are dark, his shoulders rising and falling quickly, and they both collect themselves with difficulty.

He leans his forehead against hers, cupping her cheeks. “Courage, lovely one,” he breathes. “Courage.”

She kisses him again in response, sweetly, chastely. “I love you.”
They stay thus for a time tightly embraced, their foreheads pressed together, inhaling and exhaling together, eyes closed, seeking peace, seeking calm, finding solace and comfort in the presence and the touch of the other, grasping their resolve.

He lifts her hands to his lips, before stepping back with great reluctance, his expression melancholy with regret. “It is time, I fear.”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Comments? Predictions?
SANSA STARK XIII

Chapter Summary

It cannot end like this. It cannot.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Welcome to this chapter. You may have noticed we're sticking with the Sansa POV for this instalment, and that's because originally this chapter and the previous one were meant to be one single chapter, but I had to split it for reasons of length.

This is the much anticipated parley chapter - at last! - and I've been planning it for over a year, even close to a year and a half by now (cripes!) so I can't fully express how exciting it is to finally get to this. This chapter, its sequel, and one other upcoming chapter are the ones I've been calling the 'Big Three' in my head.

I have already started writing the next chapter, so the wait should not be too long. For reasons that will become obvious at the end of this chapter, I have been reluctant to have too long a gap between posting this chapter and the next, which is partially why this chapter has been so long in coming, as I wanted to take steps to mitigate that.

My thanks as always for the help with this from galaxiasincognita/northern sky - this chapter is particularly fiddly, and I could not have untangled all the various threads without your help.

A word of warning though: this chapter earns the warning tags, it really does. It's very very very angsty and very very violent.

I can't wait to see what you guys think of this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWENTY-FIVE
SANSA STARK

Lannisport is eerily silent as they ride through it. It is strange to her that a city which only days ago was so full of life should now be as hushed as the crypts of Winterfell, their horses’ hooves echoing ominously upon the flagstones as they canter to the parley in full regalia, their sigils at their sides, their Lion and Wolfsguard behind them, and selected lords of the conclave, including her husband’s uncle Lord Gerion, bringing up the rear, pennants flapping in the wind. The townspeople have only taken with them to the safety of Casterly Rock what was most necessary, personal effects and tools of their trade, as well as easily transported objects of greater value, and so Sansa is met with the incongruous sight of washing lines still hung with linen above an alleyway, but the stones are still. Children do not play upon the doorsteps; merchants are not hard at work receiving shipments, artisans and sculptors are not engaged upon their commissions, chimneys are devoid of puffs of smoke floating lazily up into the sky.

High above them two dragons tumble through the clouds, circling like vultures eager for carrion, dark specks in the sky, their screeches more grating upon the ears than the eagle’s call. She waits for them to fold their wings and drop like stones down a well, predators plummeting towards unwary prey, but they only hover, high and ominous, circling again and again, waiting, though waiting for what she fears to discover.

Ser Leonidas and Brienne guide them through the silent streets carefully to make sure they do not stumble into an avenue set with the multiplicity of hidden and deadly traps devised by the city garrison’s engineers, and so it is a winding, lengthy route they take. There is time enough as a result for nerves to strangle her throat, and her horse sidles and snorts in consequence, tossing his proud head, and she has to concentrate to coax him back under her control with kind, soft words and gentle hands upon his neck until he snuffles, subsiding, one ear pricked forward, the other twitching back towards her, listening alertly, and his energetic gait smooth and fluid once more as they canter through narrow, twisting streets, houses five, six, seven ancient stone storeys rising above them, casting their path into shadow.
As the Guildhall comes into view at the end of a long avenue near the harbour-front, framed by a colonnade of cypress trees burned to skeletal fingers, grim and accusing, Sansa exchanges a nervous glance with her husband, before determinedly gritting her teeth, lifting her chin and straightening her shoulders. Jaime had not wanted the Dragon Queen’s faction anywhere near the Rock itself, much less the Golden Hall, which would have been the only other place suitable for a formal parley such as this one, and at the time she had understood and agreed with his reasoning entirely, but she cannot stop the queasiness roiling in her stomach at the thought that at last this negotiation is upon them. The King of the West returns her gaze, and behind the arrogant confidence she reads in the tense lines of his frame his apprehension, and she shivers, longing to take him in her embrace and run her hands through his golden hair and comfort him, longing fiercely, desperately that they had remained safely ensconced beneath the luxurious bedclothes of their bed in their chambers in the fortress high above them.

But she is a Queen and he a King, and thus they have not that freedom; for their duty to their peoples must come first, does come first, does indeed always come first; that is what it means to rule, that is the sacrifice to be made, and she makes it willingly, though not without awareness of what precisely it is that she is sacrificing.

She has so much more to lose now. So much more that it will absolutely destroy her to lose, and the Guildhall is a suitably imposing edifice for the affair. Dwarfling the houses around it, it is entirely built of white marble with golden veins glittering like ichor in the sun, and great wooden doors at least seven times the height of a man, she estimates. The facade is greatly embellished with giant lion reliefs, roaring their defiance, curled protectively around their young, feasting upon the entrails of men and dragons and kraken and all manner of beasts alike. The violence of the scene should make her shiver; instead it reminds her how safe she feels to have her alliance with the King of the West.

At their approach soldiers from the Lannisport garrison salute them as they bring their horses to a halt some ten horse-strides before the entrance. Fortune and Lady slip away from their company to pad silently to one of the side doors, into which they quickly and soundlessly disappear.

“Are they there yet?” Jaime asks harshly, and upon receiving an answer in the affirmative, continues with the swift command, “Open the doors.” As the carved wooden doors open on silent, well-oiled hinges, he reaches for her hand which she gives to him instinctively, briefly tangling their fingers before letting go and he urges his white destrier back into a canter.
Squeezing her heels into her own horse’s flanks, she follows her husband, and they sweep into the Guildhall side by side, cantering almost to the centre of the hall where the tables are, the narrowed eyes of their enemies upon them all the while, grim and black like a necklace of dead birds about their necks. More men of the garrison take their horses’ bridles to hold them still whilst they dismount. She waits until Jaime has easily vaulted from his saddle to the ground for him to assist her before dismounting herself. She takes comfort and strength from the way he lifts her easily to the ground, even one-handed. She enjoys the way such a motion pulls her close to him, the way she must rest her hands on his shoulders, the way she can easily feel the strength and breadth of his handsome frame that makes her feel safe, always so well protected, beneath her palms. She takes comfort from this easy gallantry that is his habitual, preferred way of displaying his respect and love and admiration for her, this rhythm of eloquent speech through gesture and touch and look that comes to them both as instinctively as each live-giving breath into their lungs.

Even now, in this place of uncertainty and danger, once look at her husband, one gaze at him, and her heart swells. The stones of the Guildhall crumble to dust and rubble around them. The ground falls away beneath their feet unnoticed. There are no dragons here, no fire, no death, no ash, no burning, no screaming. One glance at his green eyes, and there is only him, his expression turning tender and private as his own eyes drink their fill, scanning over her form, heated and earnest and ardent.

“You have more than fourteen guards,” Daenerys Targaryen bites out from where she sits in the shadow of a colonnade, and the moment is broken. Sansa regretfully tears her gaze from the King of the West and sees Tyrion and Jon either side of the Dragon Queen, her Dothraki and Unsullied behind her.

Sansa does not know where to look; at the splendid decorations, all gold-veined marble, and thus too heavy to be carted off easily by invaders, or at those she must soon negotiate with, so she settles with making her way, quietly hand in hand with Jaime, revelling in the gentle strength of his grip, revelling in the tender way he cradles her palm in his, towards the two chairs that are draped with banners depicting a roaring lion and a snarling direwolf respectively.

“No, we do not,” Sansa disagrees easily, her voice carrying like a bell over water, commanding and clear though not overly loud. “The lords of mine and my husband’s conclave are not guards.”
Her cousin’s wince at her words is visible even to her, and her throat seizes. If she has noticed then she is not the only one to have done so, and indeed it is not until Daenerys Targaryen possessively and smugly places her hand upon her nephew’s forearm that Jon stops staring at Sansa, stops raking her form with furious, darkly possessive eyes. Bile rises in her throat, and she looks away, feeling soiled, angrily fighting the rise in her breast of that searing past humiliation at his hands. *You made your bed, cousin,* she thinks acidly. *Now you needs must lie in it, even if it is not to your particular liking.*

“Semantics!” Tyrion exclaims. “And will your horses remain here though ours have not?”

“No, indeed they shall not,” she rebuts evenly, not allowing herself to be drawn into a more combative confrontation, and smiling briefly at Jaime who helps her into her seat, before turning her attention back to the Dragon Queen’s Lord Hand. She gestures for the horses to be led outside once more, beyond the great entrance doors, though they remain open. She and Jaime are not about to shut themselves into a room with a person so unpredictable and impulsive as the silver-haired tyrant opposite them, and she raises her voice calmly to be heard over the clatter of hooves upon stone. “The parley invitation was quite clear; it is no fault of mine that your Daenerys Targaryen does not seem to have been able to rally the Crownlanders beyond mere submission, for example.”

“Their lands are depleted after Cersei Lannister and Stannis Baratheon’s constant fighting for a throne they had no right to,” the Dragon Queen snaps.

Sansa thinks the notion of birthright to the Iron Throne is more debatable in both of those cases than the Targaryen seems to believe, but she knows it will serve no purpose except to aggravate for her to point this out. She schools herself to patience, slipping once more the familiar mantle of courtesy over her shoulders, steel under bright cloth. This gambit is a risk; of course it is a risk, of course she is nervous, but she knows she cannot let the terror strangling her chest prevent her from seeing this through. By the Old Gods she is a Stark and a Tully by birth, wedded to a Lannister, wife of the Kingslayer, wife of the man who is the bane of dragons, and though she stands upon the precipice of war, she will not let such a thing as fear shatter a chance for a settlement.

“Of course they are,” Sansa smiles blandly, eyes cold, as Jaime settles beside her, languid, seemingly at ease, sprawled upon his chair, leaning back against the wood, his legs nonchalantly extended. Only his hand tightly clenched around the elaborately carved armrest indicates any differently.
Looking at Daenerys Targaryen opposite her, Sansa holds little hope to the success of their endeavour. The silver haired woman is glaring violet daggers at them, her mouth a snarled, petulant slash upon white skin.

Nevertheless, Sansa raises her eyebrows and speaks calmly. “Bread and salt?” She gestures to her husband’s uncle the Lord Gerion, and he steps out from the grouped conclave, having collected from a discretely placed table in the corner a platter upon which stand the goblets and bowls of salt and oil and bread they will use.

“No,” the Dragon Queen agrees haughtily.

“We accept your hospitality,” Tyrion and Jon reply, bowing their heads to give the traditional assent.

Tyrion Lannister raises his head, jaw going slack with surprise. “Uncle? Uncle Gerion?” He stands, expression twisted with agitation, and Sansa languidly turns her attention to the elder Lannister, curious, willing to let this strange, unexpected reunion play out. Beside her Jaime shifts in his seat but remains silent, and she knows he shares her opinion. Their place in this altercation is to observe, impassively.

“Tyrion - what - ” the Dragon Queen begins, and for the first time Sansa sees with curious, well-hidden consternation youth, confused and bewildered, upon her enemy’s otherworldly countenance. Sansa’s fingers tighten on her armrests, and Jaime at her side ignores with difficulty the impulse to movement.

“I thought you dead,” the younger man persists, ignoring his Queen to her displeasure, calmed only by Jon’s quick distraction of clutching her silver scaled sleeve. “You were dead, lost beyond the sea.”
The Lord Gerion shrugs coldly in response. “Then I am more difficult to kill than you have assumed.”

“Uncle, I - ”

“Uncle!” The Lord Gerion scoffs. “Uncle! That you dare call me uncle after shooting your own father - my eldest brother - tells me all I need know of the man you have become.” The adventurer turns dismissively back to his task, but Sansa can see from the tense set of his shoulders that he is holding himself to restraint with great difficulty, and so speaks in turn, sensing that they are far too close to peril for her comfort.

“My Lords!” she calls, “shall we return to our sacred custom?”

Thus subdued both men resume their seats, glowering fiercely, the fires in their flashing eyes spewing hatred, and Sansa waves her hand for the platter of bread and salt and olive oil they will use first as hosts. Efficiently, she breaks the bread, dipping a small piece first lightly into the oil before sprinkling it with a pinch of salt, as Jaime at her side does the same. And as they did the night of the feast he lifts his hand to her lips for her to take the first bite, and the tender affection in his expression is a balm to her. She reciprocates, lifting her hand so he can partake, and after he has swallowed he catches her slim wrist in his left hand, turning her palm to press a gallant kiss to the inside of her wrist, and she ducks her head to hide her blush from their audience, looking at him with glimmering eyes.

“There is no need to pretend, Jaime, Sansa,” Tyrion interjects, and it is with difficulty that she schools the flare of annoyance she feels into bland indifference.

“Pretend?” she arches an eyebrow.
“We know your marriage was political,” the Dragon Queen elaborates airily, looking for all the world like a young child, smug with the victory of smashing a toy castle built of little wooden blocks to the ground like rocks in a landslide, “forged for the sole purpose of cementing an alliance in uncertain times, but there is no need to pretend now, of course.”

And who has told Daenerys Targaryen that, Sansa wonders? Her Lord Hand, or her Lord Consort? Or both, even? At to what purpose? Jon cannot seriously imagine Sansa would - but one look at the man who betrayed her and she realises that he can indeed imagine such a thing. More than imagining, she sees her cousin actively desires it; Jaime’s death, and Sansa in his bed. If Jon can truly believe that of her, that she would abandon Jaime, her husband, the man she loves, the King she is allied with, her true friend, then he does not know her at all. Your love, cousin, is nothing more than poison, selfish, entirely uncaring and dismissive of my own wishes.

She forces herself to stillness, even as a shudder ripples through her frame, because as she turns her head away from Jon she catches the resentment in the countenance of the Dragon Queen’s Hand and it makes her want to flay herself, to peel away her skin, to throw the bloody ribbons of flesh at him and escape, throwing at him like a scorpion bolt the words have me then, take me then, but this paltry skin of mine is all you shall have, not my body, not my mind and not ever my heart.

Tyrion Lannister resents his elder brother, that has been clear enough to her for some time. Jealous that Jaime got the castle, the crown and the wife. But she remembers Littlefinger telling her of the violence of Shae’s death - how she had wept, for days and days in her cold stone chamber in a secluded part of the Eyrie (another prison) when she’d heard, mourning her only true friend in King’s Landing - Sansa remembers his dismissal of the boorish King Robert beating Cersei which Sansa knows Jaime though he does not speak of it has never forgiven his younger brother for - and then she remembers her own wedding night to the youngest of Tywin Lannister’s children. She remembers her fear, the way Tyrion had looked at her, too young, still a child but that had not stopped his desire for her, running greedy hands all over her even though she’d been hysterical with terror and not wanting him, knowing he would have to rape her, him knowing it was wrong and wanting to do it anyway until only his drunkenness had saved her even as it lured him into unconsciousness, and she considers suddenly - yes, he might well be vindictive enough certainly to want Jaime dead, vindictive enough to want her in his bed unwilling -

“A pretence, is it?” Jaime bites out viciously, distracting her from her spiralling thoughts, and she inhales shakily. “And according to whom is mine and the Queen in the North’s marriage a
It is Jon who answers, and she knows her cousin well enough to see the sullen bitterness behind his blank eyes. “It is obvious.” Her nostrils flare. You are playing with fire, you fool! He ignores her as he has ignored her in so many other things, and she feels the pain of it still, a dull ache of a scar not yet fully healed.

She laces her hand with her husband’s, pointedly, taking no notice of her cousin’s pleading, possessive gaze. You have no right, Jon. No right to look at me thus, and no right to my person. Jaime raises an eyebrow in question, asking her silently if she wishes for him to redirect her cousin’s attention away from her bodice. She shakes her head minutely. Now is not the time, as sickened as it makes her feel, now is not the time, though she knows her husband will not forget this incident.

She has a choice, she realises. She can either imprison her mind falling from one excruciating hypothesis to another, or she can take charge of the meeting and shape it in the way she wants. “You may choose to believe as you like, of course. Now, shall we get on with this?” She stands, not waiting for a reply, choosing to ignore the ludicrous suggestion that she and Jaime are pretending, and nimbly preparing another piece of the bread, before holding it out in front of her. “Daenerys Targaryen,” she asks, “do you accept our hospitality?”

The Dragon Queen steps forward quickly, hand extended to take the offered token, but Sansa does not move, only raising an eyebrow, remaining motionless as the silence lengthens. Behind her the conclave begins to stir uneasily, and Sansa bides her time until her counterpart’s confusion is readily apparent, and the silence has become so awkward as to be excruciating.

“You have to say the words,” Sansa points out eventually.

“What words?”
“The customary words, of course,” she answers evenly. “For the full, formal parley ritual, there are ancient words to be said when bread and salt is given. Surely you know this? You do claim the Iron Throne, after all. I should have thought your councillors would have advised you on the topic.” Beneath her bland courtesy she bites down upon the vicious satisfaction she feels. She had been correct in her logic. Daenerys Targaryen has indeed no knowledge of the custom, and behind her the conclave stir once more.

“Perhaps the Lord Hand may guide the Dragon Queen in this?” Jaime drawls acidly, and his suggestion is seized upon with alacrity. Sansa watches carefully her opponent’s expression as she says the words. Does she understand the solemn oath the words bind her to? Sansa hopes that is the case, but a dark, grim part of her fears that the Dragon Queen does not.

The white marble rings loudly with the weight of the ritual, beginning as a low, distant rumble, swelling to thunder. After the guest receives the bread and salt with the phrase I am grateful for your hospitality, something she sees is visibly challenging for the Targaryen, after the ritual is repeated with Tyrion and Jon both, it is Sansa and Jaime’s turn to speak the ancient, sacred rite. She begins, Jaime continues, and the custom flows from them, a song unbroken, one solemn pledge, given truly, given in good faith.

Renewed shall be faith that was broken

From war new friendship shall spring

Restored shall be old trust forsaken

Tyrion and Jon lead the response, which is merely a repeat of Sansa and Jaime’s words, and the Dragon Queen rapidly follows.

There is something profound, something deeply moving about the phrases she speaks together with the King of the West, intoning them as solemnly, as seriously as she made her wedding vows to him. Eaten shall be bread here broken with gold of white anointed. Reforged shall be bonds perpetual of friend and ally not foe. The rolling rhythm of the words upon her tongue are a song, repeated, hovering, lingering in the air as though suspended, caught in a web of golden light, and
she feels the heavy weight of all those men and women who have said the words for thousands of years before them, and all of those who will speak those self-same words long after her and Jaime are buried.

And then the conclave lends their voices in support, and Sansa and Jaime make their promise of guest-right, of guest-friendship, their promise of the sincerity of this parley, the words strong and clear as the tolling of Casterly Rock’s great bell. “Offered shall be shelter and comfort,” Sansa continues, her chin held high, her voice stoic, ardent in her pronouncement of the rite. “Given shall be sustenance and friendship, wine potent and company merry, beds soft and chambers fine, songs joyous and exchange prolonged. Offered shall be all of this, gratefully and graciously received.”

We mark these bonds

And damned be he or she that shalt

This covenant disdain

The Dragon Queen’s eyes narrow at the last part of the ritual, and Sansa couches her rebuke in courteous tones that belie the ice of her words. “I am a Stark of Winterfell in the North. The North holds guest-right sacred, and the North remembers, as House Frey found out, to their ruin. Did you really expect anything different from me?”

Sansa pauses to let her words sink in, before continuing smoothly, ignoring the Dragon Queen and her faction’s shock at the subject being brought up in such a fashion. “I propose we now proceed in the following manner. The King of the West and I have drafted a treaty for you to examine. The particulars you will find cannot be negotiated, and as a gesture of good faith you will find it already signed by the King of the West my husband and myself. What is not in the treaty may however, be negotiated, though I believe you and your advisors will find our terms fair,” she warns severely, motioning for Wynafryd to bring forward the scroll, and the Dragon Queen unfurls it, skepticism written all over her beautiful, terrible face.

“And why should I agree to this? Why should I sign this?” Daenerys Targaryen retorts heatedly, after no more than a few moments half-heartedly skimming the document painstakingly written in Sansa’s elegant hand, and Sansa’s heart sinks. This is not a promising beginning. “My dragons even now circle over our heads. You will not be so defiant once I have burnt this hall to the
“You may tear our castles to the ground and dance upon the rubble, you may put every one of us to the sword or the flame, you may sow our lands with salt, but you, Daenerys Targaryen, will never be our queen,” Jaime replies harshly, undaunted. “You may burn our ancient places and you may kill our children and rape our women, but we will never submit to you, for we were born free and free we shall remain. Sign the treaty, sign now or we shall have war.”

“I could burn you all here, now.”

“I would advise against such a course of action, Your Grace,” Tyrion ventures.

“I am your Queen, am I not, Lord Hand?” Daenerys snaps. “If I want your advice I shall ask for it.”

Sansa furrows her eyebrows thoughtfully, leaning back in her chair, but yet remaining silent. At her side Jaime speaks, drawling languidly, “Read the treaty, Daenerys Targaryen, and then make your decision. We will not make this offer twice. Read very carefully, at your leisure.” He smirks briefly. “We have the time, after all.”

“Dany,” Jon entreats.

Embers smoulder in the Dragon Queen’s violet eyes, before they shutter, and Sansa suppresses a shiver, even as the she, with every impression of disdainful boredom, turns her attention once more to the scroll of parchment. The tense, anticipatory silence is broken when Daenerys Targaryen snaps her head up, and now Sansa can understand why so many have been cowed by her, though, she vows, not ever me. You will never make me submit to you.
“Jorah? If I sign this treaty, if I sign away four of my Seven Kingdoms, I will secure his release?” She is brimming, volatile with fury. Above them, muffled by the stone of the Guildhall, a dragon screams, and Sansa’s gaze hardens to flint.

“He is your oldest friend, is he not?” Sansa replies.

“This says he is your prisoner.”

“He is,” Sansa elaborates evenly. “And he is currently enjoying mine and my husband’s hospitality in the Deep Cells of the Rock. Have no fear, Daenerys Targaryen, I am not one to chain up a man and leave him to the mercy of the elements. He has food and drink enough, edible though plain, and a pallet and pillow upon which to lay his head at night. All you need do to free him, is sign his ransom in accordance with the Westerosi custom: this treaty.”

She raises her eyebrows expectantly. The Dragon Queen seems utterly dumbfounded by this turn of events, frowning, eyes wide with heartbreak, though it quickly becomes narrow-eyed resolve, and despite herself Sansa is impressed with the other woman’s determination.

“I will not,” is the eventual reply. “I am the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and I cannot give that up. Not even for my oldest friend.”

“Your most devoted friend,” Sansa begins, considering, “your oldest, most ardent ally, and you would abandon him, just like that.”

“I am the Queen.”
“I spoke with him after mine and the King of the West’s armies captured him upon the battlefield outside Riverrun,” she continues, her tone conversational, almost friendly, almost sympathetic. “He spoke ardently and eloquently in your defence, passionately, even. What will his reaction be, I wonder, when I tell him that you would not repay his service equally, with the determination to fight for him?”

This provokes her. “I will fight for him. I will get him back. I will burn down your precious Casterly Rock to get him back if you do not bend the knee, here, now.”

“I thought patience was not something upon which you place great value, Daenerys Targaryen?” Jaime interjects coldly.

Pale lips slash to a thin, tense line in response. “What has patience to do with this?”

Jaime allows a feral grin to spread across his face. “Everything. Did you honestly believe we would come to this parley and prepare this treaty without also preparing for a siege? We can outlast you. We have food stores enough for years. Indeed we will outlast you, especially once the milder temperatures bring rain, and with rain, mud. Mud and dysentery and cholera, which will only get worse once you run out of food, in a matter of weeks, given your burning of the last harvest. How, then, will you hold your armies together, when your conquering horde is reduced to starving, bedraggled men, moaning their way through fever?”

“They follow me because they believe in my cause. They have followed me through the Red Waste. They have faced starvation and thirst before, and they are still here,” the Dragon Queen rebuts heatedly. “I am still here, and I will have what is mine.”

Jaime only seems amused by such a display of Targaryen belligerence, evidenced by his drawling, almost carefree reply, though Sansa senses his anger in the coiled tightness of his frame, a lion on
the hunt, and the light in his green eyes is deadly with intent. “If you think to cow us thus you have failed. Do you not see where you are?” he asks derisively, his voice as cold as the bone-numbing chill of the sea in winter, gesturing to their surroundings, golden with light, a testament to generations upon generations of skilled craftsmanship and prosperity encouraged by the patronage of one Great House alone. “You stand now in the shadow of the Rock, three thousand feet tall, and my family’s home for more than ten thousand years. I would respect you far more if you did not pretend to want the Seven Kingdoms for some nebulous notion of the Greater Good. You want the Iron Throne because you believe you have some right to it, because you were born into it. You were not. You were the spare, never Aerys Targaryen’s heir. And even had you been born his heir, that would not give you any right to rule over us.”

“Tell us,” he continues bitingly, mockingly, “do you know how you plan to rule? My brother tells me you talk of difference, of breaking the wheel - which has never made sense to me because a cart without wheels is utterly useless. But then again I am no carpenter with this hand of mine,” he drawls rakishly, lingering with relish upon the words that provoke startled guffaws of laughter from the conclave. Sansa watches impassively as he lets the moment draw out, watching as the colour in their enemy’s childlike cheeks darken to match her eyes in fury.

Jaime leans forward, flashing gaze intent and implacable, and continues quietly but fiercely as the merriment around them dies once more into silence. “Know this, Daenerys Targaryen: the peace and prosperity of Westeros is founded upon one very specific thing, one thing alone, one thing which is unique to this continent. Yes,” he concedes carelessly, “the bannermen swear fealty to the monarch. But the monarch too swears in return,” he elaborates, his tone hard, ringing with emotion and the deeply held conviction Sansa knows he holds, and she smiles inwardly at the sudden swell of warmth and pride she feels for him in her heart. How completely, how effortlessly he commands the room! How firm he is in his resolve. She can only watch tenderly, ardently, acutely proud of him.

“The monarch swears to uphold the sacred covenant that is to protect the people: fair and formal restitution for the crimes of the crown, for example. Aerys Targaryen betrayed his vows to the North when he burned Rickard Stark alive without proper trial, on trumped up charges - banking the flames to get a nice even heat, cackling as the Lord Paramount’s spurs melted from his armour - I should know, I was there. I saw it all.” Sansa reaches to tangle her fingers with her husband’s, wishing to erase the haunted snarl from his voice. He reciprocates discretely by tightening his grip upon her dainty hand, running his gloved thumb over her knuckles, thanking her for her support of him, she knows, biting her lip at his subtle caress.

The King of the West lets hang in the air this reminder, scanning harshly with his gaze the
countenances of the Dragon Queen, of his younger brother’s troubled expression, and Sansa senses they do not entirely know how to respond to such a personal speech, and so they keep their consternated silence.

He continues remorselessly, ruthless in the pressing of his advantage he sees he has gained, a grim, feral light in his sharp emerald eyes. “Aerys Targaryen betrayed his vows to the North when he chained up Brandon Stark so he could choke himself to death - for what crime? None. Rhaegar Targaryen broke the covenant when he took Lyanna Stark, knowing she was betrothed.” And then, with a grand, terrible finality, he concludes dangerously, “And you, Daenerys Targaryen, you have too broken the covenant.”

“You cannot call yourself the rightful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and treat the Lady Eleanor Mooton Tarly the way you have done, in dismissal of our most ancient rite of petition,” Sansa in turn points out with deceptive mildness. She remembers with a sinking heart Lord Mooton’s appeal to her. Please, Your Majesty, he’d said, voice roughened by grief, Let me be there. Let me be in the room with you. Let me look upon this tyrant who has taken my daughter and my grandson. I want to see if she can look me in the eye. I want to see her attempt to explain herself, and when she cannot, when she falters for she has no reason, I want her to release that which she has no right to: my family. She’d declined reluctantly, on the grounds that she had thought it unwise to introduce yet another painful, combative element into a situation so volatile.

She sees now that she was right to take such a course, but she does not deny that she had made such a decision with a ball of misery weighing upon her chest, because it is so easy for her to imagine herself in the Lady Eleanor’s position, as she indeed once was in the Red Keep, and then in the Vale and when the Boltons imposed themselves upon Winterfell. How she’d longed for her family to fight for her! How she’d longed for her mother, for any one of her family to march into the presence of her tormentors and castigate them. She must have imagined the scene a hundred times, a thousand times; Robb galloping into the Throne Room itself upon a beautiful white charger, coldly demanding revenge. How dare you treat my sister thus! How dare you imprison my sister, torment her, beat her, molest her! How dare you! But he had not, and he never would and she had remained her brother’s scapegoat. Even now, years later, she feels his abandonment of her like the crackling lash of a knotted whip upon her back, mercilessly slicing open her tender, fragile flesh to bloody ribbons, a wound that weeps still, unable to be sewn shut, unable to heal, unable to knit itself into a lattice of faded white scars.

Indeed she has no intention of acting like her brother did and leaving the Lady Eleanor and her young son to rot, to be beaten and humiliated and defiled in the Targaryen camp. If Daenerys Targaryen will not release her ill-begotten prisoners then Jaime and Sansa with their conclave have
already drawn up plans of the military kind to secure the release of the young lady and her infant son. She will make certain that after the Lady Eleanor’s rescue that she knows how hard her father has fought for her, that indeed the entire conclave did not abandon her to her fate as Sansa was years ago abandoned, by her brother, by his bannermen.

“You cannot call yourself anything other than the Mad King’s daughter when you burn unarmed prisoners of war like Lords Randyll and Dickon Tarly who had every right to expect they would be ransomed, in accordance with our Westerosi customs of war,” Sansa states glacially. “Indeed it seems to me that there is quite a parallel to be made between the fates of mine noble grandfather and mine dashing uncle, and the fates of the Lords Tarly. You must have known this would be a concern of mine and of my lord husband the King of the West, surely?” She tilts her head. “Or perhaps you did know and you do not particularly care?”

“I gave them a choice as their rightful Queen,” the Dragon Queen snarls, leaping to her narrow feet. Brienne steps forward threateningly in response, her gloved hand going to her sword hilt. “They chose.”

“Perhaps…” Sansa demurs, gesturing for Brienne to stand down, and her sworn shield obeys, though the expression of watchful mistrust never leaves her face. “But here in Westeros a trial is the customary procedure when accusations of treasons are made, which I will point out that you did not legally have the right to make, given that the rebellion which led to your House’s overthrow had legal justification.”

“I did not come here to debate trivial legalities with a man and woman in open rebellion against the Iron Throne,” Daenerys Targaryen replies sharply, and Sansa begins to wonder, despair wrapping heavy chains about her, how they are ever going to come to an accord over this treaty. “The Iron Throne is mine and I shall have it.”

Jaime sighs his exasperation, and replies with some asperity, clearly seeing as well as Sansa that they are getting nowhere, “And as we told you in Winterfell, you have no legal right to the Iron Throne given that the rebellion against your father, as my wife has just explained, was provoked by nothing less than his breaking of the sacred covenant of rule in this continent, which is not simply a fanciful feudal pledge but the very foundation of order, law and good governance. The realms over which my wife and I are sovereign are far more ancient, and subject to a far more ancient elected right of rule than that forced upon us by your Targaryen ancestors’ invasion a mere three
“I am not afraid of you, or your armies.”

“Perhaps not,” Jaime drawls, “but you should nevertheless be afraid of destruction.”

“And I say again, I am not afraid of you, Lion of Lannister. Whatever destruction you may unleash, it will be nothing in the face of my dragons.”

“You should be afraid,” The King of the West replies blandly, “for the destruction has already begun.”

“Speak plainly, brother,” Tyrion interjects with exasperation carved into the harried lines of his expression.

Jaime flicks him a disdainful glance before continuing derisively, “Whilst you gallivant all over Westeros, the smallfolk, what do you suppose the smallfolk are doing?”

This statement is greeted with nonplussed blinking, and so Sansa replies to her husband’s question mirthlessly, her words and voice heavy with memory, solemn with the shade of remembered terror, inexorably dark in the picture they paint. “King’s Landing has no food, not after you burned the last harvest. And what do the smallfolk do when they have no food? They are rioting. Have you ever been in a riot, Daenerys Targaryen? I have. Men become monsters. They brandish in their hands hammers or pokers or pitchforks and they flood the streets like the rising tides, sweeping and wrecking all in their path. They tear down shops and bludgeon one another to pulpy death over a loaf of bread, they trample one another to dust and blood underfoot and the streets sing with screams of rape and terror because what little food there yet remains, rat meat and the like, is being requisitioned by force by your Dothraki bloodriders which you left to guard your capital. That is
the liberation you have brought the people you purport to rule.”

“How can you know this?” Tyrion Lannister exclaims angrily, recovering more quickly than the pale-faced Dragon Queen. “If this is some sort of trick - ”

Sansa smirks. Still he underestimates her, and she cannot deny the pleasure she feels at proving him wrong once more. “A trick?” she laughs lightly. “I think you forget who I am. I am a Stark. I have no use for tricks.” She lets that thought sink into their minds before continuing as easily as before. “If you think Lord Varys is the only remaining player of the Great Game to hold his own network of informants, then you are a fool. More than a fool, you are mistaken.”

“You have spies?” Jon scoffs, an expression of the most abject disdain upon his face, as though she has just admitted to some terrible, horrifying, disgusting crime, and she wants to laugh. “How dishonourable.”

“You’ve nerve, cousin,” Sansa retorts heatedly, taking the bait despite knowing she really should not. Jaime’s hand tightens in hers, and her mind works frantically to think of something, anything, to claw back the advantage she has let slip by responding to such a provocation, and just as she feels despair tighten her throat, thick and cloying, her gaze falls upon the tense way Jon holds himself, and the wounded worry with which Daenerys Targaryen looks at him and cannot hide despite her great efforts to do so, visible in the carriage of her shoulders and the tightness in her eyes, and inspiration hits her so suddenly that were she not already sitting down the force of her realisation would have driven her to her knees.

What she is about to do is a very great risk, she is indeed eminently aware of that. But it is nonetheless the only way forward she can see that means this treaty will still be signed. She inhales slowly, almost imperceptibly, resolve building as her mind darts forward, elusive as a shadow bounding through a forest still in winter, fleet-footed upon a path invisible to the naked eye, measuring considerations and consequences carefully. It is worth the risk. More than that, it will work, she is confident, as her other improvisations have worked in the past, because they were not flights of fancy but rooted instead in her understanding of her opponents relationships, motives and desires.
“After all, you were once a spy, were you not?” She continues coldly, and if Jon and Daenerys Targaryen have not understood that winter can be as cruel as the flames, well, they understand that notion now, all too clearly, judging from their expressions. “Infiltrating the Wildling clans on behalf of the Night’s Watch by seducing a woman, gaining information about them, wanting an alliance, wanting their weapons, their manpower,” she elaborates, her gaze pointedly falling upon the Dragon Queen, her insinuation thereby made clear. “It’s a bit of a pattern with you, cousin, is it not? Combining love with betrayal?”

Jon looks as though she has just slapped him, but his reply quickly dissolves whatever remorse she has felt at wounding him. “I regret every day that I betrayed Ygritte. I wish I had not. I wish she were still alive, I wish I could have grown old with her, I wish I could have had children with her, fierce little girls with a fondness for the axe and the sword rather than embroidery.” His eyes are dark with fire, with a burning that makes her think of the nightmare-inducing descriptions of the Seven Hells Septa Mordane used to scold her with when she was little. She knows from Tormund, because she’d asked him, what Ygritte had been like, looked like, and now Sansa knows the truth. She had been but a pale memory of Jon’s great love, and not loved for herself. Lusted after for her name and looks, wanted for the validation she provided her cousin with, but not ever respected, and she doubts, ever loved for herself. Not by him, and she knows he can see the shock in her eyes, the sudden vulnerability before she forcibly schools her features once more to impassibility.

A gloved thumb slips over her knuckles, and the tender gesture brings her back to herself. She is loved, she is loved by the man who is her husband, the man who treats her with reverence and respect, the only man who does not make love seem like disdain, but instead like the pure thing it is meant to be, and she turns her head to him. Her golden husband sighs his sympathy for her, and she impulsively brings both of his hands to her lips, taking comfort in the habitual chivalric gesture, kissing softly his gloved and golden knuckles, before slipping a thumb into his palm to press a tender, chaste kiss to his palm, wishing she might taste his skin and not the smooth leather, looking at him with glimmering eyes, leaning, eyes fluttering shut, leaning into the gentle way he cups her cheek, and when he in turn takes her hand in his to reciprocate with solemn, reverent and ardent kisses to her palm, to the sensitive skin of her inner wrist, she trembles, lightly brushing his cheekbone, his jaw with her tender, gentle fingertips.

“Then you do not love me?” the voice, womanly, thick with humiliation, and so different from the previous haughty, imperious tones, jolts Sansa, and she is reminded that as much as she might wish otherwise, her and Jaime are not alone. She has forgotten herself, forgotten where they are. It will not happen again.
Jon is looking at Sansa and Jaime with the dark kind of fury that makes her think of destruction, reckless, indiscriminate, brutally dangerous, and Sansa realises that of course the Dragon Queen has seen this, and even as her dragons high above roar their pain she approaches her nephew-consort more tentatively than Sansa would ever have expected, an expression of quiet entreaty upon her childlike features. She lays a hand upon his arm, frowning when he tenses, and Sansa grits her teeth, bracing herself. This is not going to end well, anyone can see that.

“Then you do not love me?” Daenerys Targaryen repeats.

Jaime hisses in surprise beside her as she suppresses a pained wince. This disbelief, this incredulous sense of betrayal, is something she is all too familiar with, and despite being herself on the opposite side of the field, she finds she would not - she does not like occasioning pain to anyone, not even a tyrant with fire-breathing dragons. Even a monster can love.

Unnoticed by everyone else, Jaime turns his head to murmur discretely into her ear, “I am the luckiest of men, lovely one,” with a fleeting, chaste kiss to the sensitive skin below her earlobe, and she sighs languidly, happily even, in response.

“Of course I love you, Dany!” Jon replies, strangled.

“But not like you loved her,” the silver-haired woman persists.

Jaime’s grip upon Sansa’s hand threatens to crush her fingers.

“No,” Jon admits eventually, shattering the tense silence. “Not like her. But when I was killed by my own men that part of me died too. The difference is that that part of me did not come back.”
Sansa shifts uncomfortably. She feels like an intruder to this conversation, her sense of modesty shies away from it, but Jaime reassures her by squeezing her hand gently, and she revels in the way he holds her, steadfast in his affection, and it reassures her. Whatever their endeavours, she repeats to herself. Whatever their endeavours she is with him, and he with her.

“Did you seduce me for my dragons?” Daenerys Targaryen demands, a brittle quality to her voice, and Sansa remembers with bile rising like slime in her throat Lysa Arryn’s hysteria at the end, before she was pushed from through the Moon Door to fall flailing, screaming until the wind snatched away the sound, through the sky to her death. “Did you?”

Jon stalks to his aunt-lover, glowering at her. “You imprisoned me on Dragonstone, you took away my weapons and my ship. What did you expect? For me to fall at your feet in awed worship?”

“You betrayed me,” she hisses dangerously. “You tricked me, you deceived me.”

“And you imprisoned him, Your Grace,” Tyrion intervenes. “I would say that makes you about even.”

It takes all of Sansa’s self-control to retain her impassiveness, to keep her jaw from slackening open in shock. What is the man playing at? She doesn’t understand his strategy, and that frightens her.

The Dragon Queen whirls upon her Lord Hand, astonished. “How dare you! I love him!”

“And yet you imprisoned him,” Tyrion continues, seriously. “You love him, you imprisoned him. He betrayed you, yet he loves you. Forget past transgressions, and build anew.” His voice softens. “Or would you give him up?”
“No,” she says shortly.

Tyrion spreads his hands. “Well then. I would say your path forwards is clear.”

“I forgive you, my love, if you would forgive me?” Daenerys Targaryen entreats, her voice girlish, kittenishly soft.

Sansa is astonished at Tyrion’s success in the matter; she would have thought the effecting of such a reconciliation an impossible task, but the Dragon Queen’s intimate, tentative question tells Sansa that her enemy has a profound need to be loved, for adulation, even worship, and that is something Sansa can turn to her advantage, if she just for a moment thinks. The Queen in the North’s instinct that Daenerys Targaryen cares less about people leaving her or going against her plans and wishes than she does about them returning to her fold, is proved correct by Jon’s reply.

Jon closes his eyes, his shoulders slumping. “Yes,” he says eventually, resigned. “Yes.” He swallows thickly, “my love.” The small, silver haired woman embraces him, an embrace he returns heavily, but he lifts his head as his lover-aunt buries her face happily in his chest, laughing like a maiden, and Sansa freezes.

Her cousin is looking at her with an expression of utmost misery and entreaty carved into his grey eyes, set into the harsh lines of his face, pleading with her to save him, and her embarrassment turns once more to fury. How dare he! How dare he once more expect her to clean up his messes as though she were his nanny and he a helpless child! You are a man, not a babe in swaddling clothes. This is not my responsibility. You made your bed, cousin. Lie in it. She shakes her head once, and his jaw sets, but she turns away, remote, impassive, she feels forged from ice itself.

As she wonders how to bring everyone back to the negotiations over the treaty, staring contemplatively at her husband’s hand still cradling hers, turning strategy after strategy over in her
mind, eager to get this over with, done with, the quiet is suddenly and dramatically interrupted.

Fortune and Lady leap silently from the minstrels’ gallery above, landing elegantly, evidently bored of sunbathing languidly out of sight beneath the coloured glass ceiling, and Sansa’s cousin and the Dragon Queen leap apart from one another in surprise.

“What in the Seven Hells…” Tyrion breathes, disbelieving eyes fixed upon the direwolf and the sigil Lion the size of a warhorse, warily tracking their every move. The Unsullied point their spears, the Dothraki leap backwards, hands going to their arakhs, gaping at Fortune, and Sansa realises belatedly that whilst they might have seen Ghost at Winterfell and therefore a direwolf is not a sight unknown to them, a sigil lion like Fortune is, as all the Dothraki routed near Riverrun had been slain.

“Father killed your wolf, Sansa!” Jon frowns in shocked confusion. “Lady was grey, not red, how -”

She extends her hand daintily, but to the shock of everyone in the Dragon Queen’s faction it is Fortune, not Lady, who instinctively responds, padding nonchalantly over to her. The line of Jaime’s shoulders relaxes as she winds a small hand into his Lion’s rich golden fur, and then a moment later as Lady lays her russet head in her husband’s lap for a scratch behind her velvety ears, it is Sansa’s turn to sigh, soothed by the caress.

“Lady is a manifestation of my soul, cousin, not my pet, not my child, and she returned to me, changed, of course, after the rout at Riverrun,” she explains, bestowing a tender look at her husband. “Jaime’s Fortune led me to her.”

“I cannot believe,” Daenerys Targaryen begins haltingly. She swallows unsteadily, her throat working. “That is impossible.”
“In a land where White Walkers lived in the ice and dragons in the sky, surely a Lion and a
direwolf such as these are not so far-fetched a proposition?” Sansa replies mildly.

“You have a lion,” Tyrion repeats, dumbfounded.

“That has already been established,” Jaime replies shortly, and Lady nuzzles his chest to comfort
him, and it is at that moment that the tableau they present, her and Jaime and Lady and Fortune, is
understood by their onlookers. Tyrion flicks his eyes incredulously back and forth over them,
resignation writ into the defeated lines of his frame. Jon swallows harshly with burning eyes,
staring furiously, covetously - still - at Sansa, and it is with trepidation that she realises she can
probably replace the still with always. She is not his to covet, and she wonders for the first time if
his resurrection has changed him beyond what he has publicly admitted to; namely that part of him
was slain with Ygritte and was not returned to him, and she considers if dying and then being made
to come back, being raised through the Red Witch’s strange magic, has not made her cousin
more… unstable? He seems darker now, more single-minded. At first his entire focus had seemed
to be upon the White Walkers and the war against the dead, but now she wonders if that attention
has shifted, if that intensity has taken her as its object. It would explain much if that were the case.

Tyrion does not frighten her anymore, but Jon does, and the realisation is sobering, a shock of iced
water thrown over her head, and it leaves her gasping, struggling for breath.

But it is the Dragon Queen’s reaction that truly shocks her. All haughtiness is gone from her,
stripped bare like bark from a tree. More than defeated, she looks eviscerated, and Sansa swallows
down her laugh. Truly, she thinks, Targaryen arrogance knows no bounds. Whatever sympathy she
had previously felt for her enemy - because Sansa has indeed come to understand only too well the
biting pain of unrequited love, and she is not vindictive or petty enough to wish such suffering
upon anyone else, even upon a tyrant, even upon an enemy as dangerous as Daenerys Targaryen -
has evaporated. Did she truly believe she, alone, was Aegon the Conqueror come again, destined,
deserving, righteously ordained to rule merely because she had dragons? Merely because of a
family name? It is quite the realisation, Sansa supposes sardonically, to suddenly understand that
you are not a god, but instead as human as any other.

With rising hope in her chest, Sansa suddenly sees that this is the moment to press the advantage,
this is the fulcrum. This is where she can turn the tide, this, this weakness that has been revealed to
her, this is what will stop a war. This is the purest form of hubris she thinks she has ever come
across. This is a weakness that does not feel spiteful or cruel to exploit. Humiliating, certainly, Sansa fully knows that, but only due to the Dragon Queen’s own view of herself, not attaining something so deeply intimate and private as one person’s feelings for another. It is nothing like the betrayal Jon has perpetrated, and upon both women, Sansa realises. It is not nearly so heartless, and it has not required any negative action for Sansa to perpetrate against her enemy. What the silver-haired woman chooses to do now with Jon, if indeed she chooses anything at all, is not in the least Sansa’s affair; she has no intention of interfering. The Queen in the North’s concern at this juncture is purely political, and if Jon’s actions give her some way of coming to an accord with her rival, some means of beginning a real dialogue, one woman to another, in the interests of peace and freedom, then she will do it.

“Turn back, Daenerys Targaryen,” she begins, Jaime tensing at her voice, and she squeezes his hand in reassurance. *Trust me. I know what I am doing.* He reciprocates instantly, and the warmth of his respect and faith settles languidly over her shoulders like a protective cloak, enough to give her the courage she needs to pursue this course. “Sign this treaty and turn back. Set your own house in order; I fear it greatly needs it, or by the time your campaign is done you shall rule over naught but ashes and ghosts. Think carefully. Think very carefully, for we will not make this offer again.”

The Dragon Queen stares at the picture in front of her, blankly ignoring her advisors around her, and Sansa waits patiently. She is not naive enough to believe that she has earned anything other than the Targaryen’s enmity with her actions, but that matters not, not when it means this treaty will be signed. The silence that follows is tense, suffocating in its hope, cloying with greed, bitter with dashed ambitions, but it is at long last broken in the way Sansa had anticipated: with the eventual and visibly reluctant capitulation of Daenerys Targaryen.

“I will sign this treaty,” she says, beginning quietly, her voice ringing loudly out by the end. “I have decided to be magnanimous in the face of such evident courage. I will sign this treaty and you will remember what I saved you from: destruction by dragon fire, and we shall have peace.”

To forestall the grumblings of the conclave at the high handed declaration, (she knows her and Jaime’s bannermen well, she thinks) Sansa quickly motions for quill and ink to sign the parchment with. Thin fingers childishly grip the quill, silver hair falls across the table and a squiggle is scrawled upon the document, and Sansa allows herself a discrete sigh of satisfaction, shakily drawn out with a release of tension.
Rather anticlimactically, after such combative, volatile negotiations, it is done.

It is done.

They are no longer at war, and were she alone she would weep with sheer joy.

The freedom of the North, the West, the Vale and the Riverlands has been secured, and Sansa is all of a sudden lightheaded, far too dizzy with relief to feel anything but pleasure.

There is one final formality, only one more, and then they can leave and Sansa can repair to her and Jaime’s bedchamber in the Rock for a private celebration. A languid day amongst the bedsheets, a long, frolicking bath with her husband, laying her head upon his lap whilst he places morsels of lemon cakes between her lips and they talk about what to name their child - the ache of longing hits her so fiercely she almost sways with it.

She stands, motioning towards the forgotten tray of goblets. “Shall we toast?” Sansa turns to the Dragon Queen’s advisors. “Did you bring the wine, as is our custom?”

Tyrion replies in the affirmative, producing a wineskin which he hands to his ruler for her to pour into the goblets, as is traditional. The hosts of a parley provide the goblets, the guests the wine, as a way of mitigating a potential risk of treachery. Wine poured, Daenerys hands Jaime the first goblet, before taking the second for herself and giving Sansa the third. It is a petty insult that Sansa does not care for, but there are more important things.

“To peace,” she states, lifting the glass high, allowing herself to revel in the triumph she feels, closing her eyes, savouring the taste of success, sweet and heady. Jaime and the Dragon Queen repeat the toast, the three of them standing in the centre of the hall, guards and conclave some steps behind, Lady and Fortune curled around the legs of Sansa and Jaime’s chairs, idly flicking glances
over the assembly.

Solemnly, the three of them drink.

The first small sip tastes a bit strange upon her tongue, and Sansa wonders if the wine has not travelled well; it is not a particularly splendid vintage - but no, there in the back of her mouth a hint of - she frowns in consideration - bitter - bitter like - the charred remains of a meal - bitter like -

It is only a small detail, but it catches her eye.

The pad of Daenerys Targaryen’s right index finger is black.

Her vision blurs, with sudden, dizzy, nauseating shock.

Poison.

She coughs, even as she feels her heart begin to pound wildly. *Think, Sansa.* She has only moments, she knows. Petyr Baelish taught her enough about poisons for her to know that. She does not recognise this poison but his tutelage, as horrid as it had been, had nonetheless meant she has learnt enough to be able to extrapolate from general principles, has meant she never finds herself without - she turns, stumbling back towards her chair, tripping over the long hem of her gown and she sways, the glass of wine falling from her fingers to shatter into shards upon the stone.

She’s dizzy, she’s so dizzy, and it is by feel alone that she fumbles for the discrete ring upon her right hand, using her teeth to flick open the catch because her fingers are shaking too badly, tipping
the white powder within the recess of the jewel into her mouth, swallowing desperately. Not an antidote, but a powder to purge her stomach.

It is the only chance she has. She wears this ring every day, and she had thought it a precaution in case Jaime was targeted by the Dragon Queen or even Jon, given his hatred and disdain of her husband - it seems obvious to her, that on the brink of a siege the military man, not the girl, would be in greater danger. She had never imagined otherwise -

The violence of her stomach twisting takes her by surprise, forcing her roughly to the ground as she coughs and sputters and retches up spatters of black bile, and she hopes wildly, desperately, that this might rid her body entirely of the poison. She moans at the sudden pain in her temples, a stabbing kind of pain, and when she pulls her shaking hand away from her hair it is covered in dark glimmers of blood. She moans again, shuddering, and feels a warm hand around her waist.

Jaime. Even like this she recognises his touch.

It cannot end like this. It cannot.

She tries to turn towards him but her body slumps in his embrace, exhausted, trembling, wracked with contractions as the white powder does its work and she vomits again and again and again, her vision fading.

She’s crying, she realises vaguely, Jaime’s face is blurred above hers, as he begs her to stay with him, as the Lion and Wolfsguard surround them, shielding them both from their enemies, and she hears as though from a great distance shouting, from their guards, from the conclave. Only Jaime’s gaze does not waver from hers and she clings to the green light even as her nausea increases, she clings to it desperately, to the colour of the summer forests, but she is slipping away -
Daenerys Targaryen never had any intention of letting the treaty stand, Sansa realises grimly. What a fool she has been. What a silly little fool she has been. She should have known better to believe that her happiness might be of any great duration. She should have known that a life of peace and freedom and happiness was nothing more than the stupid dream of a naive little girl.

She has not been made for anything other than one sorrow after another, one misery and then the next and the next, she understands that now.

She was foolish to believe she might live - that, oh gods her child, hers and Jaime’s child might live, and she whimpers, delirious with pain.

“I’m sorry,” she chokes out. This parley had been her idea. Forgive me, Jaime, please. I don’t want to leave you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I’m so sorry. I love you. I adore you. I choose you. Beyond the ending of the world I love you, and I love- oh gods I love our child and I... our child, gods, our child - please - Jaime make this end, make it stop, it hurts so much and I’m so afraid -

She can hear his voice now, low and strained and pleading in response to her stuttered words, a sound for her alone, anguished beyond belief and how it hurts lovely one, stay with me, stay with me my love, we will get you out of here, we will get you to a maester, you have to live, Sansa you have to live -

But the light is fading, his face is blurring and she can’t see him anymore, she can’t see anything anymore and she’s so afraid, she’s so desperately afraid, she doesn’t want to die, she wants to live with Jaime and make children with him and live, happily, to give their allied kingdoms peace and stability and prosperity, she wants that, she doesn’t want to die. It cannot end like this. She will not let it.

She is numb, she can no longer feel anything except the mad rushing thunder of her heart, accelerating like a bolting horse, there is nothing now except the hollow ringing in her ears and the sticky wetness in her hair, she must have hit her head on something as she fell but she didn’t feel the blow at all and she doesn’t want to die. Not like this. She does not want to die, not now that at
last she has so much to live for.

Not now that she has had a true taste of happiness, a true taste of love, when a future was within her grasp and so for it to slip like water between her fingers now is heart-shattering.

_Jaime I’m afraid. I’m so afraid. Don’t let -_

But the darkness has dug its claws too deeply into her, and she is powerless to resist, her head hurts, and she is dragged down, down, down, falling, always falling into the murky depths, her mouth open in a soundless cry, a plea _Jaime! Our child - Jaime pleasepleaseplease -_ the water brackish and dark flooding in and her chest _burns -_

And she drowns, down, down to where the blackness swallows her whole.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Jaime at his most dangerous.
“Yes, but I can do better still than only that,” he drawls, his voice frigid with disdain for his brother, and he is met with wide-eyed fear. Good, he thinks vindictively. Let his brother fear him. Let him remember at last that Jaime is a Lion of Lannister, and let him remember what that truly means.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Welcome to this next instalment. I am absolutely floored by the reception the last chapter received; it exceeded every expectation I could have had, so thank you so much! As always, your comments and enthusiasm for this story really do make an incredible difference, and I am very grateful for all your support.

Thanks too to galaxiasincognito/northernsky, for all the help with this story in general and this chapter.

Without further ado, I give you:

Jaime at his most dangerous. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
It happens so rapidly he scarcely comprehends it. One moment they are toasting, wine glasses held high, and it seems the next he is on his knees and his wife is crumpled in his arms, retching up spatters of black horror, her hair matted with blood from where she hit her head upon the flagstones with a loud, horrifying crack after she'd fallen like a marionette whose strings had been suddenly cut, crumpled with pain.

The look in her eyes as she struggles to breathe, whimpering in pain, gasping, choking as she fights the poison, is the greatest, cruelest agony he has ever known - crueler than discovering Cersei’s continued and substantive infidelities, crueler than the humiliation and shame and agony of having his right hand, his sword hand chopped off by a lowly goat of a sellsword. Sansa is entirely vulnerable, pleading with him to make it better and he *can’t* and his hands shake over her body and he doesn’t know how to take this pain away from her and he wishes he could. By the gods how he wishes he could. He registers out of the corners of his eyes Fortune roaring his defiance, curled protectively next to him and Sansa, and Lady howling. She has nothing to be sorry for, he thinks, his heart breaking, the self-condemnation in his wife’s expression making him grit his teeth in mingled fury and despair. She is all that is good and kind and gentle and pure and it is not her fault that Daenerys Targaryen has attacked her in such a manner.

He’d only noticed something was wrong when Lady had dashed his own wine glass from his hand with her paw, before advancing in a manner reminiscent of Grey Wind, a manner that haunts him to this day, her hackles raised, growling fiercely at the Dragon Queen when his enemy had attempted to block his path to Sansa. He’d turned towards her, towards Sansa, only to see his wife collapse and he hadn’t been quick enough to catch her, unable to prevent her head injury, so frozen into paralysed horror by the sight in front of him to act. Their guards, further away, had taken longer to dash towards them.

He begs her, begs her, begs her like he has never begged in his life, to stay with him, attempting to reassure her, but his voice grows more panicked as he visibly sees her struggles weaken, as he sees her slipping away and damn him but he is a Lannister, he is the Kingslayer, his enemies chopped off his sword hand but he’s still standing, still able to fight better than anyone else from sheer determination even whilst he knows his previous glories are forever lost to him, he is the King of the West and he will not suffer to see his wife, the love of his life, ripped from him like his Myrcella was assassinated, bleeding to death in his arms. He is a Lannister and Lannisters *shape* the world, they do not endure it (he has endured enough and for far too long) and he will not let the Dragon Queen take his wife, his unborn child from him and he grips her hand, tightly, pressing shaking kisses to her dainty hands, to her knuckles, her fingertips, lingering painfully over the elegant band of her wedding ring, the golden metal warm under his lips and he -
Sansa moans quietly, and then she is still, her eyes fluttering closed, her head slumping back against him, exposing the elegant line of her pale neck.

No. No.

He will not let her die. She is not dead. She cannot be dead. She cannot be gone. She is the beautiful warmth of an autumn sunset, the radiance of a winter dawn, the gentleness of the spring rain, the persistence of the summer sun and she cannot be gone. He will not let her be gone.

Fumbling, dizzy, choking on his tears, he reaches for her wrist and forces himself to concentrate, trying to sense the pretty flutter of her heartbeat, desperately. He prays to gods he no longer believes in. He has not believed in them since his mother’s death all those years ago. But he prays now. He prays not for himself, but because there is no-one more deserving of life, of happiness than his wife and their child; there is no-one more beautiful in heart, in soul, than Sansa Stark and the child they have created together. There is no-one more deserving of the rare mercy of the gods and so he will implore it for them. Let them live. Let her live. Let her live. She has to live. I love her. I adore her. I choose her. Every single time I choose her and I cannot live without her. I cannot live without our child. They do not deserve this horror. Let them live. Please let them live. They have to live.

But he cannot find her pulse and he cannot believe it - she is still warm, she is still warm and she cannot be dead. But her eyes are shut and her hair is dark and matted with blood and - he wraps himself over her, cradling her tenderly, gently, pressing his cheek to hers, the salt of their tears hot upon their skin and he turns his face into her silken hair to weep, his agony private, and he presses despairing kisses to her neck.

Come back. Come back to me. You have to come back. Come back, please come back. Live. Lovely one, you have to live. Live! He exhorts her, but it is no use and he roars his grief, an animal cornered and mortally wounded. The world is ending, turned to bitter dregs of ash in his mouth. Come back, lovely one, come back...

It seems to him he feels something then, beneath his lips, and he - this is a cruel jape. Have the gods not laughed at him enough? To give him at last love and redemption, to let him all too briefly taste of paradise in her tender embrace, only to snatch it away, and then give him a damned hope again? It must be a jape. But there - he presses another kiss to her neck, not daring to - he must be a madman. He must be a madman to hope, to believe. He must be the stupid fool he has always been accused of being by his siblings.

But no, there it is.
Faint and sluggish, not the delicate fluttering he adores so much, that is so responsive to him, his kiss, his touch, his every caress. It is not responsive to him now.

But it is there.

She’s alive.

Her heartbeat.

She’s alive. Just. For now.

For now, only for now.

And it is that urgent thought which spurs him into action, and he struggles to his feet, lifting her so she is cradled in his embrace, holding her gently, tenderly so she is not jostled, so her injuries are not worsened, to pass her with the greatest reluctance to Brienne at his side.

He pulls his friend into a rough hug. “Get her out of here, get her to a maester immediately,” he murmurs into her ear so no-one else can hear. He does not want the Dragon Queen to know she has not succeeded in her plot to kill Sansa. “Her heart still beats. Save her. You must save her. Save my wife. And tell Ser Addam we are at war. Ready the scorpions and the Singer’s Gate and the men alike. Everything, the Great Bell, the traps, the siege weapons, the pitch, the tar, the burning sand - everything. I will have war for this. I will have blood and death and the destruction of the Dragon Queen for this. I will cast down House Targaryen and raze them from the map. I will have this and nothing less for the injury upon my wife and our unborn child.”

Brienne jolts at that last piece of information, determination and grief warring in her sapphire eyes, grim duty carved into her severe countenance but he wrenches himself away, knowing that if he does not go now he never will, jerking his head abruptly for the rest of the Wolfsguard to follow their commander and hurry back to the safety of his ancestral fortress. He does not wait to see the leader of the Queen in the North’s guards carry out his command, shadowed by Fortune the faithful, for he knows she will.

Instead, he watches, almost unobserved except by his Lionsguard who look at him warily, the commotion before him. Everyone has drawn a weapon, and he knows that they are one command away - his command - from a bloodbath.
Daenerys has thrown out her arm in front of Jon Snow to prevent him from running to Sansa, he knows, and the black haired man is now fighting the restraint of two burly Dothraki bloodriders. He does not fight the disgust that roils, a veritable tempest, in him at the sight of his wife’s cousin. How dare he, after betraying Sansa, hurting her, and then coveting her, lusting after her even now, how dare he display concern for her now. How dare he. The Dragon Queen stands impassively, as untouchable as the eye of the storm, even when Jon looks down at his aunt’s hand and exclaims, “Dany! Your finger!”

That draws his attention, and he realises that one finger upon the Targaryen’s right hand has been dyed black. The spatters Sansa had coughed up were black too; it is not a difficult connection to make. The Dragon Queen’s treachery truly astounds him; he had not thought, after the full guest-right ritual, after the signing of the treaty itself, that they would still be in danger in the way that it is now apparent they are. Surely, surely, even her Essosi advisors would have counselled her against poisoning his wife in such flagrant disregard of ancient custom. She must have known it would invite retaliation. It is impossible for Jaime to believe otherwise. Well, if it is retaliation she desires -

Distracting him, his uncle the Lord Gerion draws his blade, the mighty Brightroar, with a singing, clear rasp, and looks to advance upon the Dragon Queen and cut her down in two where she stands, but a quiet, strained “Uncle,” from Jaime halts him.

His uncle moves closer to him, frowning in surprise though obeying nonetheless, and Jaime catches sight of the blood on his hands, staining his skin, staining the bright metal, and narrowly avoids retching. Sansa. His sweet wife, his valiant, gentle queen whom he adores and admires beyond anything else in the world. His lovely one, her blood. Sansa’s blood. Dear gods her blood is slick and warm and glimmering in the light, her blood, dear gods, her blood upon his hands - he’d felt the life drip from her, holding her, powerless, and she now only barely clings to life. He is shaking, trembling, fury lancing through him, grounded only by Ser Leonidas on one side of him and his uncle Gerion on the other placing each a hand upon his shoulder, and he swallows harshly, thickly.

One word from him. One word and this will become a bloodbath. One word and he shall have his vengeance. One single word, and he longs to speak it. He longs to form his mouth over the syllables, tasting the sound, relishing, revelling, longing ardently, even violently. He longs to draw Endever in turn and cut down his enemies for this trespass, this violation. It would satisfy him to hear his blade sing a song of death, to feel the life leave them, to taste upon his tongue the copper tang of his enemies’ blood, freshly drawn, to watch the light leave their eyes, to watch them bleed out like the lowly animals they are, craven, treacherous turncoats to do such a thing as poison the Queen in the North his wife and it would feed his rage, fuel it, draw it ever higher -

But his gaze alights upon his younger brother’s horrified, fascinated stare at Jaime’s hands, and he knows that whilst the first sip of revenge is sweet, the dregs are bitter and hollow out the heart, and
his recklessness has been tempered by time and suffering. He must be better than the man he once was - for Sansa, for their unborn child - he will be better. He cannot afford a reckless blaze of glory, bright but soon burnt out. No, in this, he must be greater. Recklessness is easy, impulse is easy, and he must ask himself, what would it truly achieve? Nothing more than a hollow victory, and only in the short term. Should he fall now, all would be lost. He is beginning to think he might prefer something different, something more long-lasting, something far more permanent. And that will require control, an immediate effort to restraint, the better to control his retribution in the future, to measure it out in a relentless, enduring onslaught, like his father would have done. Retaliation, retribution, vengeance, yes - but on Jaime’s terms, not the Dragon Queen’s. He has spent far too much of his life merely reacting to outside events, he realises. It is a tiresome, exhausting way to live, and he is thoroughly sick of it. That ends now.

Lady growls ferociously, ominously, and the hall falls silent.

He is not like his sister, who was most dangerous screaming, blazing and burning like wildfire, or Tyrion, most dangerous when loudly, resentfully woeful, lamenting bitterly the unfairness of the world against him. No, in this Jaime is like his father, and in this he must think as his father would have done, not his siblings.

Jaime is most dangerous in restraint, that has always been true.

What he has not done is a far better indicator of his rage than what he has, and he sees the precise moment his little brother remembers this little fact, his countenance turning ashen with trepidation and unease as he observes Jaime.

He has never before envied his father’s predilection for cold, harsh calculation, for his ability to see past the immediate and work tirelessly for his favoured outcome, but he envies it now. He envies his father’s control in matters of the heart. He thinks of Tywin Lannister’s impassive, implacable face, unmoving even in the face of horror, the shield carefully guarding his deeply wounded heart and he wants his father’s strength, because he has never felt so unmoored, so volatile, so close to drawing his blade and cutting anyone and everything down, but Sansa’s - gods, her name hurts, his sweet wife, his lovely one who might be - his mind shies instinctively away from the thought - her words we will plant your apricot trees upon the mountainsides come back to him and he realises he cannot plant trees if he is dead. Sansa fights - fought, gods, she fights, fights still, she’s still fighting, clinging on, he reminds himself, it isn’t over yet - for life, for life and freedom and love. He would be doing her the greatest disservice if he did not do the same, and even as everything in him screams for him to leap straight onto his horse and charge like a man possessed back to the Rock to her side, there is one thing that remains to be done, here.

There is one memory he cannot help but cling to in this moment, a memory of his father that is indelibly seared into his mind because he remembers even at his young tender age being awed by it. Awed and terrified by the crashing depth of emotion his father had shown, lifting his mother’s
corpse from the bloody birthing bed. Cersei’s attention at the time may have been focused on Joanna, but Jaime, Jaime had had eyes only for his father, upon the terrifying manner in which his father, that great and all-powerful god, had crumbled before such a sight like stone to dust. He had only understood, much later, that his mother was dead, and not merely asleep. Jaime had felt something was wrong, known it deep in his bones when the screaming had stopped to be replaced with chilled, suffocating silence, but Tywin Lannister’s grief had been vast, far too vast for Jaime to understand, for him to catch more than the barest glimpse of it. Far more formidable still had been the way his father had drawn himself up, clawed himself back from the violent ravages of grief, to order the appropriate funeral arrangements for a lady as beloved of the Great Lion as Joanna Lannister had been. Shattered sea glass had been in a single instant reforged into something stronger, harsher, more implacable than Valyrian steel. And Jaime had only been able to watch, frozen, numb with shock, with admiration and wonder, as his father had proven himself still a god, fighting past the pain to become once more the High Lord he was, if more distant, more melancholy. If he can have even the merest, slimmest echo of his father’s fortitude to help him now, Jaime will be grateful, and repay the gift with careful retribution and not recklessness.

He’d also asked his father once, when he’d been older though still only a squire, why in the aftermath of his mother being attacked by Aerys, he had not done what Jaime himself is about to do. Tywin Lannister’s jaw had flexed, but he had answered his son’s question eventually. This situation is different: the only Targaryens left are a tyrant and a turncloak, respectively. There are no innocent children here. There is no old friendship to mourn here as there had been between Joanna Lannister and Rhaella Targaryen.

“Your dagger, brother," he says evenly, holding out his left hand. When the younger Lannister hesitates, his face pale, Jaime takes another step forwards, the image of his father’s careful, measured steps, a lion on the hunt, ever entirely in control, vivid in his mind. “Your dagger, Tyrion, now,” he repeats fiercely, dangerous and commanding.

“What are you doing?” The violet-eyed woman chastises her advisor as Tyrion duly does, cautiously, curled into himself, as Jaime has ordered him. Jaime examines the weapon perfunctorily, holding it out in front of him. A simple hilt and unadorned, but the blade itself is sharp and honed. He nods to himself. It will serve well enough for this.

Daenerys Targaryen continues blithely, self-satisfaction dripping from her voice like a serpent’s venom and it sears Jaime’s blood with rage. “Shall you bend the knee now, Jaime Lannister? Shall you have peace under the rule of the Iron Throne and House Targaryen?”

Jaime answers her by meeting her gaze coldly, imagining only too clearly the disheveled, wild sight he must be, and the Dragon Queen quails under the crackling, snarling ice of his expression, and he draws himself up proudly the way his father would have done. If this Targaryen thinks to have broken him thus, well, she will soon learn her error. He is still standing. He still has the means and the will to fight, more even, now that the Targaryen has also given him the motive.
He does not laugh, he does not speak, he simply waits until all eyes are upon him, and he feels the weight of their attention, hushed and narrow-eyed, as he flicks his gaze almost nonchalantly, with a deceptive, casual carelessness, down to the small, naked blade in his hand. Slowly, solemnly, his grim gaze landing upon his brother’s frozen countenance, he raises the dagger and he draws the blade shallowly across his right cheekbone; just enough to cut and bleed in glimmering crimson drops, but not deeply enough that it will scar or require stitches, before disdainfully discarding the blade, letting it fall to the ground, immediately forgotten.

His younger brother swallows hard at the ritual gesture, recognising and understanding it instantly, paling as he comprehends that the battle lines have been now irrevocably drawn. Jaime’s conclave around him stir belligerently, but fall silent as he says the words.

When at last Jaime speaks he hardly recognises his own voice, every word measured, a deadly vow, serious and heavy with vindictive promise, quiet at first, then gaining in grave intent. “We shall have peace when blood has answered blood; we shall have peace when death has answered death; we shall have peace when my House sees your House bled dry. Upon the honour of my House; this I do declare: until lifeblood drench the earth, until the stone of thy House is cast to rubble, until thy Name is no more than the mere echo of dust, until thy very extinction, thou shalt be mine enemy eternal, the Lion shall hunt and slay the Dragon, wheresoever upon the earth, sea, rock or sky mine enemy might be; this I do declare, this I do swear, this I do write with mine own blood.”

“A Blood Feud?” Tyrion sputters. “You would start a blood feud over this, brother?” Jaime catches clearly the unasked, implied question beneath the incredulous words: is he really, truly about to start a blood feud over Sansa? Over an unborn child? Are they truly worth such an extreme vow? Jaime fights down the overwhelming impulse to wring his little brother’s neck. Sansa, Jaime’s wife, the lady he loves, the lady who is his honour and with whom he has made a child out of the purest, happiest sentiment of love he has ever felt, with his wife the Queen in the North - yes, he thinks with a growl of roiling fury, yes, she is worth starting a blood feud over. She is worth everything. Their child is worth everything. And Tyrion is a fool, truly, to not understand that. He should know better than to ask Jaime such a thing. After everything, after the twisted paths their lives have taken these last years, Tyrion should know better than to ask such an idiotic question.

“Yes, but I can do better still than only that,” he drawls, his voice frigid with disdain for his brother, and he is met with wide-eyed fear. Good, he thinks vindictively. Let his brother fear him. Let him remember at last that Jaime is a Lion of Lannister, and let him remember what that truly means. “For the breaking of guest-right, for the attempted assassination of my wife the Queen in the North and our unborn child, I can do much, much better than that.”

There is a stunned, deathly silence as the import of his words sink in. Even the Dragon Queen has paled, and beside her Sansa’s cousin has turned green. Jaime is not so crass as to mock the other man’s choices at such a juncture - there are more pressing, more important things - but he has marked the way the male Targaryen covets Sansa his wife, the way she shudders uncomfortably in response, the way she cloaks herself in ice as a shield, the haunting in her sunset eyes that tells
Jaime she wishes herself a world away when men leer at her, when they think her chattel, appraising her openly, lustfully, the way they would a piece of meat and he will neither forgive nor forget the disrespect she has been shown, and he vows he will have satisfaction, perhaps not upon this day, but Jaime has no intention of letting that debt go unpaid forever: in time all debts are paid.

The resulting commotion and chaos draws him from his vengeful musings, and Lady, ever comforting and gentle at his side, as steadfast as Sansa is, has to growl again so Jaime can make himself heard over the rising bloodlust of their conclave.

“I can give Daenerys Targaryen her heart’s desire,” he continues, low and dangerous and nearly snarling with intent. “I can give her the Iron Throne. The Iron Throne, the Seven Kingdoms, The West, The North, The Riverlands, The Vale.” He throws out his arms. “Come and claim them, Dragon Queen. Come and claim them, and I will give you the war you so desperately want. It arouses you, does it not? To see men scream as they burn, as the flesh chars from their very bones. It makes you feel powerful. It makes you feel right and just. Just like your father Aerys the Mad whom I slew because he wished to make your beloved capital of King’s Landing his own pyre, never mind the million innocent inhabitants of the city,” he continues, warming to his theme.

“You shall have the Iron Throne, Dragon Queen, you shall have your heart’s desire, and I tell you now that once this thing you covet so much is in your greedy, bloody little hands you will despair,” he says, revelling in the words he speaks as he would a promise, with all the gravity and grandeur and terrible certainty of a foretelling. “For your lands shall be barren ash, your people shall be dead shades, and your crown, your crown it shall weigh heavy upon your brow, and your neck will bend under its crimes. The metal shall cut your skin and your head shall bleed and stain your hair like wine and you shall walk in your palace of stones cast down to rubble, and you shall gaze upon your kingdom and see the rivers grey and dry in their riverbeds, the wheat rotting in the fields and the sun weeping in the sky and the air, the very air itself, the wonderful, life-giving air shall taste as bitter poison upon your tongue, and your stomach will twist to breathe it and then, and then shall you say, now that there are none left alive to hear, what have I done? And what shall answer you but the ashes blown into your face by the biting wind? What shall reply but glassy, unseeing eyes staring up at the grey skies? What but the silence of agony shall speak the words you have become your father’s daughter?”

“You think to cow me like a dog at your feet with a curse?” the Targaryen retorts with flashing eyes and reddened cheeks. “I am a Dragon and I am not afraid of you.”

“No,” he replies with deceptive mildness, with a truly dangerous drawl. “This is no curse. This is a promise. This is a sworn, solemn vow. This is an oath, ritual and declared. You wanted a war, and so a war you shall have. This is nothing less than the debt I owe you, and believe you me, I owe you the greatest debt of all. I shall have my payment.”
His gallop back to the Rock is a furious dash, spent in a reeling haze, guiding his horse more by memory and instinct than anything else, flanked by his guards. His promise, his vow made, he’d spat at them in a universal gesture of disgust and stalked away, his Lionsguard and the conclave falling protectively into step around him, Lady mournfully brushing his shoulder.

He’d ignored his brother’s frantic cry of “Jaime! I did not know. I had nothing to do with Sansa - ”

“Enough! You are unworthy to even speak her name. I don’t believe you, brother,” he had retorted with enough venom to poison even a dragon fully grown, spinning around upon his heels. “I do not believe anything you say to me, not now, not anymore, not after what has happened here today. Not ever again will I trust you. Not ever again will I believe you. This is the end, brother. This is one betrayal I cannot overlook, or forgive, or forget. I will remember this always, and I will remember that you were there, not at my side, but as mine enemy, that I will remember always.”

And so he had left the Lord Hand to educate the Dragon Queen, his chosen tyrant, in the intricacies of the ancient custom of the blood feud; cruel perhaps of Jaime, but he finds as he sweeps through the Singer’s Gate - that final, ominous rampart before he comes to the courtyard before the entrance to the principal part of the fortress - that he does not particularly care, if he thinks about it. Daenerys Targaryen should have educated herself on Westerosi customs; it is not Jaime’s fault she has not.

The sight of his wife’s sigil, of Sansa’s direwolf, is the only thing that keeps his concentration intact. He is reeling, glad of the wind caused by his speed of travel because it masks the tears wetting his cheeks, glad of the illusion of privacy given to him by his Lionsguard’s studious professionalism, even now, in this excruciating - he cannot bear to hope for a miracle. He cannot not bear to hope, because a life without Sansa, without their child, is not a life he wishes to live.

Magnificence does not protest the pace, though febrile, snorting and flicking his ears with his rider’s agitation, and Jaime finds himself clattering through the Hall of Heroes into the Golden Hall beyond still mounted, barely paying any attention whatsoever to the cavalry companies steadily mounting up inside the hall, riding up through the cavernous tunnels that form part of the Seastair ramparts from the stables. The full conclave is also there to meet him, belligerent and armed for battle, saluting him with grim determination.
He dismounts carelessly. Magnificence is trained not to stray, and in any case there are an abundance of people able to hold his destrier’s reins still. Ser Addam, he is pleased to see, has already had his armour brought up from his chambers, along with a bowl of water to wash the blood from his hand and it does not take long to fit the King of the West for war.

“How is she? How is my wife?” he demands urgently, almost deafened by the low, booming ringing of the Great Bell, taking off carefully his crimson doublet which was a wedding gift from his wife, and he hands it off gently to Ser Leonidas, who gestures for it to be taken down to Jaime’s rooms.

“The maesters and the Wolfsguard are with her now. Whatever powder she managed to ingest successfully purged the poison from her body, the maesters tell me, Sire,” Addam reports succinctly as he helps Jaime into his leather surcoat.

“Powder?” Jaime frowns his question, not understanding. He had not seen her take anything bar the wine. Has his clever wife - has she -

“From the ring upon her right hand; the casement behind the jewel concealed a purging powder,” his oldest friend explains, fastening Jaime’s breastplate securely. Jaime knows the ring; Sansa has always worn it, a delicate silver band with a cluster of small white diamonds arranged in the discrete pattern of a flower, and he swallows when he comprehends how seriously she had taken the threat of assassination, to be constantly prepared in such a way. It is a legacy, he realises, that must stem from the fact that in all these years of torture and travel and fear she has never felt safe, not completely. Or if she has ever felt truly safe, nevertheless she has not managed to shake the habit of caution that has been beaten into her. He had not thought of it, not really, and he sees now that that was a mistake. He can only hope this mistake of his does not mean her life. It is only that he had not thought the Dragon Queen would be stupid and impulsive enough, given House Stark’s unfortunate history with the custom, to break guest-right, and especially not in such a way.

He fights ruthlessly the treacherous wave of rising hope in his chest. By the gods he cannot take any more of this, but he wets his lips nonetheless and forces himself to speak. “Then she will live? Our child will live?” He trembles. “Will. They. Live?” He asks again, more forcefully.

“Her Majesty shows no signs of miscarriage,” Addam answers, and only Ser Leonidas’s hand upon his elbow as he fastens a vambrace stops Jaime from sagging wearily to the ground in relief. “But I must caution you nonetheless, my King. The poison is unknown to the maesters; only the Lady Pellagea was able to identify it - the Dothraki Deathglove. Had she not used the purging powder, had she drunk more than the barest sip of that wine, it would have been fatal within mere moments, I am told. But the Queen in the North’s injury to the head worries the maesters. She is not hallucinating, which at this stage is by all accounts important. Should any eventual hallucinations
cause her distress, she could inadvertently injure herself further. For now she is unconscious still, and feverish. If she survives the night then her survival is more likely.”

“If,” Jaime chokes, shivering. His sweet, sweet wife - has she not suffered enough? Has she not endured enough that she might be spared further pain? Has she not suffered enough? And now he is told she is at the very gates of death. Fury and despair tightens his throat. Has she not suffered enough? What further price must she pay for the crime of happy innocence? So many have hurt her, so many have attempted to destroy her and now, for a tiny sip of poison to succeed where some of the most monstrous men and women he has ever heard of have failed? He wants to tell the Dragon Queen that Sansa Stark is not so easy to kill as she believes, that his lovely one is resilient beyond any one else he has ever met but then the memory of the terrible fear in the Queen in the North’s eyes makes him doubt. And if the maesters are unfamiliar with the poison used…

“If.”

“It is not over yet, Sire.” The two men clasp forearms briefly, and Jaime bows his head briefly, moved beyond words. Doubt and hope and despair and fury wage a crashing, bitter, furious battle within his heart. He needs her to live. His lovely one must live, and he is the fool his siblings have always disdained him as, he is a fool to hope, a fool to keep faith, a fool to take heart in his wife’s strength of character that has outmanoeuvred, outplayed and outlasted many of the cleverest men, those with the most resources at their disposal. It cannot end like this. He will not let it end like this.

If she dies, if his child dies, then revenge and retribution will be the least of Daenerys Targaryen’s concerns, that Jaime does promise himself. But he shies away from the notion because a world without his wife is not one he wants to live in. A world where his and Sansa’s child is ripped from her unborn is not a world he will allow. A life without Sansa is unthinkable.

“If it was the Dothraki Deathglove, and Pell is rather astute in these matters, believe me - the tales I could tell you - then give the Queen in the North shadewine,” Jaime’s uncle Gerion interjects suddenly, and Jaime turns to him in surprise, not daring to believe -

“Shadewine can cure her?” he asks lowly, rolling his shoulders as the weight of his pauldrons settling on his muscles, lifting his arms out to the side so the armour can be fastened more easily. His crimson sash is draped once more over his shoulder, Endever’s sword belt wrapped around his waist to keep it in place.

“No. But it should alleviate some of the symptoms, so the stomach cramps from the purging powder do not develop into something more severe, for example,” the elder Lannister explains, his eyes genuine, and this, this is the uncle Jaime remembers from his childhood, and it reassures him more than he could ever have anticipated. “The shadewine should also help bring down her fever,
but cure her? No. That is beyond it.”

“And how did the Lady Pellagea come to learn so much of poisons?” Jaime cannot help but ask, skeptically. He is far more curious about where his uncle has come to acquire such knowledge. “If you and she are wrong, if this is some sort of trick to hasten my wife’s botched assassination - ”

“Pell is a woman and a pirate at that; it is practically a requirement,” his uncle responds, undaunted by Jaime’s violent words. “In any case Pell has told me she rather admires the Queen in the North. Pell told me that she had never before met anyone able to rule through gentleness as your wife does, nephew, instead of battlefield skill or fear; the notion quite intrigues her, I believe. On more than one occasion such knowledge of poisons has got she and I out of a merry scrape. Why, when the Sepens of the Basilisk Isles - ”

“Do it,” Jaime orders, cutting off his uncle. He is in no mood to listen whilst his swashbuckling buccaneer of an uncle goes off on yet another of his storytelling tangents. Not whilst his wife and child hang so precariously between life and death. “Tell the maesters, whatever must be done to save my wife and child, they do it. No question.”

“At once, Sire,” Ser Addam bows.

He turns once more to his uncle. “I am trusting you,” he warns severely.

“I know, Jaime,” the Lord Gerion replies, equally solemnly. “The confidence of a King and a Lannister no less is not easily won; I do know that. You will not regret it, Sire.”

“Good,” Jaime replies evenly.

“Sire,” his uncle ventures, “I hesitate to broach the subject at such a juncture as this, but I must ask: should the worst happen, what about the succession? Tyrion cannot be permitted to - ”

“I agree, uncle,” Jaime replies quietly. This is not something he wishes to contemplate, but he knows he must, and he takes a moment to gather his thoughts. “If I die, my crown passes to my wife and our child. If they - if they both die, then my crown passes first to you, uncle Gerion, then my cousin Ser Daven. If my wife - then her crown would pass to our child, and then her sister the Lady Arya.” He declares carefully, swallowing harshly. “Do I make myself clear?” He looks long and hard at his uncle, at Ser Addam, at Ser Leonidas, men whom he trusts to carry out his wishes in the event that he is not there to do so. “My brother - my brother is a thrice-damned traitor and a
kinslayer and patricide if treason were not crime enough. He has betrayed my house, he has betrayed the Westerlands his ancestral home, and he has betrayed Westeros by bringing to these shores a deranged weapon to sow chaos in the form of the last mad scion of a house rightfully overthrown for all horrible manner of infamies. He has thrown in his lot with a Targaryen invader who is possessed of both a nasty immolation habit and a tendency to disdain our traditional customs. He cannot be permitted to assume rule over the West or indeed anywhere else under any circumstances.”

“So be it, Sire,” the three men reply solemnly, and Jaime knows instinctively his commands, his wishes on these matters will be obeyed in full.

“Scorpions? Archers?” Jaime pursues restlessly, fighting the impulse go race down to his chambers and see for himself the state of his wife. He can imagine all too clearly the scene in his mind; his wife, pale, unresponsive, bleeding, dying and a frantic cacophony of maesters around her, shouting, calling for instruments and poultsices and linens and tinctures and unguents, rushing their apprentices off their feet in frenzied haste, his sigil Fortune the faithful silent and protective at the Queen in the North’s bedside, and the Wolfguard standing in solemn vigil over her, great silver swords drawn. Fortune is what reassures him; the fact that he can vaguely sense his Lion’s watchfulness over Sansa in the back of his mind, as yet untainted by frantic despair, though the sigil carries a heavy, melancholy sense of shame that he was not attentive enough, did not recognise the strange scent of the Dothraki poison for what it was. Jaime forgives his sigil, for the shame is his own. He was not fast enough, not attentive enough, not cunning or imaginative enough to think the Dragon Queen might do such a thing as poison Sansa, in such a manner and upon such an occasion, no less.

“Waiting for your command, Sire.”

The reply shakes him from his imaginings and Jaime nods shortly, with grim determination. He sets his helm upon his head and then mounts his warhorse, knotting his reins for quicker manoeuvrability and holding out his left hand for his lance, which is duly given to him. Hefting the weight with an ease born of long familiarity, he nudges Magnificence towards the entrance, clattering down the Hall of Heroes with the great doors awaiting him at the end, where he finds his standard bearer and his signallers, and he nods to himself, waiting with equanimity for his men to fall in line behind him. At the end of the Hall of Heroes is where the Rock itself joins with the fortress; the Hall of Heroes and the Golden Hall together with the higher Seastair form the central command of any defensive battle, for from this centre the ramparts and long, wide corridor tunnels, wide enough for ten horses to walk side by side, spread down through the mountain and the fortifications, as extensive as the hand of fate, and a maze just as convoluted as the deepest, darkest mine shafts. The fortifications as a whole have been designed so signalling is both very rapid and effective throughout, and the same can be said for acoustics.

This is why Casterly Rock was built in such a way. Of course, the long gallery of the Hall of Heroes suddenly opening into the grandiose space of the Golden Hall was designed to impress guests and visitors, but it was more subtly conceived also for the purpose for which Jaime now
uses it. Not for nothing is the Hall of Heroes here. Every Lannister host, every Lannister commander must ride through it on his way out to battle.

His forebears, golden and stern, some carved from silent stone, others drawn in colourful mosaic swirls upon the walls, watch Jaime ride out, the weight of their gaze upon him his house’s history, and he breathes deeply, moved beyond anything, any sentiment he can parse or explain. The sunrise, bright and joyful, in the background of one alcove makes him think of the only man he has ever wholeheartedly admired, and from contemplative wistfulness and melancholy his spirits rise to faith. Are you with me, Arthur? He thinks, and it seems to him that the legendary Sword of the Morning replies as a murmur in his mind, a whisper carried to him by a gentle hand, Have heart, little brother. Have faith, for as the sun must set, so to must there always be a sunrise. The dawn always comes. Take heart now, take faith, and have courage. I am with you. The Kings of the Rock before you, your golden, prideful ancestors, they look upon you from the other side with great attention. You have made me proud, and so too you shall make them proud of you.

It might be a silly, stupid figment of his imagination, but his heart swells nonetheless, the line of his shoulders straightens proudly, and he sits tall and straight in his saddle, every inch a King. Thank you, Arthur, he thinks. I will not fail you. I will not fail Sansa. I will not fail our unborn child. I will not fail my father nor my mother. I will do everything to be deserving of the title of King of the Rock bestowed upon me.

Magnificence chomps eagerly at his bit and Jaime runs through his strategy one final time in his mind. Ser Daven, in his role as Lannisport garrison commander, is already in his place beyond the Lion’s Mouth with his own company, ready to lure out the Dragon Queen in the way that they have planned, Jaime knows. Ser Addam, having vaulted onto his own mount, and saluted Jaime, now rides for the height of the Seastair, from which vantage point he will have the view required to command the archers and foot soldiers currently lining the all the fortress ramparts, ready with pitch and tar and burning sand and fire arrows as well as arrows of the more mundane variety in their stuffed quivers. The scorpions are dotted throughout the ramparts and watchtowers and gatehouses, and Jaime has given Bronn command of those, along with Leonel of Lannisport’s mechanical siege devices and traps, such a position suitng his sellsword friend’s sense of cunning, Jaime thinks. The lords of the conclave are scattered amongst the cavalry and the men, though to Jaime’s surprise with him and the Lionsguard and his uncle in the vanguard have joined him, amongst others, Lords Royce, Glover, Lefford, Mooton, ferocious old Manderly on his fearsome giant of a destrier, and Marbrand, Ser Addam’s father.

“A fine day to bring down a dragon,” Lord Glover comments.

“Indeed,” Jaime smirks, nodding at the bannerman, who nods back. “My lords,” he continues, addressing the lords of his vanguard, looking each man in the eye. “I would have no finer men with me on such a day.”
“Sire,” they bow their heads.

“And you, Ser Leonidas? Do I have the faith of my Lionsguard? Will they ride with me?”

“You have our faith, Sire.”

Jaime nods again to himself, swallowing past the heartfelt emotion that suddenly appears in his chest, a bright, warming curl. “You honour me, gentlemen.”

He urges Magnificence forwards, turning the stallion with a nudge of his knee so he faces the legions he will lead into battle, to the centre of a large circle of gold-veined marble set into the flagstones, where if he speaks he knows he will be heard not only in the Hall of Heroes but also throughout by the soldiers and commanders throughout the fortifications, aided by mirrors placed just so which will throw the sound as far as necessary, just as the Great Bell quiets and stills, and the host with it falls silent. He motions to his signal master, giving his order quietly, not taking his attention off his men. “And now we begin. Keep the dragons occupied.” The order is a flash of cloth, rippling down the line, a staccato of colour, and up, up, up, translated into light, flying like a stone from a catapult, up to the Seastair, and then the echo of the command Fire! Fire! Fire! a returning ricochet, punctuated by the muffled fury of the dragons in the skies above. Jaime sees them clearly in his mind’s eye, whirling like leaves in the wind, plummeting, soaring, diving, tumbling through the patches of cloud - the only thing that matters is to make them too busy dodging scorpion bolts to turn their attentions to the ground and set the city and soldiers alight.

His host remains silent as the battle grows outside the mountain walls of his fortress, and he keeps his attention firmly upon them in return, setting Magnificence into a canter down the line. Every man meets his gaze, calmly. Ready for war. By this time, Jaime calculates, his crack cavalry captain Vylarr, along with Ser Daven, will have provoked the Dothraki and Unsullied outside Lannisport, luring out of their camp and into the city itself, as Jaime and the conclave had strategised in their war councils. He has no illusions; he will be at the centre of the carnage. He is a King, and more than that he is a Lannister. He will lead the way he has always before led his armies: from the front.

The time has come to prove himself worthy of the faith of his bannermen and soldiers. This, he knows, will be on a grander scale than any other battle he has ever fought in. Not even in Winterfell against the Night King and the White Walkers were there so many elements to consider, as there are now. But this is why Blood Feuds, true Blood Feuds declared by ritual custom, are so rare. House Lannister, he knows, has only once declared in over ten thousand years of recorded history a Blood Feud, and this against a house of the Iron Born who mutilated the Queen Leila Lannister, and whose holdfast was razed to the ground and the direct line of descent made extinct, in retaliation for such a trespass.
He has vowed nothing less than the complete extinction of House Targaryen. More than that, as every Westerosi boy and girl learns, a Blood Feud declared requires any and every member of Jaime’s own house, to do the same as him and inflict annihilation. He fully understands that this places Tyrion, for example, in a rather precarious situation, but Jaime has no sympathy for him, not anymore, not after the poisoning of the Queen in the North. Whether or not Tyrion chooses to disregard Jaime’s declared, vowed Blood Feud is his own affair - but the Lord Hand must carefully measure the consequences of such an action. Jaime will not interfere. Indeed he has no plans to make Tyrion’s eventual decision in some way easier; this is a demon his little brother must wrestle with on his own.

Jaime shakes his head of the distracting, dismaying thoughts - he is utterly heartbroken by Tyrion’s actions, by his betrayals, and much as it was with Cersei in the end, Jaime no longer knows what to think, no longer knows what to believe of his wayward, turncloak brother, and he clatters once more down the line, returning to the centre of his host, returning to halt his horse upon that marble circle, motioning for the great doors to be opened.

The time has come.

He inhales deeply, and speaks from his heart to rally his men. He knows of no other way to inspire them, to fortify them for the carnage to come, other than to speak from his heart. He has not particularly planned any great, flamboyant speech, but as he begins he thinks of his wife, his child, a sweet, bright-eyed little girl with her mother’s warm russet hair, or a boy like him, blond and brave with his mother’s cleverness and compassion, and the words flow from him as though a river. “Men of the West, of the North, of the Trident and the Vale - Men of Westeros!” he calls grandly. “We’ve had our differences in the past, that is true enough, and yet here we stand. Here we stand, together. One line, unbroken, and though beyond these doors we will face dragon fire and madness, I have hope.” Hope for his wife’s life, hope for a future. He cannot do anything but hope.

“I have hope because we, we Westerosi, we fight for something greater, for something worth holding to,” he continues, warming steadily to his theme. “We hold to our customs and rites, ancient, significant rituals. We hold to our lands, to their prosperity and peace. We hold to our lives as free men. We hold to our oaths of fealty to our lords, unless our lords break the sacred covenant, in which case we hold to our recourse of formal petition and demands for restitution, and only if these are not met do we call our banners.”

He pauses to collect himself, before continuing, more somber now, but with rising conviction. “This Dragon Queen has ignored our ways of war, butchering the unarmed and burning food. She spits upon our solemn and sacred customs of parley, of bread and salt, upon our ancient rite of electing for ourselves our rulers. She knows nothing of our cultures, of the importance of the vine and the apricot tree in the West, of the heart tree in the North, or the apple tree in the Reach. She knows nothing of the importance of the Trident in the Riverlands, or of the well in Dorne or of the pulley in the Vale. She knows not our songs, our histories, our duels, our treaties, and still she thinks herself the person to rule us!” He lets the host jeer the Targaryen invader, lets them build
the rising battle-fury in their blood for a time, before holding his lance high once more for silence.

“I have been called many things in my time - Lion of Lannister, Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, Man without Honour, the Limping Lion - not so limp now, am I? I have been called King of the West, Goldenhand, husband. And I will tell you know that I hold to three of these: Kingslayer, husband, King of the West.” His heart is pounding. He had not intended to make such a personal speech, but he soon sees the interest of it, and pursues his course. He is honest. He is wholly honest. He lets his people and his wife’s see him for who he is and he will ask them to make their choice. Will they follow him to war? To death? Will they ride with him?

“I am the Kingslayer because I cut down the Mad King, and now I plan to cut down the Mad King's daughter, because she is as mad as he, and I will not let my people suffer the Targaryen yoke when I have yet strength and blood in me to prevent it. I am the King of the West because you, my lords, my people, chose to elect me, chose to place your faith and trust in me, and it is an honour to which I hold.” His host is cheering raucously now and he lets the energy feed him, he lets the blood lust carry him onwards, and his words become more personal still.

“And finally, I am husband, husband to the Queen in the North Sansa Stark whom I love. And as I speak I know not whether she yet lives or whether the Dragon Queen's poison has bled her life and that of our unborn child from her body.” He does not hide the anguish he feels, nor his rage and despair. Were he stark naked before his host he would be less vulnerable. He has imagined many times declaring that his wife is with child; he cannot say that he has ever imagined announcing it first as part of a Blood Feud oath to his enemies, and secondly as he does now, to a host of thousands of men on the edge of battle as part of such a speech. He had imagined something far more prosaic; at a celebratory feast with conclave and bannermen, in a time of joy and hope. He had imagined dancing with his wife upon such an occasion, revelling in her happy laughter and singing. He never could have contemplated the circumstance in which he now finds himself, declaring the news in such a way. The pain of it makes it difficult for him to breathe, difficult to speak beyond the agony in his heart, seizing it, crushing it beneath an uncaring, cruelly indifferent fist. But he was not chosen to be King because he was a god. He was chosen to be King because he is a man. Sansa has taught him that. He has always made it his practice to come to know the men under his command in his years as a soldier, but his wife is the only person he has ever met to have openly encouraged him in this style.

“Daenerys Targaryen's true colours have been exposed,” he elaborates forcefully. “She is not the rightful Queen of these Seven Kingdoms for she poisoned with the intent to kill my wife Sansa Stark, the Queen in the North, Queen of the Trident and Queen of the Vale, in violation of the hallowed rights of parley, breaking the treaty of peace and freedom we had signed. The Dragon Queen is a tyrant who thinks nothing of ignoring the ways and customs we hold sacred. She owes me, the King of the West, a debt indeed. She owes my wife the Queen in the North the greatest debt, she owes the West, the Vale, the Riverlands and the North a debt. She owes every one of us the greatest debt of all.”

“Lannister! Lannister! Lannister!” Jaime’s cavalry chant, and his heart begins to beat that
pounding tattoo, loud and roaring in his ears, *Lann-i-STER, Lann-i-STER, Lann-i-STER.*

“I am a Lannister,” he snarls, “and a Lannister always pays his debts. And the North remembers, does it not?” He pauses, before beginning once again, now ominous and terrible and certain. “And so I vowed that we might have peace when blood has answered blood; when death has answered death; when I see the stone of House Targaryen bled dry and cast to rubble, until lifeblood drench the earth, until extinction, until the Targaryen name is no more than the mere echo of dust, then, and only then, shall we have peace.”

“So here we stand,” cries out the King of the West, “here we stand together, one line unbroken. And though the Dragon Queen will throw the full might of her armies at us, we will stand together, one line unbroken,” he repeats. *One line. One line unbroken.* “Though they will come at us screaming, baying for blood, though it will be ugly, painful, fatal, we will stand together, one line unbroken, because this is our land, and the only way these barbarians can take it from is if we let them. Though she will unleash her dragons upon us, we will stand together, one line unbroken, because we have brought down those fell monsters she calls children before, and we shall do so again. We will stand together, one line unbroken, because we have looked the setting sun in the face every day of our lives. We will stand together, one line unbroken, because as my old friend Ser Arthur Dayne used to remind me, the dawn yet comes.”

“So we hold to the sunset and to the dawn,” he commands of them, “we hold to the strength of the roaring lion and the fangs of the winter wolf; we hold to the flight of the eagle and the dutiful leap of the fish, honourable and bound in the bonds of kinship; we hold to being first in battle; we hold to these realms free and true. We hold to life and love, we hold to fealty and freedom, we hold to our banners and our lands, we hold, here, now, to stand together, one line unbroken. These lands are yours, these people are yours, and yours alone. Men of the Kingdoms, will you fight for them? Will you stand with me, here, now, until your last breath, until your last drop of blood, and fight with me to send these barbarians from the East back to the wastelands from whence they came? Stand, I bid you, stand and ride with me, stand together, ride together, one line unbroken, and fight with me!”

The cheers of his men threaten to deafen him, echoing upon the walls carved from ancient stone, until his fortress resounds with their cries, rumbling like thunder. He leans back in his stirrups and Magnificence pirouettes easily, proudly.

He stares out through the great doors, having a far view of his battlefield sloping down away in front of him. Casterly Rock. Lannisport below, and the Targaryen encampment beyond. The sounds of men dying and the ferocious clash of swords rise like steam from fresh entrails cut open.

In the centre of chaos and carnage he is certain and calm.
He raises his lance once more. “For Casterly Rock!” he calls. “For Winterfell!” Lady is a russet shadow at his side, Magnificence entirely unperturbed as the direwolf howls her vengeance to the unfeeling skies. “For the Queen in the North!” For Sansa. For their child. For them both he will take the burden of violence entirely upon his shoulders, so his brave, gentle wife never must do the same, so that their innocent child may yet and always remain innocent.

He and his armies will wade in blood to their knees under the setting sun, Jaime knows, and his enemies will this day be reminded precisely what it is the name Lannister truly means.

By the gods he will revel in it.

And who are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low?

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Comments? Predictions?
SANSA STARK XIV

Chapter Summary

Let me wake, she pleads soundlessly. Let me wake and find myself away from here, let me find myself safely in my husband’s arms.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!

Welcome to this next instalment. Thank you as always for your comments and support and enthusiasm, they really do mean so much to me, and they help me keep the momentum going, so thank you all.

Thanks also, as always, to northernsky for the help with the characterisation & narrative arcs.

This is a chapter I've been wanting to get to for a very, very long time. It's one of the most important as regards Sansa's characterisation, and I can't wait to see what you all think of it.

A word of warning nonetheless: graphic sexual violence at the beginning of the chapter, and MAJOR angst throughout. I'm not kidding. This chapter really earns the angst tag especially.

See you all at the bottom xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWENTY SEVEN
She is falling, drowning, dying in the dark. She falls and falls and falls, breathlessly, aware and helpless, until she is not; until the sensation of movement fades away, and leaving in its place only a headache of gargantuan proportions, and then a voice, unctuous, crawling like a thousand spiders with a thousand milky eyes, nightmares, over her skin -

“Slowly, sweetling, you were slower with the antidote this time, and you have borne the consequence, daughter.”

She twists in the sheets, shuddering with revulsion and she retches over the side of the bed, again and again and again, spattering the contents of her stomach upon cold stone tiles, coughing out between spasms - “You are dead. You are dead at my sister’s hand and you can no longer hurt me now. You are dead.” You are not my father. I am not your sweetling.

“Come now, dear Alayne, come, you are delirious still from the poison. Alayne has no sisters, she is my beloved only child.” He moves languidly towards her, boots silent upon the stone.

“My name is Sansa Stark of Winterfell, and you are dead. This is a nightmare.” She shakes with the force of her conviction, spitting the words. I am Sansa Stark of Winterfell, I am the Queen in the North, and I am the beloved wife of Jaime Lannister the King of the West. She cloaks herself in her belief, in this unalienable truth, and it gives her strength enough despite her physically weakened state.

“I shall call the maester for you, you are clearly unwell, sweetling,” he continues blithely, as though she had not spoken, ignoring her entirely.

“I am not unwell, excepted the poison you tested me with again,” Sansa bites out.
He tilts his head in curiosity, extending a cold hand to press against her forehead and she jerks away from the touch, immediately, instinctively. “You are not normally inclined to debate, sweetling.” He sweeps her with a stomach-churning gaze, lingering where her nightshift clings to her with sweat, lingering where her bedclothes have been thrown off by her thrashing to expose her to him and she shudders, feeling feverish with disbelief and bone-deep disgust of him, humiliated shame at her position - this is not real. This is a nightmare, he has no right and he is dead, he is dead, he was killed right in front of her by Arya at Winterfell, condemned and executed after a legal trial, openly and properly conducted in the sight of the conclave - he is dead, buried in an unmarked grave, he is dead, he is dead, dead, dead and gone.

She tries to sit up and get out of the bed - get away, she has to get away, she must, she must - but her vision spins and blackens when she tries, moaning piteously, and this makes her gaoler, her tormentor pick up another silver cup and she tries to shy away instinctively, twisting, trembling in the bedclothes but he uses his superior strength and weight to pin her beneath him and she chokes, sobbing, shaking her head, pleading with him to stop because she remembers all too clearly what comes next even though she wishes she could not. He pinches her nose with cruel fingers to force open her gasping mouth and he tips the viscous white contents down her throat, making her swallow chokingly, and she remembers this and she hates it, she’s so frightened, she’s so ashamed because what comes next is - she remembers - she remembers thinking the first time that she had never felt so degraded - and then she had been sold like chattel to Ramsey and had discovered that she had been so, so very wrong and -

It begins the way it always does, in her toes, a cold, lethargic sort numbness that freezes her in place, stealing higher with every frantic beat of her broken heart, and she can’t feel her legs anymore, she can’t move, she can’t move her torso, nor her shoulders, nor her arms, nor her head, not even her eyes and they remain fixed upon her gaoler’s face, unable to escape the cunning, lustful satisfaction in his terrible eyes, vindictive as his breathing deepens and he sighs you’re mine now, little Cat but she is not. She is Sansa Stark of Winterfell, the Queen in the North and though she might be forced into such a humiliating, submissive pose her mind is still her own, her mind is ever her own and she does not have to see him as he revels in his power and lust over her.

She is numb, unseeing, unfeeling, a statue, as he cuts away her nightshift with a dagger and - oh, he is always very careful to keep her maidenhead intact but there are other ways, she has come to understand, to defile her and her tears because she cannot weep come to weigh upon her heart, shattering it, and she does not fight the spreading numbness because the lethargy is an escape from this horror - she does not want him, she has never wanted him, she is not his, he has no right, none at all and she wants Jaime, she wants her husband but she cannot move because the mockingbird has ensnared her in his glimmering net, and tied the strands so tight as to make escape impossible and she welcomes the only thing that remains, she gives herself up to it, exhausted, she welcomes the oblivion.

Distant as muffled thunder, a lion roars, and she reaches blindly, desperately for the sound but it is far away, too far away and fading even as she attempts futilely to grasp it and she falls again into the dark, falling, drowning, dying.
When she opens her eyes again, cautiously, slowly, it is to weak shafts of pale light slanting through broken shutters and she - has she not suffered enough? As she recognised instantly her cell in the Eyrie so too she recognises her prison at Winterfell, her childhood bedroom, once a place of comfort and sanctuary become a haunt for her pain. Her dressing table, once the safe-box of the little trinkets she’d considered precious, coloured ribbons and scented flower petals from the glass gardens, childish, girlish things, remnants of a safer time, thrown to the floor, doors mangled and half-hanging from their hinges, the mirror frame shattered in pieces upon the stone. Ramsey had thought it a fine laugh that the upended position of her heavy table, a symbol of her ravaged innocence, and the glass shards like flashing gems of blue-hued ice upon the floor, prevented her from leaving her room without the sensitive soles of her feet being cut to bloody ribbons by the glass.

The cold walls stripped of the decorative tapestries she’d spent hours admiring as a little girl, trailing her fingers dreamily over the colourful strands, lingering upon the pretty things, green and gold tipped leaves tumbling through the composition as though just blown about by a gust of wind, the proud, powerful arch of a white destrier’s neck, the gleaming blue-black metal of the handsome knight, the shimmering strings of a high harp or a mandolin or a lyre, the bright flowers - white and red and gold, not blue, never blue, never ever blue - crowning the innocent maiden dancing, laughing. In an act of the cruelty Ramsey had revelled in she had been forced to witness its desecration by her blood, forcibly taken at knife-point, its subsequent defilement with his seed, and at last its destruction by fire as the Bolton bastard had tossed it over the burning logs. She’d thought of her grandfather then, roasted alive in his armour as he was by the Mad King. The knight had become ash first, his helmed head disintegrating before the rest of him, and the blaze had set the destrier’s mane aflame, and the proud posture had become a twist of agony comparable to her own torment.

At least this time she senses she is alone in her bed, naked, the pounding in her temples returning with swift and painful retribution as she realises her legs are crusted in dried blood, and her spirits sink, shuddering. She might not be restrained by a foul concoction as she was under the Mockingbird’s tutelage but she may as well have been: she cannot walk, not with her legs in their current state, and she knows she would only be bringing further agonies upon herself were she to attempt it, the only way to pass time to stare mindlessly at the ceiling, awaiting with despair yet another night of pain and terror.

With sudden terror she recalls the last time her legs were covered in blood and she - with desperation borne of the acutest sorrow she brings her hand to the juncture between her legs, praying, eyes shut, please, please, please let - her fingers come away without blood and she sobs with acute, overwhelming relief, curling her hand protectively over her stomach. She has not miscarried. Her and Jaime’s child, this child she wants, this child born of the greatest, most wonderful love she has ever known, this child still is growing in her womb. Her child yet lives. Her and Jaime’s child lives.

A commotion on the other side of the door; it swings open and she shies away as best she can, attempting to make herself as small as possible, barely breathing because if she is asleep perhaps he
will not - he likes to make her scream, she knows, but who is she trying to fool? The blood drying stickily, crustily upon her legs is evidence enough that her being asleep would not be enough to dissuade him. A shadow stands upon the threshold and with a harsh shove propels a smaller figure into the room, sobbing, collapsing upon the flagstones even as the door slams closed behind him. Theon? she thinks, but the person turns to look at her and she gasps -

“Rickon?” she clutches weakly at a grimy fur, pulling it hurriedly over herself. “What are you - I don’t understand?”

“Sansa?” her littlest brother croaks. “You’re not meant to be here yet.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, her brow furrowing.

“I’m dead,” he replies simply. “You’re not meant to be, at least not yet.”

“And this is what? One of the Hells?”

“No. A passing place. A memory. The dead can walk these places if they want.”

“How do I leave? Can I leave, then, if, as you say, it is not yet my time?”

Rickon turns an unusually solemn expression on her. “I came to find you. There’s only one way out.” He holds out his bleeding hands to her. “You have to fight. I’ll help you.” At her look of astonishment he smiles sheepishly, though his eyes never lose their cracks of pain. “You came back for me. Jon didn’t. He didn’t want to at first, you had to persuade him. Sansa, you were dying. Fleeing on foot through the snow with those fucking hounds hunting you, you were dying. And you came back. You knew he was a monster, you didn’t have to imagine what he was doing to me because you knew. You’re so brave, big sister. You came back. I would have understood if you had not wanted to. If you never wanted to see R-Ramsey again - ”

“Rickon, it wasn’t a choice. You’re my little brother. Of course I came back for you,” she replies, her voice low and strained with fierce emotion. “Of course I came back. You are family. You’re my little brother. Of course I came back for you. I am only sorry I failed, please forgive me, Rickon, forgive me.”

Rickon shakes his head, his unruly curls falling floppily over his forehead, and despite the horror
There had been no choice, Sansa thinks, her blood stilling, searing her veins with ice at the memories. Jon had not understood, but to Sansa, there had never been any other alternative than to ride back to Winterfell and get her little brother out, or die trying. Sansa knows what it is to be abandoned, to know that your elder siblings could have fought for you but for the notion that they think you a lost cause and so they do not even try. She had been hard pressed to think of anything worse, anything more heartbreaking, anything more entirely terrible than her little brother clinging desperately to the thought Sansa’s still alive, Jon’s still alive, they’ll come and get me, they’ll rescue me day after day, only that to sustain him, only that to give strength and fortitude enough to endure through the torment, and Sansa not mounting a rescue attempt because it was too risky, because, because, because, with a list of excuses to speak enough until the ending of the world - the moment of that realisation destroys you from the inside out, Sansa remembers. To know that your elder sibling whom you have always hero-worshipped, who has an army, a multitude of resources at their disposal, but does not consider you to be worth enough to rescue, that rips you apart, how could it not?

She had been determined to avoid Rickon having to endure that kind of heartbreak. Not on her watch, not whilst she still had life enough in her to prevent it if she could.

“I remember you singing, Sansa,” Rickon says suddenly, and it wrenches her from her reminiscing. “I don’t remember much - from before the fat man came to Winterfell, I mean. But I do remember you singing, and when Ramsey brought me here I heard you singing in my ear, laughing with me, holding me, and I - it helped me.”

“Oh, Rickon,” she cries, overwhelmed.

“Everyone else - Mother, Father, Robb, Bran, everyone else left me behind, except you,” he growls, ferociously swiping at his eyes with the backs of his hands. “You came back for me. I won’t leave you here to rot.”

“How?” she croaks. “How do we get out of here? I’m not leaving you either.”

“You’re the strongest of us all, big sister, the bravest of us all, and you can fight, I know you can.” He continues, encouraging her, motioning for her to take his hands and so she grits her teeth, clinging to the light in her little brother’s eyes, her little brother who has come to save her when the rest of the family has not, and she forces herself to stand. “Come on, Sansa, brave, sweet sister.” He has so much faith in her, she thinks, sobbing, and that is what gives her the strength to do as he
She screams as her legs give out, collapsing into her youngest sibling’s waiting embrace, burying her face in his shoulder, weeping helplessly into his tunic, clutching feverishly at him.

“It’s done, sweet sister, it is over now, you can close your eyes, I have you, I’m not going to abandon you, big sister, I’m not, I promise I’m not.”

She falls again through the darkness. This time, there is a wolf howling in the distance along with the lion. This time, she does not fall alone. This time, she falls, clinging to her youngest brother, him clinging to her.

The sun is warming her face, and she smiles softly, keeping her eyes resolutely closed the better to enjoy the sensation, so rare it seems she had half forgotten what it felt like. The sunlight is tender, like the caress of a lover, gentle, and her smile deepens to a sigh of bliss. She knows that touch, she would know it anywhere, she would know it beyond the ending of the world. “Jaime,” she murmurs, “my love, my king, husband mine.”

A soft breeze ruffles her hair across her face, and she brushes it back without thinking, content to lie here, at peace in the warm sunlight. And then all of a sudden everything is still; the breeze vanishes just as suddenly as it arrived. Bewildered, she opens her eyes, and she gasps, for she finds herself in a woodland glade, filled not with northron pines but with apricot trees heavy with blush-golden fruit, sweet-smelling and ripe, flanked here and there by a solemn cypress column, and her smile widens with joy. She stands, and she is relieved to notice that she is actually dressed - and, she blushes violently - in the white gown she wore to Jaime’s great and ardent admiration to the feast at Casterly Rock. She is barefoot, her hair is loose and curled down her back, and she is at peace.

Quietly, softly, slowly, she wanders through the glade, the grass soft and luxuriant beneath her white, dainty feet, reaching out a tentative hand to pluck one of the apricots, desiring to sink her
teeth into it and taste of the juicy flesh - but Rickon’s words come back to her, ringing in her mind like an alarum bell: *You are not meant to be here yet. This is a passing place.* This is a wood between worlds. And so she thinks better of the idea, and wanders languidly on, leaving the fruit untouched.

It strikes her then that the glade is entirely silent; there are no birds singing in the branches, even the skirts of her gown are eerily hushed as they trail along the grass, but before she can examine the thought more closely she catches sight of a shape half hidden by a cypress, and as she approaches it, it slowly reveals itself to be a statue, no - two statues, side by side, the size of horses, one of a lion and the other a direwolf, their attitudes proud and fearsome, snarling eternally at the sky. The letters carved into each plinth read as follows: *FORTUNE THE FAITHFUL* and *LADY THE LAMENTED*, and beside them lies a mound of fresh, dark earth and she recoils with instinctive horror, a chill unlike any she has ever known creeping over her and settling with vindictive ruthlessness like chains about her into her skin, flaying her to her very bones, the sun sinks behind dark, evilly growling clouds and she -

*That is my grave,* she thinks, shuddering. *Oh gods, that is my grave I cannot bear this an instant more* -

She turns and flees, running fleet-footed without any attention to her surroundings, through the glade as the deluge from the heavens begins, merciless in its assault, and her hair and gown are rapidly weighed down with water but she pursues her course, her heart twisting at the visible destruction of such a beautiful gown, her favourite because it is Jaime’s favourite, because she had worn it for him and only him.

She had not thought the glade would have an end, but have an end it does, and she realises as she stands in the open that it is not in fact a glade, but merely a terrace hewn from the mountainside, one of many, one of thousands, because they spread, linked by wide, elaborate stone staircases, as far as she can see, and she is alone.

She trembles. She is alone in this strange landscape - no, there, below there is a rider, furiously churning up the turf like the wrecking wind of a storm, and in one hand he holds a grey and white banner, and in the other a burning torch. She can only watch in horror as the rider tosses the torch high and the trees catch fire. The flames hiss at the rain but appear determined to conquer it and now the blaze begins to spread and the direwolf on the banner it seems to her it comes to life, snarling and howling at the heavens.

The rider turns his mount towards her and though it is too far her vision is strangely sharp and she -

“Robb!” she screams, taking off running again, this time frantically down the steps, and it seems to
her that the trees scream with her, apricots light from within to become burning embers, as inside the branches sap boils as blood. “Robb!”

His head snaps up.

“Robb!” she cries again. “Why are you doing this?” Why is he burning trees? Why is he burning life? Why is he here?

She is closer now, close enough that he sees her and cannot ignore her, and she halts her frenzied flight down the steps, only paces from him, and his horse sidles in surprise no less than his rider.

He looks at her, then, this elder brother of hers with the same eyes and hair as her, and she shivers, not because of the roaring flames or the pelting rain that sticks her hair flat to her head, but because of his gaze, as cold and as unfeeling as the Night King’s as it rakes over her, dismissively, as though she is nothing and she does not understand what he has become. This is not the brother she remembers from Winterfell, nor even the King in the North that she imagines he was, this is a demon from the battlefield with brimstone in his eyes and violence carved deeply into the lines of his face, with hatred, she is stunned to discover that is aimed at this place, hatred that is aimed at her, though she cannot understand why. Let me wake, she pleads soundlessly. Let me wake and find myself away from here, let me find myself safely in my husband’s arms.

Meeting him again is too much. Her skin prickles with fever, her temples pound with her ever-present headache, and she sways, catching herself upon a stone pillar. “Why did you leave me in King’s Landing?” she asks, in a voice small and tight, the question slipping out before she has entirely realised that she has spoken.

“And trade you for the Kingslayer?” he replies coldly, condescendingly. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I would have! I would have if it got you back,” Sansa cries. “I would have tried anything, everything - diplomatic embassies, spies, sellswords, sued Tywin Lannister for a peace agreement palatable to he and I and our bannermen, anything, anything at all, everything I could think of if it got you back. I would have bribed the guards, I would have hidden myself as a serving girl, eavesdropped in taverns, crawled like a rat my belly to the earth through the tunnels underneath the city, anything, everything, if you had been in my place. If any one of my family had been in my place, I would have done those things, and I would not have given up after one paltry tentative.”

“It never would have worked.”
“You did not even try! You refused all overtures by Tywin Lannister, and every time you won a battle do you know what Joffrey did to me? I was your scapegoat,” she yells. "I have been your scapegoat for years," she continues, furious with herself that she cannot say this without weeping. "Every victory of yours," she snarls, "every single one I paid for in blood and beatings and tears and shame and humiliation, and you left me there to rot. Tell me why you did it. Tell me." She must understand. She must. If she is ever to have peace, she must. She can understand that Robb’s own actions led to his doom, but what she has never in all these past years been able to fathom is why he abandoned her. More than that, why he never so much as sent a single man, a single scout, a spy or sellsword to even make any attempt at rescue.

“The Kingslayer for a girl?” her brother scoffs, and her heart sinks, her throat tightens. “Sansa, stop living in dreams. That is not the way the world works.” So to him she is still the stupid, naive, little girl he considered her before she left Winterfell the first time and she is surprised by how much the thought hurts, though tangled with the pain is also the sentiment, the realisation that now, at long last, she will truly come to know what her family think of her, and it is the day of reckoning that has daunted her, petrified her, haunted her like a mad ghost for years, and she is afraid. It has the power to destroy her, she knows herself well enough to dread that.

Somehow, wetting her lips, she finds her words, and they drip with long-fermented scorn and betrayal. She has been silenced by others, tormentors and family alike, for far too long, and she will have none of it, not anymore, even as she wonders why they think her so easy to silence? Her courtesy? Her gentleness? Her love of music and art and poetry? Even her own kin have considered her eminently biddable, and she is not. Or they mistake her acquiescence for submission when it is sympathy and kindness instead. She is a Lady, and she is proud of that; she will not pick up a sword all of a sudden simply because that is what many consider to be strength. Power is not strength, strength is not necessarily the weight of a sword arm, strength can also be the heart, the mind, she has learnt that sharp lesson only too well during the course of her various captivities.

“And why should we have to submit to the way the world works? You were a King, you had the power to change things - but you did not take it. You kept to your warmongering and your cock-wetting and look where it got you - betrayed by your own bannerman.” She thinks, shocking herself with her own audacity, that Jaime would be proud of her bluntness, and the memory of his warm voice (whatever our endeavours) sharpens her mind, straightens her spine, makes her determined to stand her ground. Her husband’s respect and admiration and love for her gives her the courage to now demand the knowledge she believes it is entirely right for her to have.

“I started a war for Father. For Father, in case you had forgotten.” His impatient destrier comes closer to her, snorting and prancing, as arrogant as his rider, she thinks vaguely, and Robb looks down at her from his greater height, but she has made up her mind not to be intimidated by him, not to be intimidated by anyone, and she intends to hold to her promise to herself.

“I had not forgotten at all: you forget,” she replies calmly, evenly, cloaking herself in the cloak of courtesy that is one of the greatest, most incisive weapons she possesses, looking her brother coolly in the eyes. “I was there. I saw Father’s head chopped off, I heard the raging mob that day. You
did not. And you may have started the war for him but you refused to end it for me. You refused to end it for Arya, and we both suffered for it.” He flinches at her tones, terrible with melancholy and accusation, and she continues, ruthlessly, relentlessly, without remorse, willing him to understand what he has done. “You cannot imagine the depth of our suffering. Why did you leave me there?”

“As I said, it never would have worked to get you out,” her brother replies impatiently, almost dismissively.

“Petyr Baelish managed it, did he not? Why not you? Strange, is it not,” she continues darkly, almost to herself, the notion only now occurring to her, “that a pimp and a brothel owner from a pile of forsaken rocks should manage to do what a King from a House with an eight thousand year old reputation for honour could not?” She shakes her head, her tones becoming sardonic with disdain. “No, you could have done it. You could have come to an agreement with Tywin Lannister, who would then have forced Joffrey and Cersei to abide by it, but you did not. You could have sent a company, eager for glory, to the rescue, but you did not. You chose to not do so. You chose glory on the battlefield instead, and you left me at the mercy of my tormentors to do with me what they pleased. I could tell you stories of my time there that would curdle your blood, and that was only the beginning of my torment. So I will ask once more: why did you leave me there?”

“A girl was not worth the Kingslayer. Two girls were not worth the Kingslayer.”

“And the girl you married? The girl which brought down upon your arrogant little head the wrath of one of your scorned bannermen, that led you to your doom - was she worth that?”

“I loved her!” he retorts heatedly, losing for the first time his ominous iciness.

“You wanted her,” she corrects him calmly, ignoring the crick in her neck from staring up at him upon his warhorse. "There is a difference. You were thinking with the object between your legs, not your mind, just like Jon, just like Rhaegar did, and it backfired most spectacularly for you all.” He could not have anticipated Walder Frey’s breaking of guest right, that Sansa does realise, but Robb should have anticipated some form of retribution from the man.

“And what do you know of love, you who were married first to the Imp, then Ramsey Bolton and now the Kingslayer?”

“What you say is true; Jaime is my third husband, but he is the only one who was my choice. I was forced at the point of a sword to marry the first time, and sold like chattel the second time.”
“I have never been so glad Mother and I disinherited you after I received word of your first marriage,” he spits. “I should have sent a copy of my decree to the Citadel and then you never would have been elected Queen in the North. You disgrace the office, allied to the Kingslayer, married to him and willingly no less. Tell me,” he continues, cruelly mocking, “how does the older brother compare to the younger?”

She stills, unable to believe her ears, ignoring the insult he has dealt her because she cannot have heard correctly. Surely Robb had not - had not disinherited her, surely? “That was your reaction when I was marched into the Great Sept of Baelor and made to marry Tyrion Lannister?” she exclaims wildly. "To disinherit me? Not to fight for me? That was your reaction? And Mother too?” That hurts more than Robb, she thinks. That her mother was part of it. That hurts far more than Robb, especially after Brienne and Jaime both had told her of the vow both knights had sworn to Catelyn Stark.

"She was as furious as I," her brother elaborates vindictively, "she hates the Lannisters as much as I do, and that will never change, not even in death. Mother agreed to it. Not the part about legitimising Jon as my heir, but the part about disinheriting you, yes, she agreed to that."

She had thought, oh gods, but she had thought she knew already Robb’s actions during the war of the Five Kings. She had thought she had known it all because it would have been most unlike either Joffrey or Cersei to keep from her news that would hurt her. She had thought she had known the full extent of - but that is a lie, it seems. It is a lie and she is suffocating, unable to believe it, but she looks into her elder brother’s eyes and sees the truth in his stern countenance, sees that he and their mother truly attempted to disinherit her, that he - that she - oh gods she cannot endure this for every single time she thinks she has learnt the worst of things, every single time she thinks her torment is over, that she dares reach for the slightest shred of hope and happiness it is torn from her, and by those closest to her, no less, by her family, by those she loves. Her brother, her mother... she fights down a hysterical laugh. She had known. How naive, how utterly naive and - and stupid, a stupid little girl - she has proven herself again to be. She had genuinely believed that - well, not even Tywin Lannister whose animosity towards Tyrion had been known throughout the Seven Kingdoms, not even he had disowned the dwarf, and so for her mother and brother to have attempted it as regards her, well, it beggars belief, it is entirely beyond her ability to comprehend. She had not thought that would have been their reaction. In some childish part of her she had hoped they had worried about her, perhaps spoken again of how to rescue her, but instead they had given her up as a lost cause when she yet lived. She would never have done such a thing. They had cared more about her claim to Winterfell than about her. Out of all the many people who had seen her as her claim, she never could have imagined her own kin would have ever numbered amongst them.

Jaime is the only man she has known, the only person it seems that she has ever known from whom love does not feel like disdain but instead feels like the purest happiness. Love is meant to make a person happy, she has always believed. Jaime’s love is the only love that ever has made her happy. She has always felt as though her parents’ love was in some ways conditional on her being what they expected of her, whether erroneously or not, it is a conviction she has held, a wound
upon her heart, for as long as she can remember. With Jaime it is the other way around: he loves her for who she is.

She thinks then that she hears his voice as though from behind a veil, distant and muffled, calling for her and she starts towards the sound, taking a few furtive steps before his voice fades away again, but it is enough to harden the despair to determination in her heart, like the tempering of steel to a blade. There is another question she would ask of her eldest brother.

Anger makes her snarl the words. “Your conduct is far from blameless, Robb, and you are in no position whatsoever to throw stones. You are in no position to do so at all.” She swallows painfully, her voice becoming hoarse. “I have wondered this for a time, ever since my husband first told me of it. House Stark is meant to be honourable. Why then did you chain Jaime to a post in a cage like a lowly animal? He might have been your enemy in battle, but he deserved more from you. He deserved hostage accommodations fit for his rank as Tywin Lannister’s eldest son.”

It is not only the shame she feels, being made her brother’s scapegoat once more, always his scapegoat even now years after his death, and in some despairing, jagged, bleeding part of her she wonders if she will ever cease being his scapegoat, when Jaime acquires that hollow, distant look upon his face whenever he thinks of his captivity. Jaime is the first to defend her, to say that she need not take upon herself her brother’s dishonour, but it is her dishonour. She is Sansa Stark of Winterfell, and therefore Robb Stark’s dishonour reflects upon them all, upon her whole house, for that is the way of the North. And so she does feel ashamed, she feels so wretchedly ashamed whenever she thinks of it. But it is not only the dishonour that gnaws like gangrene at her heart and her soul. It is also that - and she quails whenever she thinks of it. “How could you have been so careless as to treat him in such a way?” she cries, dangerously emotional. "So reckless? How could you be so foolish?”

“He was the Kingslayer, an enemy of my house!”

“He was your prisoner, and you had an obligation to treat him with dignity,” she corrects him fiercely, in tones she over-enunciates to make her point. “To treat him as you did was beneath you. Whatever his actions, it was beneath you. No matter the circumstance it was beneath you. It was beneath House Stark, and beneath the King in the North. Do you have any notion of how, through your actions, you made even more precarious my already incredibly dangerous position as Cersei and Joffrey’s hostage in King’s Landing?” It makes her quail, shiver like a leaf buffeted around in a storm to even think about it. “If Joffrey had his Kingsguard beat me every single time you won a battle, what do you think he would have done to me had he learned of the way you treated Jaime? What do you think Cersei would have done to me?”

Robb only looks at her, his mouth agape, as though the question has only now at this moment first occurred to him, and she swallows bitterly. Her astonishing luck that the conditions of Jaime’s imprisonment had been kept from her tormentors’ knowledge stuns her, makes her dizzy. “No, you
did not think of that little fact, did you?” she realises, and she laughs hollowly, a terrible melancholy and fury coming to settle over her and she wonders vaguely how she has not yet fainted from the agony of her breaking heart. She can feel it shattering, piece by crumbling piece, being dashed to dust with a deliberate sort of cruelty that she will never be able to understand and she - “Why do men always - why do you always only care about war and bloodshed without giving thought to the consequences your actions bring upon others?” she cries with sudden, despairing vindictiveness, a dam broken within her. “Why must you always be so vainglorious? Why must you always take and take and take and leave others to pay the price?” What does it say about her, she wonders, that she thinks of Jaime at this moment, of his plaintive, childish question that had made her soul, her very being, ache for him? Why was I capable of loving them both when they not only hated each other but actively tried each to turn me against the other? She has yet another similarity to her husband, she finds now. She is too loyal for her own good, and it has led to her being unable to stop loving Robb and Jon even after they had betrayed her. She had loved Jon until the moment he showed her he did not respect her, until he made clear that he did not understand why she had been so hurt by his actions. And she has loved Robb up until this moment, and she can feel her affection for him withering into nothing, being ripped up, torn apart, utterly destroyed and why does it hurt so much?

“The little girl I remember would never have spoken to me thus.”

“Of course I have changed,” she replies, melancholy laughter, dead as bones crumbled to dust, tumbling from her lips. “After everything, did you expect I would not?” She should have expected the same from him, she thinks. But she had not expected so great a change as this. All she wants from him is - if not precisely an apology, because she is not so foolish now as to believe she will receive one from him, but an acknowledgement from him of her suffering, and to know why he chose as he did. If she knows why, well - no matter how terrible the eventual truth, knowing will mean she can at last set this question which haunts her, torments her, to rest. “I am your sister, and you left me in King’s Landing surrounded by enemies at every turn, surrounded by enemies that thought nothing of, indeed delighted in, attempting to destroy me. For years I have turned the question over again and again in my mind, attempting to understand what could lead you to abandon me. I am your sister. Your sister.” She does not know what else to say, what more to do to make him understand the paramount importance of her need to understand. It has more than tormented her, it has haunted her, a cruel phantom chain binding her to despair, the bone-deep sort of despair that siphons strength from the living to make flesh and blood their incorporeal monsters of the mind and if he does not understand what he has done to her at the end of this, she begins to suspect he never shall, and she does not know how she is still standing.

He only looks coolly down at her from his destrier and before he even opens his mouth to speak she knows that - she braces herself though for what blow she knows not -

“The little girl I remember was she. The woman I see before me today is not my sister.”

Her temples pound, lightning exploding behind her eyes. A blurred shape races past her to knock Robb from his horse, and suddenly Rickon is there, her brave little Rickon is shouting at Robb and
two direwolves are snarling at each other, black circling grey and then everything goes dark once more.

“Open your eyes, brave girl, gently now.”

“Rickon?”

It is not her youngest brother who has spoken, though he sits at her side, leaning back against a tree, waiting impatiently for her to wake. It is a man, grizzled and clear-eyed, and next to him lounges a younger man with the mischievous air of a troublemaker, subdued by worry.

“This is grandfather, Sansa, and our uncle Brandon,” Rickon replies buoyantly, making the introductions, sitting as restlessly in place - that is to say not at all - as she remembers Shaggydog being as a puppy. The grown direwolf is currently lazily sunning his black fur, sprawled out over the ground.

The three Stark men sit near her as though for a picnic, lounging casually upon cloaks, leaning against the trees she recognises from the Wolfswood outside Winterfell. The stream where a lifetime ago her brothers found the direwolves gurgles happily, a baby’s innocent laughter, and she is startled to feel instead of snow and earth beneath her palms grass and soft leaves, and to realise that she is still dressed in her white feasting gown, miraculously restored to its previous pristine state and she cannot suppress the girlish high spirits that result.

She pushes herself up on one elbow. “I don’t understand - I was, I was - with Robb - I - Rickon, you knocked him off his horse,” she finishes helplessly, unable to keep the hint of admonition from her voice, though she is moved by her little brother’s defence of her.
“He was being an idiot,” her littlest brother replies. “He deserved it.” He reaches to take her hand. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get to you earlier, I was looking for you and I couldn’t find you so I asked grandfather and he told me where you were.”

She bursts into a startled laugh at his words. Gods, it feels good to laugh. It feels so good to laugh with the family she had thought entirely lost to her.

Rickon looks pleased and proud that he has managed such a feat, and launches himself at her in a fierce hug and they tumble back down onto the grass, giggling together, two children playing happily and innocently. She embraces him, swallowing harshly. “I’ve missed you so much.” When they were both little she had carried him around so much that their mother had joked that Rickon was Sansa’s baby, not Catelyn’s. Sansa had been the one to take care of him whilst their mother was recovering from the strenuous birth.

He smiles and her heart lightens. He touches her cheek with disbelief. “You’re happy. After everything you are happy.”

“I am with you, Rickon,” she replies simply. “How can I not be happy when we are playing together?” She has not played in so long. Only with Jaime, the day they had played tag in her solar and he had chased her and lifted her and spun her around, his low laughter entwining with hers and then he’d embraced her and kissed her and she -

“You are dreaming of him again, are you not, sweet niece? Of your husband?” her uncle Brandon’s voice is teasing, drawing her from her recollections and she blushes, sitting up and hugging her knees protectively.

“Yes,” she admits quietly, feelingly. She pauses, before seizing her courage and asking, “you are not angry that I married him? A Lannister, and Jaime no less? You are not angry?”

“Granddaughter,” Lord Rickard begins solemnly, “Surely you do not think we would condemn you for it?”

“Robb did,” Sansa replies darkly. “Even the first time I was forced to marry, his first reaction was to disinherit me, not think about rescuing me, he told me so. He would rather have had me raped every night than make peace with Tywin Lannister, because what is a sister’s safety compared to the glory of war and that is the truth of it. I have dared to believe differently for years and I have just found out that I - ”
“Shaggy and I can go and push him off his horse again if that would make you feel better?”

“Rickon!” she exclaims, scandalised, bursting into shocked laughter. “Thank you, but no. I was not expecting him to be so…” She does not even know how to explain it.

“He hated the Lannisters, all the Lannisters, whilst he was alive. Death cannot change our natures, though it does give us the opportunity, if we so choose, to watch over our loved ones yet living.”

“Is - is everyone here? Are mother and father here? Aunt Lyanna?”

“No, not everyone.”

Uncle Brandon snorts derisively. “Lyanna is quite happy ensconced away in her tower with her Rhaegar, as oblivious to others in death as she was in life. But enough of her, I want to know more about you whilst you are here, Sansa. You seem happy with the Kingslayer.”

“Please do not call him that. He has a name, just like the rest of us. Please use it.”

“You mistake me, sweet niece; I did not mean it as an insult. It was a compliment.”

She gapes at him.

“You cannot think, given the manner of mine and my lord father’s deaths that I would be anything but thankful that your husband had more balls aged seven-and-ten than the rest of that damned Kingsguard put together? I cheered when he put his sword through the Mad King’s crooked back.” Brandon Stark’s face twists with darkness. “I asked the rest of the Kingsguard when they came through, what it would have taken for them to kill Aerys. Funnily enough only Ser Arthur and Prince Lewyn approved of Ser Jaime’s act, though for different reasons. The rest of them would have let the whole city burn, the craven bastards.”

“That will mean a lot to my husband,” she replies quietly, ducking her head, twisting her fingers in her skirts, blinking away the tears. “It means a lot to me. Thank you, my lord uncle.”
“He loves you and respects you and admires you, that is clear as day.”

“He devotes himself to me, to his kingdom, and to becoming every day a better man than he was the day before. He has done some terrible things in the name of love, but he is that man no longer. He makes me feel safe, he makes me feel like I am his equal. He is a better man, a good man, and I love him for it. How can I not?”

“Good.” Her grandfather replies firmly, and her head snaps up.

“Good?” she echoes, bewildered.

“You deserve to be happy, granddaughter, and he makes you happy. You could not have made a better match, either politically or personally, I believe.”

“It was my choice,” she replies quietly, feelingly. “The only choice I have made for myself in years, and I will never regret it. Whatever happens to us, I know, I could never regret it. I love him, I admire him too much. I have faith in him.”

“I was watching when you parleyed with the Targaryens outside Winterfell, you and Jaime,” Rickon interjects enthusiastically. “You were - what’s the word, grandfather? You said it, you were watching too - ”

“Intimidating?”

“No, the other one, grandfather.”

“Formidable?”

“That was it. For-mid-a-ble.”

She laughs at the exaggerated way her little brother sounds out the syllables, and his answering grin melts her heart and shatters it all at once. “I wish you were not dead, little brother.”
“So do I, sometimes,” he replies seriously. “But it is peaceful here, and I have grandfather and uncle Brandon to keep me company, and sometimes grandmother too. Bran is not here, he’s gone again where I cannot follow.”

She catches the edge of bitterness of the words he does not speak and her gaze narrows. “Not Father? Not Mother?” she continues sharply.

“Mother is always with Robb and his wife. She says Robb’s wife is everything she could ever have wanted in a daughter.” Sansa winces at her brother’s clipped summary, her heart wrenching for him, and she finds it hard to believe that her mother could - actually, upon reflection, she does believe her mother capable of such behaviour. She knows only too well how impetuous and certain of her convictions her mother was. She likely views Sansa’s marriage to Jaime much as Edmure did, as the final betrayal, Sansa thinks, her heart sinking. Given that Catelyn Stark agreed to Robb disinherit Sansa, she thinks her mother capable of everything, Sansa realises with terror. “She hardly ever remembers I lived, I think. And Father, well, he is too busy trying and failing to find Robert Baratheon, his greatest friend, his blood-brother he loved more than anyone else, except probably the way he loves aunt Lyanna.”

“He abandoned Mother?” Sansa asks, disbelieving.

Her grandfather sighs. “She learnt the truth of your cousin Jon, and I have never seen your parents argue so fiercely as they did then. If she speaks to him now at all it is with such cold courtesy that I would have thought her a Northerner born and bred.”

“And Ned slunk away with his tail between his legs,” uncle Brandon mocks, “to Lyanna and Robert.”

“Brandon,” Lord Rickard warns.

“She caused a war because she could not be bothered to take the minuscule amount of time necessary to scrawl her family a note assuring us of her safety! I went to King’s Landing for her, I confronted the Mad King for her, I saw - you and I were - and Ned, for Ned, Lyanna can do no wrong - ” he subsides when his father raises his palm for silence.

“I know, Brandon,” he replies, and her grandfather’s voice is so filled with raw grief even now that she nearly weeps. “I know, and I do not absolve your sister. If she was old enough to refuse a betrothal, if she was old enough to abscond with a married man with a wife and children who loved him dearly then she was old enough to face the consequences of her actions. Not that she has understood this, with her narrow, petulant wilfulness. Death cannot change her nature any more
than it can change one of ours. No-one could be more disappointed in her than I, my son. It is a bitter pill to swallow to know that you have failed your children.”

“Her own actions led to her ruin. She never listened to you anyway, Father,” Brandon replies, seeking to allay his sire’s remorse. “And short of locking her up indefinitely, which would have been the height of cruelty, I do not see what more you could have done to prevent her actions. Even before she could walk she never listened to anyone, she was too wilful, too wild. I have not forgiven her your death, Father, and I never shall. I can forgive her mine, but yours - never.”

“Are you disappointed in me? Is Father? And Mother? Would they see me?” Sansa ventures, twisting her hands together, in her skirts, fighting the urge to retch with fear and guilt. “I married Jaime Lannister, willingly, I fell in love with him, Father died because - because -” oh, how deeply she wants her father’s approval, even now! How acutely she is aware that - she must be the greatest disappointment in his eyes, she always was, even as a child, for why else would he never praise her, even when she’d spent hours in the library learning her history lesson properly to be able to greet guests, even when - she remembers the first time she successfully managed a curtsey after practicing and practicing as a three year old - her father had not even noticed because Robb and Jon had been doing well in the tiltyard with Ser Rodrick. Why else would he have ignored her, if she were not - not Stark enough - why else?

“Ned was killed because he trusted the wrong man, because he thought Cersei would act like him, would act honourably, which was a very silly miscalculation, and child - Ned used you as a distraction for his investigation. He placed you deliberately in the heart of danger which you had no notion of, sought to shield you, yes, loved you, yes, but he wronged you deeply. A simple be careful whom you trust, people here are not necessarily what they seem, would have been the least he could have done. You are not to blame, for any of it, do you understand me?”

“I was - I was a distraction?” she repeats hollowly, morbidly focusing upon the most shocking statement. Her ears are ringing, and her headache has returned with a fiery vengeance. "A - a-distraction?"

“I am sorry, brave girl. I wish I could spare you this.”

“Tell me,” she implores him. “I am sick to death of lies and secrets.”

With visible reluctance, his voice soft with melancholy and shame, her grandfather elaborates. “Ned never had any intention of letting your betrothal to Joffrey stand in the long term, but he needed the excuse to stay in King’s Landing to investigate Lord Arryn’s death, and he could not let Robert know anything was wrong, so he took you and Arya with him.”
She stares at her grandfather, at his weary countenance and knows he has not lied. She searches incoherently for words and finds them beyond her grasp. This is yet another terrible truth in a very long list of terrible truths and then she does retch, coughing up her empty stomach, her insides twisting painfully, and her head, her head - and then Rickon’s thin arms come round her waist to support her, her uncle holds her hair out of the way and she leans her forehead against his large, calloused palm, wanting to die, wanting to drown in her misery. She had never thought - good gods, is that what they will use as her epitaph to carve upon her tomb - she had never thought - and she laughs, a cold, bitter sound.

“I’m sorry, brave girl, I’m so incredibly sorry,” her grandfather sighs, and she collapses into him, sobbing helplessly, inadvertently taking Rickon with her.

“Where does it end?” she chokes out eventually, staring blankly at the grass. “Where does the suffering cease? Where do the betrayals stop? Please, make it stop. Make it end.” I cannot bear this. Make it stop, please make it stop, let there be an end, let there be nothing more, no more, no more, I cannot, gods I cannot - must all the men of my family betray me? Father, Robb, Jon, must they all betray me? Where does it end? Make it stop it must stop -

Breathe with me, lovely one, breathe, you’re alright, breathe for me, lovely one, come back, lovely one, come back -

Jaime? she turns her head, shocked by his words from her thoughts but his voice is fading already, like water between her hands, gone to where she cannot follow, though the memory of his voice, the way he has always comforted her, always brought her back to herself, shown her that she is stronger still than any torment, that she can endure, his voice, warm, comforting, always with unshakable faith in her - though it does not take away the pain it reminds her of his vow to her: my sword stands between you and the rest of the world and that settles her, that soothes her and gives her the courage to grit her teeth and lift her head again.

Her grandfather, her uncle, her youngest brother are all looking at her not with the pity she expects but with pride instead. “There she is,” her uncle says proudly. “Undaunted by anything, like the Starks of old.”

She blinks, bewildered, at her grandfather’s gentle smile. “Do you not remember Rickon saying you were the strongest of us all? Well, there you have it. Undaunted, head held high, and a true talent for rule. Tywin Lannister’s political acumen combined with the tenderest, gentlest heart imaginable. A force to be reckoned with. You succeeded where so many others failed in ending the Stark-Lannister war and forging from that destruction an alliance with deep foundations, you freed four of the Seven Kingdoms from the mad Targaryen yoke. Jaime Lannister is a very lucky man.”

“He knows,” she quips impishly, though she does not know how. “And you flatter me. I’m
observant and considered and I understand the importance of working with others, that is all.”

“I’m stealing your husband’s line here, but that was not flattery, niece, that was the truth,” her uncle winks, and she grins despite herself, shaking her head, cautiously letting the warmth of her family’s support and pride in her sink into her, moved by their praise.

She cocks her head, an amusing thought occurring to her. “Did you ever meet him? My husband?” She suddenly finds herself immensely curious as to the answer.

“Only once,” her uncle Brandon tells her, smirking. “At Harrenhal, sparring with Arthur Dayne. I was invited to join in, I have some talent with the blade, but it was clear from the first parry that I was hopelessly outclassed by them both. Your husband was rather noble about it. They used to do this exercise whereby they would spar, both of them blindfolded. He was fifteen, and it was utterly mesmerising to watch, and I will never forget his face when Aerys said his champion against Father was fire itself. It gave me reassurance that about to die in front of my father, and my father in front of me, there was yet some grain of conscience in the world. And all these years later I am proved correct, now that he had the excellent taste to fall in love with my niece.”

“You are teasing me, uncle, with that last compliment,” she mumbles, her cheeks red. “Can I see him? Can I see Jaime now, whilst I am stuck here?” she asks, the sudden longing for him cutting through her like a sword.

“That would not be wise, brave girl,” her grandfather warns. “Only the dead can watch, and unless I am much mistaken you want to go back to him, you want to live. You want to give him a child.”

“I - I do. Yes. I do.” She ducks her head, closing eyes. “I - I miss him. I miss him so much and I - gods, how do I go back to him? How do I wake up?”

“You will,” Rickon assures her. “I promise you, you will. But can you stay awhile longer?”

“Why?”

“There is someone else to whom I would like to introduce you,” her grandfather says, a twinkle in his expression that wakes her curiosity and lightens her heart all at once. “Rickon, why don’t you run along and tell the Lady we will be with her shortly?”
Her youngest brother bounds up. “Of course, grandfather.” He turns to Sansa, launching himself at her again, embracing her tightly. “Good-bye, big sister.”

“You’re leaving? Rickon?” she says, panicked. “I won’t see you again?”

“Not for a time,” he replies sadly. “I love you.”

“I love you too, little brother,” she chokes out, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “I love you.” She watches him heavily as he reluctantly disentangles himself from her and then scampers off through the trees, she watches him until he disappears entirely from her view, Shaggydog a swift black shade at his side, hidden by the dark green of the great northern pines growing tall and thick in that part of the forest.

"I do not think I want to see my mother and father," she murmurs pensively, sitting up again to wrap her arms around her knees protectively. "Not after what I have learnt today, that my mother attempted to disinherit me the first time I was forced into marriage, and that my father used me as a distraction. I know I said before that I wanted to speak to them, but I know now that if I do, I shall rage and cry and - I do not wish to do so. I have wept enough. I do not wish to have my heart broken again, for every single time it shatters I think it is the last time, and every time I am proven wrong, and enough. Enough."

"Do not worry, brave girl," her grandfather reassures her. "You do not have to speak to them if you do not wish it."

"They love you," her uncle says. "Though I will not defend their actions: they have wronged you deeply."

"Sometimes love is not enough," she snaps. "If that is their love then I do not want it. I know they will never agree with my decisions - marrying Jaime and making allies of the West, though I daresay my mother is not above using Jon's defection to the Targaryen cause as proof that she was right all along to be suspicious of him, when the truth is more complicated than that. In my parents' eyes my crimes are many and unforgiveable: I have committed incest willingly - or at least I thought I was doing so - I married Jaime willingly and then had the gall to fall in love with him, and I ended the Stark-Lannister war without bloodshed, through means of an alliance I mean to honour. If my father's love is using me as a distraction, if my mother's love is disinherit me and leaving me as a child to fend off my enemies for myself, if Robb's love is abandonment, if Jon's love is betrayal and reminding me to know my place as lesser than him, then I do not want their love, for it is poison. Let me rather have their scorn and disdain. Let me have their disgust, their hatred. It would be more honest." Only as she pauses does she realise the force with which she is trembling, and the harsh, furiously clipped tones with which she speaks that make the two Stark men listening to her look upon her with shame and melancholy.
"We are proud of you, sweet niece," her uncle responds, feelingly. "My father and I are proud of you, of everything that you have achieved, and we love you for you. There is nothing you need prove to us; you are a Stark of old, weirwood and ice made flesh. My father can tell you more than I, but your brother Robb was not the first to revive the dream of independence from the Targaryen yoke. The dream was not dashed to shards when Torrhen was made to kneel to the Conqueror, when the Lions bowed their heads in the aftermath of the first Field of Fire - it simply... became secret."

"I remember reading manuscripts in the library, hiding them from Maester Luwin once I realised what they contained," Sansa recalls pensively, her eyes wide. "The old tongues, prayers, customs, rituals, a culture that rule from King's Landing could not stamp out entirely despite the declared intent to do so. But I thought the books were half-forgotten, destined to crumble to dust without anyone knowing. And I know that in the more isolated keeps - Last Hearth, Bear Island - some of that, the stories, the knowledge, the customs all lived on, though privately, so as to not fall foul of Targaryen laws never repealed by Robert Baratheon."

"As Aerys's madness grew, the Lords Paramount, the vassal Tyrells excepted, formed a plot," her grandfather begins stoically. "All of us, Stark, Tully, Baratheon, Arryn, and yes, even Tywin Lannister the Lord Hand, who had more motive than most, more motive than I, certainly. It was a thankless task, being the Mad King's Hand, and yet Tywin Lannister did it successfully for more than twenty years, despite Aerys throwing every provocation possible at him. Arryn did not wish to approach Lannister, but Baratheon persuaded him in the end. If the Lords Arryn and Lannister had not been so... well, Arryn took exception to the way Lannister had dealt with the Tarbecks and the Reynes, and never let him forget it, which hardly endeared him to the Lord of Casterly Rock, and this made the process much more fractious and time consuming."

"What happened?" Sansa asks, fascinated.

"It was the aftermath of the Defiance of Duskendale that hardened our resolve. Before then we had ideas, vague, half-formed, but nothing concrete, and no definitive way to succeed," the Lord Rickard Stark explains. "We knew from Lord Lannister that Rhaegar intended to convene a Great Council and, some suspected, depose his father, or at the very least declare him unfit to rule in the years leading up to the tourney at Harrenhal, once Aerys had become demonstrably unhinged, at least in the opinions of those closest to the centre of power. The plan, simply put, was, though an alliance of the Lords Paramount, to force Rhaegar, in exchange for agreeing to a Regency or even a deposition, through means of a signed covenant, a contract, if you will, to abide by laws that would greatly have restricted the powers of the monarch, to prevent another Aerys from ever again ascending the throne. In time, perhaps a generation hence, that would have so weakened the central crown to such a point that the Lords Paramount would have been able to declare independence. The key was to do it gradually, so gradually that the erosion would go unnoticed until it was far too late. We were so close, but the idiot Rhaegar scuppered all our plans by absconding with Lyanna." He smiles at Sansa, and the expression, gentle and proud, warms her through the astonishment she feels at his telling of such a compelling tale. "So you see, brave girl, you and your Jaime have done what your forebears wanted and worked for but could not achieve. Do not underestimate
"I will not forget it," she vows solemnly, bowing her head. "Nor will I take it for granted, I promise."

"And for that sentence alone, Sansa, you deserve the title of Queen in the North," her uncle replies.

"I vowed it to our peoples," she answers, ducking her head to hide her embarrassed blush. "When I was elected to the office, I vowed I would never take their faith and their freedom for granted." She swallows, before continuing earnestly, "I did not believe I would be - that ever the conclave would choose me, a girl, but they did."

"You were able to rise above Robb and Jon's mistakes because you understood the consequences," her grandfather summarises. "Though I would yet give you a word of caution: you have a long, hard road ahead of you in your fight against the dragon queen. Be considered in your actions."

"I will do my best, you have my word, my lord grandfather," Sansa nods. "Please - do you - say you have faith in me?" If my parents do not approve, is the unspoken thought, heard by her elders nonetheless.

"I think your father thinks you are doing the right thing, even if he disapproves of your allies and your methods. Your mother... well, it is probably best not to speculate," Lord Rickard Stark finishes.

"Ned has ever been too rigid in his thinking," her uncle Brandon sighs. "But I have faith in you, and your husband. Look at how far you have come, look at how far you have both come. How could we not have faith in you?"

"I will hold that thought close to my heart, my lord uncle, my lord grandfather, thank you," Sansa says quietly, a smile touching the edges of her lips, before she speaks again, considering. "If that was so, that the Lords Paramount had a plot to break away from the rule of King's Landing, why did that not happen after the Rebellion?"

"It would have been the ideal opportunity, that is true," her grandfather admits. "But who remained? Ned, for the Starks, had no wish to be King of anything. And Robert Baratheon, well. As soon as he took the throne in King's Landing any chance of the North seceding evaporated, for
as you well know, Ned was incapable of going against Robert, the consequences be damned. Of the rest, who remained? The Tyrells? They were more likely to rise up for Viserys and Daenerys than to declare themselves monarchs. In any case neither Arryn nor Lannister trusted them; it was the only thing they could agree upon, and the Rebellion only dug wider the chasm between them instead of building a bridge."

"Because Lord Lannister did not engage his armies until the last moment, and when he did it resulted in the sacking of the city of King’s Landing," Sansa surmises accurately.

Her grandfather nods before continuing. "What Arryn never bothered to think about was Lord Lannister's motivations for doing so - Jaime could tell you more on the topic than I, but it is quite clear to me that Tywin Lannister's reasoning behind such a tardy entry to the war was predicated upon one thing, and one alone: Jaime being nominally a Kingsguard, but in actual fact Aerys's hostage in King's Landing, and for nothing in the world would Tywin have jeopardised the safety of his beloved son."

And this makes sense to Sansa; Tywin Lannister's affection for Jaime was very well known, and she - her brows narrow as she considers her uncle and her grandfather, how easy they are with one another. "That is why you did not call your banners when the Mad King summoned you, is it not? Because uncle Brandon was in the city, already Aerys's prisoner?"

"Clever girl," her uncle smirks.

"Yes," Lord Rickard Stark replies. "I knew only too well that if my banners went south of Moat Cailin and that Lord Varys heard of it as he inevitably would, before passing that information on to the Mad King, Brandon's life was forfeit. My only daughter had disappeared. I could not risk the life of another of my children."

"Father, enough," Sansa's uncle says, his voice uncharacteristically soft. "We have for over two decades entire ruminated upon what might have been, and that is a painful thing. Is it not enough now that already five of the seven Kingdoms have seceded successfully? And that your granddaughter was a principal actor in that success?"

"Forgive an old man, would you, my son, granddaughter?" he answers, sighing. "You are right, of course, Brandon. Dwelling indefinitely upon the past causes only pain."

Sansa swallows harshly past the lump in her throat. Her grandfather and uncle are right, and it is a lesson she has been once again harshly taught. She will stand by her earlier words: she no longer wishes for the love of her parents, of Robb, to say nothing at all of Jon, whom she wishes
desperately she had never held any affection for. If their actions are proof of love then let her have their hatred, their scorn, their indifference - it matters not to her, not anymore.

She begins to hum to herself, and the three of them sit in pleasant, contemplative silence for a time, before her grandfather and uncle suddenly stand, surprising her, and she hurriedly follows suit, scrambling to her feet.

She catches sight quickly enough the reason for her elders' sudden change of posture, and she swallows hard. Approaching them is a lady in a gown of cloth of gold with a crimson sash around her waist. The fashion differs to Sansa's own, and she rapidly recognises it as characteristic of some thirty years past from the trailing sleeves that fall almost to the ground, and the squarely embroidered neckline. Golden hair, and eyes the colour of green sea glass.

The men bow, and Sansa curtesys. Not as deeply as is her habit to curtsey to her husband, but still very respectfully, and she hides her nervousness by clasping her hands in front of her so she finds it more difficult to wring them in agitation. She believes she knows who the lady is, and it would make sense, but -

"My Lords of Stark," the lady says, and her voice is the gentle caress of waves upon the sand, the resonant echo of harp-strings plucked by the dainty hands of a virtuoso. "Might I be so bold as to ask for an introduction?"

"Of course," Sansa's uncle Brandon replies, winking roguishly, an action which makes the lady scoff good-naturedly, evidence of long familiarity, something which eases Sansa's anxiety. She wants to make a good impression, most desperately. "My lady, this is my delightful niece, the Queen in the North, Sansa Stark."

She curtesys again, concentrating on inclining her head at the perfect angle, deeply enough to indicate sincere, earnest respect, but not so low as to suggest subservience.

When she rises, her uncle continues, and she does not need to look at him to know that he is particularly enjoying this, saying the words with a dramatic flourish that in any other circumstance would have amused her.

"Sweet niece, this is the Lady Joanna Lannister."

"My lady good-mother," Sansa says hoarsely, concentrating upon the formalities because she -
what if Jaime's mother hates her? Or worse, thinks her unworthy of her beloved son? She does not think she could bear it if that were the case.

"I have wished to meet with you, your Majesty, ever since my son first declared you his last chance for honour," the Lady Joanna Lannister continues, her voice as kind as Sansa remembers Jaime saying it was, and Sansa fears she will burst into tears at the compliment. "Jaime is waiting for you. It's time to go back, good-daughter. Will you come with me?"

Jaime. The thought of her husband makes her heart twist and she wants so desperately to see him again, to be with him, but - she has seen her family again that she had thought irrevocably lost to her and she - why does she feel so guilty at the thought of leaving them?

"Go, granddaughter," Lord Rickard Stark says kindly. "We will meet again, in time."

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Comments? Predictions?

Next time: Jaime, unleashed.
JAIME LANNISTER XIV

Chapter Summary

"Is this Lannister enough for you, little brother?" The words are bitter ash upon his tongue, and he chokes upon them, wishing even now that he had no cause to speak them.

Chapter Notes

Welcome, everyone, to this next chapter!

Thank you for all your comments and enthusiasm and encouragement, it means so much and I can't wait to see what you all think of this instalment.

As always thanks too to northernsky for all the help with plot and characterisation.

A word of warning: this is very, very violent and very, very gory. It really earns the 'graphic depictions of violence' tag, truly it does.

Until next time xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART TWENTY-EIGHT
His cavalry reach the Lion's Mouth without incident, trotting down through the fortified courtyards of the Rock in concentrated silence, the only noise the jangling of the horses' bits and the clatter of their hooves upon the flagstones. Faintly they can hear rising like smoke from a crackling fire the shouts of the men fighting and dying in the city below, punctuated by explosions and screams high above as the two dragons, furious, cannot get close enough to the city or the fortress to burn it because they are being pelted with scorpion bolts, forcing them into all manner of precarious acrobatics. He sees the catapults flinging boulders from the watchtowers and ramparts; they have been scattered around the fortress and the city itself; the idea is that the machines upon the ramparts are more exposed and visible; therefore making a greater target for the dragons, and indeed he is correct because again and again the beasts set a course for them, only to be waylaid by stone flung at them and scorpion bolts too, springing at them with all the suddenness of assassins firing from a minstrels' gallery or hidden behind a column. This leaves intact for longer the catapults hidden within the city of Lannisport, leaves them alone to wreak as much havoc as possible upon the Targaryen encampment sat beyond the city walls, a foul smearing stain of dull cloth and soot and smoke upon quiet fields.

As he passes through the Lion's Mouth he urges Magnificence into a smooth canter, and it is his father's words he hears in his mind, not an admonishment as he had thought them the first time, but as the statement of confidence he now knows they were: You are blessed with abilities few men possess. Become the man you are meant to be. Not tomorrow, not next year, now. Become who you are meant to be. He swallows, moved, and has time enough to vow, I will, Father, I am. I will become who you always had faith I could be. For you, and for my wife, before entering the city of Lannisport itself and the stench of battle hits him like a hammer to the chest, innards and piss and faeces and above it all, tying it all together like some grisly farce of a sauce, the metallic taste of blood upon the tongue. The carrion crows are already circling high above, and they will feast well, tonight, Jaime knows: eyes fleshly plucked from corpses, bursting like summer berries in the mouth, the tender flesh of the cheeks torn from greying faces, stripped to the white jawbones beneath - the scavengers, those death-birds, they will glut themselves from dusk till dawn on steaming viscera, and greet the sunrise, cawing, greedily fattened upon the meat of dead men.

Lady stays close to his left side, Ser Leonidas at his right, and Jaime considers that he has never seen this direwolf as she is now, growling lowly at the enemy, fangs bared vindictively, her fur standing on end as she bristles. The direwolf's comportment reassures him a little; because it means that his wife is yet living, still fighting on. He thinks that at this moment gentle Lady might be more dangerous than Grey Wind and Nymeria combined; not even they had ever shown such coiled, restrained fury as this, only waiting to be gladly and fatally unleashed, a ruin, strong and swift.

Beside him his men fan out from their column to fall into their habitual formation, and a signal from his man, relayed across from where Ser Daven's company is, some distance in front of them down the principal axis of the city, brings them to a halt upon the square outside the Lion's Mouth and Jaime looks up at the sky. The dragons are screaming on the other side of the ramparts; his
company has not been seen, and he nods grimly to himself, drawing his sword, the blade singing. He watches, counting to himself in his head, as Ser Daven's company complete their manoeuvre, and peel away into the side streets, leaving the way open for their Dothraki pursuers to see Jaime and his men, and screaming their ululating cries that make the hair on the back of Jaime's neck stand up, arakhs high, make a charge for the King of the West.

Jaime's vanguard is silent in the face of this provocation, eerily still, and they simply wait, as they have strategised, Lady vibrating with energy beside him. As the Dothraki pass the next junction, some of the horses at the front scream and stumble, cutting the sensitive inner parts of their hooves upon the tiny metal spiked caltrops placed at the centre of the thoroughfare to force the invaders to stick closely to the walls of the houses. As a rider passes a red door on the left side of the avenue his horse must catch a leg upon one of the ropes that turns over a barrel filled with bricks, and it rains down upon the unlucky man, crushing his skull and he falls, his horse terrified, struggling in vain against the projectiles fallen upon its hindquarters, crushing the bones, rendering movement impossible. The horse is as good as dead, Jaime knows. This single incident leads to other riders swerving into one another, protesting violently, and Jaime has no need to signal the order, knowing that Ser Addam high upon the Seastair has an impeccable view of the whole battlefield, and therefore will give the order for him. His faith is justified when a short moment after he sees the vinegar-soaked ropes hidden by tarpaulins weighed down here and there by sand to give all the appearance of a natural road set alight by one of Ser Daven's men in one of the side-streets. The rope burns like a lightning strike, one moment invisible, and the next crackling ferociously, a drawing of flame, and more Dothraki are felled, forced into ever narrower lines, onwards to Jaime like a flood, a torrent churned with bloodlust and savagery horrible enough to freeze the heart of lifeblood itself. The fires are greedy, licking at the ropes with a gnawing, ravenous hunger, darting high into the air, here and there sparking colourfully and explosively as the small packets of flint-grey *byshhir* hidden within the ropes are hit, spooking the horses further, and in some cases, ripping man and mount alike to chunks of bloody flesh with more frenzy than a pack of rabid dogs set upon a deer, and Jaime swallows grimly, understanding stoically what his uncle had meant by *almost as foul as wildfire,* but then the dragon-beasts screech in the skies above and he knows that however ugly siege warfare might be - and he knows it to be without a doubt the ugliest kind of warfare - it can never compare to the horrors of dragons and dragonfire. In the face of such Targaryen provocation Jaime will use any and all means at his disposal, that he had determined upon the Field of Fire when he first came face to face with Daenerys Targaryen, and his opinion on the matter remains unchanged.

The collapsible sections of the thoroughfare do their work, the wooden sections rigged to fall open as the first horse steps upon them, revealing the nasty shock of wooden stakes sharpened, designed to impale horse and rider alike, and they fall into them, buckling and tumbling and unable to stop even had they wished it. Some are fortunate enough to meet death instantly; others bellow and groan, attempting fruitlessly to lift themselves off the stakes they have taken to the thigh or the belly, only in the end prolonging the agony, squirming and writhing like skewered boars.

Their advance is hence slowed, the back lines not seeing the disturbances and dangers in front and so pushing ever forwards, only realising they are crushing their fellows in their haste when they in turn come upon the traps and yank their horses' reins wildly in a desperate, last ditch attempt at avoiding the same grisly fate. When the trenches are filled with dying horses and men, the remainder of the horde ride over them, trampling them further, single-minded in their goal of
attacking Jaime's men.

The Dothraki will fall upon them like water upon rock, Jaime knows, they will break under this staunch defence of his, and at last he signals for the lances to be raised, and then, in silence for the advance, controlled and steady. They have the advantage of the higher ground, and the fact that Jaime knows the flame ropes and traps stop two-thirds of the way up this part of the slope in order to give his men the manouevrability they need. So Jaime does not let himself be rushed, he feels the calm, even movement of his horse under his legs, and holds the line, even as they advance to a fluid canter, leaving enough space for each horse to move properly.

The joining of the armies, when it comes, is like a crash, enough to rattle the teeth from a man's jaw if he is not careful. More than a jolt, more than being unseated at the joust, it is a thunder clap, as though the gods in a fit of rage are tearing apart the skies, the very earth itself. He bares his teeth in a snarl as he unseats one man, and then another by sweeping his lance out to his right, plunging fiercely into the fray. Onward and onward they go, slowing as the front lines get through, and suddenly he finds himself five horses deep in the Dothraki line, and he draws his sword, discarding his lance. It falls, a Dothraki horse steps on it, snapping the wood, and stumbles, and Jaime takes advantage of this to put his sword through the back of the rider's neck as the animal goes down, eyes rolling, mouth frothing with bloody, pinkish foam.

Lady keeps pace with Magnificence, the brilliant stallion unperturbed even when the direwolf brings a man down by leaping onto the horse's neck, sinking claws and fangs into tender flesh, climbing viciously the mount to reach the rider, tearing out the unfortunate man's throat with a cleanliness that surprises Jaime, before racing onwards, growling and snarling to scare the Dothraki, who whilst they may have seen dragons before, have not seen a direwolf, and especially not one ripping a bloody crimson swathe through them, a knife through silk. The sigil's precision reminds him eerily of Sansa, in the way his wife is careful and clean with her words, her movements, even her embroidery stitches. If any direwolf could make such savage, feral butchery as this look clean, it would be Lady, Jaime thinks. Only her muzzle and fangs and claws are wet and red with gore, her russet fur somehow remaining pristine.

Out of the corners of his eyes he sees the lance work has done its job; unseated and broken the Dothraki front line, and so he signals to begin the sequences. Magnificence responds beautifully, and unfazed by the noise and chaos of carnage, he collects and coils his energy. His destrier's first strike of the front legs comes down upon an unmounted enemy attempting to cut into Jaime's horse's neck, but Magnificence comes down so terribly upon the man's upper arm and shoulder that the deadly curve of the blade goes uselessly wide, the man's arm snaps like a branch with a sickening sound, the crunching of rocks, and he is trampled to mud and bone and blood beneath Jaime. Every stride his horse makes is punctuated by a parry and or a block, first to the left, then the right, and right again; he knows with no little amount of relief that his golden hand is a useful way of parrying an overhead blow from an arakh, designed to take his eyes out and split him from forehead to neck, enjoying as always the look of shock and confusion and disbelief in his foe's eyes when he blocks a blade-strike with what looks like an elaborately designed glove, a ridiculous extravagance, when it is actually a metal weapon in its own right.
Onward, ever onward to deal death to his foes, to see the light of life leave their eyes like a candle blown out, and Jaime imagines their souls leaving their bodies like those twisting coils of smoke. Onward and onward again, swords singing a clarion call, ringing out across the field of battle, a fatal grace, silver and flashing inescapable as a thunderstorm pounding the brown earth to mud. Ever onward undaunted, in great sweeping strikes the King of the West sets forth to pay his debts. His wake shatters the earth, the brave men at his sides following, loyal and true and protective upon destriers proud and fleet-footed.

Beneath him Magnificence coils again, and strikes again, and Jaime's line advances inexorably, taking ground stride by stride, thrust by thrust to the head and the neck and the arm, trampling the stubborn foe into the ground beneath their hooves, streaking the stone with wine-crimson blood, and Jaime revels in it. This chaos here, this is familiar to him, as much his home is war as is Casterly Rock, and his line holds as they canter on. He sees in his enemies' eyes not the defiance he expects, but a wariness, and he notes vaguely that just as his breastplate is covered in sprays of grime and gore so too are his destrier's graceful legs, from the strikes and trampling they have engaged in. We will wade in blood to our knees under the setting sun, he vows fiercely. That is the price of the debt he owes; that is only the beginning of the debt he owes, and it will be a debt paid in slashed throats and bodies crumpled like marionettes, a debt paid in the horror of war.

This will be a long day, a day of lance-pierced bowels and sword-hacked limbs, for many. He does not intend to be one of those unlucky men.

He hefts his sword with a dancer's grace even with his left hand, and Endever seems to appreciate the gift of lifeblood, rich and warm and wine-red, drinking thirstily, singing eerily with joy of war as all weapons of Valyrian steel do. The sword is a dream in his hand, responding fluidly, and he suddenly has the strange thought that the blade must be able to read his mind. It is the feeling of rightness he experienced the first time his father put a sword in his hand; from the first swing of his arm, Jaime had known. It was an instinct, a dance, deadly and precarious with a swift kind of beauty, it was life itself. And he feels it again now, Endever responsive to him, like Magnificence, and together they wreak a terrible, consuming vengeance upon their enemies, swift as a torrent, as ear-ringing as the crashing of the waves upon the rocks, as treacherous as the sea-currents that pull a man under the waves and quietly drown him. His destrier pirouettes and his sword is a flashing arc of silver light, dealing death above, and Jaime is breathless with concentrated exhilaration. He works quickly, seeking to remove his enemies as threats, and whether that is by chopping off a weapon-hand or stabbing a foe through the chest he does not much care, acting with a ruthless, brutal sort of finesse rather than the flamboyant strikes men such as Loras Tyrell had favoured.

He admits to himself; he has missed this. There is something about war, about the clashing steel and the feel of a warhorse's energy and courage under him that makes his heart beat more quickly, it thunders with righteousness all the greater now due to the circumstances. Every blow he deals, he thinks, clear-headed, for Sansa. For my child. It becomes a litany that he repeats, confident in the knowledge that his Lionsguard are at his side, providing valuable cover and protection when Jaime engages in the more dangerous manoeuvres. For Sansa. For Sansa. For our child. Onward again, onward and onward until lifeblood drench the earth, pouring from mortal, deathly wounds in libation, onward, ever onward.
His enemy has reckless courage enough to come at him and his line even when they kick and trample and slash their way through this invading horde. One rider gets close enough to Jaime for the man to attempt to slash down at Magnificence's belly, to cut clean his saddle girth and bring him to the ground, but Ser Leonidas delivers a ringing, arcing blow to the shoulder and the man slumps in his saddle, the horse veers into Magnificence's flanks. Jaime's warhorse takes exception to this, snorting, flicking his ears, coiling and mastering his energy to protect his rider, and Jaime has never been so grateful in his life that he is riding a destrier of such quality as this, for brave Magnificence, without his rider's prompting executes the customary half-rear in preparation for the powerful leap into the air - Jaime hurriedly adjusting his seat to aid his horse. The aerial kick, a vicious, controlled lashing out with muscled hind legs that Magnificence delivers crushes the Dothraki's skull into itself upon impact, limp hair matting with spatters of brain and white bone, Jaime can see, glancing back over his shoulder.

Jaime's horse lands with a shuddering, dull thump, snorting, neck arched proudly. Thank you, my friend, Jaime thinks. Magnificence flicks an ear in brief acknowledgement, prancing. And then onward, ever onward.

The Dothraki are beginning to give him and Lady a wide berth, scattering, Jaime sees with vague, satisfied amusement. He might only have one hand, but he recognises that he owes his success upon this deathly field all to the incredible horse he is riding. This noble destrier might be the finest he has ever come across. Lady, not to be outdone, begins hunting down the remaining Dothraki with a vengeance, her paws hardly touching the ground as she leaps from one horse's back to the next, tearing, kneading vindictively, ripping muscle and sinew and bone apart with her sharp claws and the animals go down screaming and whinnying with terror, their riders torn apart with a brutality that makes him shiver in his armour. She is all lingering tracks in the snow, the endurance of a shadow in the woods stalking prey for nights on end, a creature of the elder days and tales around merry hearths in the long ancient frost, a direwolf of the Kings of Winter come again, to remind those misfortunate enough to have forgotten such a thing, to their mortal peril.

"Sire!" Ser Leonidas calls from his right.

His Lord Commander is correct; now is the time to seize the advantage, and press onwards. And so Jaime signals the about-wheel, and his line closes, his cavalry now riding knee to knee, stirrup to stirrup, as they turn, collecting the canter, preparing for a charge. The turn complete, the line widens and ripples seamlessly into a series of arrow-headed points, aimed unerringly at their foes, akin to a hailstorm dark enough to turn day to night, hiding the sun, and then the rout begins.

As it was outside Riverrun, it is bloody and merciless. The dragons scream overhead, tumbling through the sky, furious that the scorpions firing bolt after bolt at them prevent them from getting low enough to incinerate the men fighting on the ground. If there is one thing Jaime has learnt from his previous battles against the Dothraki horde it is that they find discipline as the Westerosi understand the word unsettling, deeply so. They do not comprehend it. He has observed from them that they fight as individual men, and they are fearsome in their way, their ululating cries announcing their arrival far before they can be seen. So Jaime has chosen to fight with silence...
instead. His men are trained in such a manner, to this cold manner of nobility; they do not respond to provocation with insults or shouts or jeers. They remain quietly, calmly focused, efficient in the cool way they dispatch their enemies, in the same way that a hunting lion, having found his prey, is silent and still before he leaps. This is his father's influence, Jaime think. That cold, collected ruthlessness is what he strives to emulate in battle - not for nothing was Tywin Lannister one of the greatest military commanders of the century. It also means his enemy do not realise what he is doing until it is too late for them to counter, which had been Jaime's aim.

On the far left he sees Lord Royce's company turn and trap some of the Dothraki between them and Lord Glover's men. He sees distantly Lord Manderly's horse going down after taking four arrows to the neck and the eye, but this does not disturb the man in the slightest. For such a bulky man he is surprisingly light upon his feet and dismounts easily, greatsword held high, and he stands his ground with a bellowed "Come at me, you lily-livered bastards, you screaming monsters! Yes, you," the Lord of White Harbor continues unerringly, gesturing rudely at a mounted foe, "you, you scurvy-teethed scullions, you dunghill-eaters, come at me and fight me, or I'll think you've had your pizzles cut off!" And they do, seemingly renewed in their bloodlust by the appearance of an enemy inclined to make some noise, and he cuts them down to a man. Jaime raises an eyebrow, snorting his appreciation at the man's eloquent breadth of vocabulary, enough to make even the crassest of sailors bow in resignation in the face of such wonderful sophistication, before turning his attention back to his own opponents.

When Jaime's part of the line circles around and canters past him Lord Manderly salutes Jaime with a "Give them hell, Sire," and the King of the West barks out a short laugh of acknowledgement.

His wife's bannerman continues a ceaseless barrage of insults, taunts and provocations that ring like a death knell in Jaime's ears, heard grimly even from afar, from halfway across the field, his great foghorn of a voice able to cut above and through the tumult of battle, luring all foes to him, a treacherous light-house beacon leading not to safe harbour but instead to shipwreck, dashed and final, upon hidden rocks beneath the surface of the water. "Come on, you villainous sons of poxy-whores, come on, give me a bit of a fight, you floppy stock-fishes, you unwashed bunch-back toads!"

Eventually, long past the time when Jaime began to feel his leather surcoat sticking wetly and uncomfortably to his back, it is done. The Dothraki have fallen, and with it too comes a sickly sort of silence. The square where only some days previously Jaime had ridden through with Sansa to cheering acclaim is now piled so thickly with corpses the road is hidden under blood and entrails ripped steaming from bellies and a mire of blood and bone and leather. Here and there Dothraki horses stagger about, whinnying, bolting madly, flanks bloodied. They will be slaughtered for food later, he knows, the meat cured to last for months, even years. Lady howls her victory, the sound echoing off the stone after spitting out the entrails hanging from her fangs like ribbons, steaming, gruesome, with dainty disdain and disgust that might seem incongruous but somehow is not. Jaime huffs out a reluctant smirk at the notion that his wife's sigil does not consider the offal worth eating. It reminds him of Sansa's shudders of distaste, the delicate, endearing way she wrinkles her nose at the thought of eating mussels, of which she cannot stand even the barest mention. Sansa. Even her name makes his heart bleed, sorrow, violent and visceral surging through him, a
mounting tide of pain, and breathing heavily, he shakes his head to clear his mind. He cannot afford to lose his concentration now.

Turning to Ser Leonidas, he takes stock of his losses. The Lord Commander reads his King's question upon his countenance before Jaime voices it. "Better than we expected, Sire, look. Much better." And it is true; only here and there does Jaime catch sight of the occasional red or blue cloak or heavy northron fur slumped upon the ground.

Jaime nods with stern, stoic satisfaction and takes advantage of the momentary lull to survey the entirety of the battlefield. Lannisport is a smoking ruin, smouldering, red and angry as a lancing boil, a pustule ablaze in part, buildings collapsed and blackened, rubble blocking streets like streaks and spatters of grime, but that had been a sacrifice Jaime had known he would have to make. Homes can be rebuilt, the stone reused. The dead, however, cannot, and should not be raised again again from their graves and crypts dug deep and low in the mountainsides. Sinew and muscle and bone cannot be once more knit together once severed from the human soul, and it would be the darkest, vilest of magics to even attempt such a horror, a blasphemy.

"It is not over yet, Sire," Ser Leonidas warns, gesturing mildly towards Ser Daven's standard, flying high and proud above the mêlée. From what he can vaguely make out Ser Daven and Captain Vylarr's companies seem to be doing well on the other side of the city, charging through the Targaryen camp, tasked with flattening it, amongst other things. "He's luring the Unsullied towards us, do you see?"

"Good man," Jaime murmurs, before pirouetting Magnificence to address the full strength of his host, filling his lungs hastily for the bellow necessary. "Reform the line, gentlemen! Reform the line!"

Fighting the Unsullied requires an adaptation of tactics. Lancework will not help them, no, here they needs must rely on superior bulk and weight of the horses, as well as speed and manoeuvrability. With the skill of the Lannister cavalry, this is not an especially difficult task. It helps, too, that the Unsullied wear light leather armour, not metal. The heft and arc of a cavalry sword, aided by the momentum of a warhorse thundering at a full charge, can cut a man in leathers down from neck to groin if done with enough force, cleaving him in two like a log splitting cleanly under the blow of the woodsman's axe. Jaime's host, too, know how to leap over the angled spears of the first line of the phalanx that is a standard defence against a cavalry attack. Here, where he is with his vanguard at the entrance to the Lion's Mouth, with a straight, open shot of a road through
Lannisport to the gates of the city, is one of the principal targets, he is eminently aware of that. But that is his duty as King of the West, to lead from the front, to find himself in the eye of the carnage, one he has been raised to fulfil from his earliest childhood.

The Unsullied advance more cautiously than their Dothraki counterparts, carefully, gingerly picking their way between the various traps Jaime's military engineers have laid out. To cross the trenches filled with Dothraki corpses, the Unsullied use their small round shields to build a series of stepping stones of sorts, and then continue their slow advance. There are many of them still, a few thousand, Jaime estimates, marching in one long column towards them, barring those troops yet held in reserve at the Targaryen camp. Jaime signals for the gates of the Lion's Mouth to remain open.

They are going to need them.

Were Jaime an Unsullied commander, he would attempt to pin his cavalry in, hounds cornering a stag with the ravine steep and treacherous behind, to remove their greatest advantage which is their manoeuvrability and speed, for which the horses need a certain amount of space.

So that is precisely what Jaime is going to let the Unsullied do, at least to begin with. When he had announced the totality of his strategy in conclave, his wife had paled dramatically at the danger of it, but he had kept his gaze upon Sers Addam, Leonidas and Daven, men he knows he can trust to tell him if he is being too reckless. Instead, they had nodded, seeing in their minds the destruction his suggestion would cause, and thinking it feasible, though a great risk. Lord Royce, most dutiful and protective and counselling of the Queen in the North's bannermen and one of the most experienced battlefield commanders currently alive, had simply looked at Jaime, impassively, at great length, before bowing his white head and stating simply, with the sincere directness Jaime knows his wife dearly appreciates, "A strategy worthy of Tywin Lannister himself, combined with a kingslayer's boldness."

The charge, this time, is from the halt, and they use the slope of the ground to aid their momentum, the high-stepping gait of the Lannister warhorses a gift from the gods here. Jaime loses himself in it, his world narrowing to the ceaseless rhythm of slash, backhand, run a man down, adjust his weight in the saddle as Magnificence half-rears to strike out powerfully with his front legs, all the while keeping the line, working together, selecting his next enemy. His destrier truly proves his worth and his heart here, never tiring, never sidling or shying away and refusing to engage as a lesser horse, one less well trained and with a more temperamental character, might, but steadily, courageously aiding his rider, onwards and onwards. This, this is where the battle changes, this is where it boils down to sheer endurance, to steadiness, to a soldier's ability to hold his nerve. Jaime has survived having his sword hand chopped off and being held captive, chained like a rabid animal in a cage. He can survive this. He can endure long enough, longer than his foes. He can hold his nerve better than many other men. He will hold his nerve now.
And this is where the tide turns, this is how Jaime knows the moment has come. With his right foot, he nudges Magnificence's shoulder. On cue, the stallion stumbles, before righting himself again. But he knows the Unsullied will have seen it, he knows his own men will have seen it, and Jaime's own line spooks and trembles like a still lake disturbed by a pebble thrown by a child.

It wavers. It falters.

And then it falls, crumbling in upon itself like a house brought down to rubble from the inside out.

The horses stumble, panting, and the riders pull hard on the reins to bring their mounts back to equilibrium, bumping into each other, soldiers shouting, voices cracking with fear. Onwards, onwards!

Chaos.

The Unsullied come forwards once more, and Jaime's line is in disarray. Magnificence snorts, scrambles, and the Lionsguard around him struggle with the same. The Unsullied press forward, stepping in time, utterly unperturbed, statues come to life, their faces blanker than a night without stars. It is unsettling, that Jaime will readily agree. The gaps in Jaime's line widen, and the Unsullied pour through like sand falling between fingers. They are still being cut down, of course. But there is an art to this, a skill to choosing how many men to kill and trample underfoot, and how many to let through, and how far to let them go into your ranks.

"We're overrun, Sire!" Ser Leonidas calls, frantic, wheeling his horse around, raining down blow after blow to protect his King.

He trusts his Lord Commander's judgement.

"Fall back!" Jaime roars, turning Magnificence around. "Fall back! Fall back to the Rock!" His order, shouted for the benefit of his enemies, is relayed through the habitual signalling flag channels to his soldiers.

The Unsullied are quite disconcerted by this sudden change of events, but they can see the growing disorder in Jaime's ranks and they continue onwards as Jaime had known they would, with the intention of skewering the King of the West on the sides of his own ramparts.
He has no intention of allowing that to happen, and so he spurs his warhorse into an easy gallop. The Unsullied at his back jeer him, and Jaime's men follow him, urging their horses back to the safety of the fortress, egging the destriers on, hands flapping the reins about. The Unsullied with a great cry ripped from their chests as though by rage pursue them. A more suspicious mind than their commander would have noted the fact that the King of the West's troops never disengage entirely, and that whilst the cavalry are fleeing back into the castle, their companies abandoning any semblance of order, so too does the Unsullied line gradually thin out as they pursue, intently, like bloodhounds upon the scent of a running fox through the woods.

There is an art to this, an art to creating the illusion of chaos and panic and the disintegration of a host whilst keeping it still in order, and it relies upon a simple method, so simple, in fact, that it seems ridiculous, but it is this: counting. When the host turns tail, it does so at a pre-determined, rehearsed pace, with carefully counted gaps, and the counting helps the host keep a steady speed, and this means a retreat fast enough for an enemy to infer panic, but slow enough that the ranks never disengage entirely, forcing pursuit.

The Unsullied pursue them all the way into the castle, into the fortified courtyards themselves, and Jaime holds his breath with anticipation. When he has passed the Singer's Gate he raises his right, golden hand high in the air so the sun flashes upon it, a signal he can be sure Ser Addam has caught when the great doors to the Rock proper open upon oiled hinges, and Jaime positions himself off to the side, watching as his men clatter back into the fortress itself, the great doors shutting behind them until Jaime and his Lionsguard and Lady find themselves in the courtyard with only twenty cavalry, and most of the lords of the conclave in the vanguard, Lord Manderly having wrestled a Dothraki mount into submission, and in front of them a company of Lannister infantrymen that exited the Rock even as the cavalry swept in, heavy embossed shields locked into a protective wall against spears, the rank behind forming an overhead carapace with the very same.

Jaime watches as the Unsullied fill the courtyard, pouring into it, and when it and all the other fortified courtyards leading up to it are the same, Jaime raises his golden hand once more to give the order.

With a sound like a clang of two clashing blades magnified a thousand-fold, the portculli come crashing down.

And the Unsullied are trapped.

They only have a moment to realise it, dread turning to determination, before they flee from the gatehouses towards the centre of the courtyards to escape the burning sand and pitch and tar being poured onto their helms through the murder holes like an avalanche down burning mountainsides, and they stagger into the open, writhing, screaming, crushing their fellows. Some foolhardy and determined souls attempt to rush the portculli again, attempt through the sheer, brutal strength of the soldier to lift them up and free themselves, but the arms of mortal men are no match for such a
great weight of iron, and they are beaten back to the centre again by another deluge of burning sand that slips underneath leather armour and makes skin burn and itch so terribly that a flaying would hurt less.

Jaime sees the moment these indentured slave-soldiers realise there is no way out, not from this, and he raises his golden hand again, waiting to see what the enemy will do. He demands their surrender in fierce, commanding tones, but they simply stare blankly back at him, mouths agape.

Surrender must not be a word they are familiar with. An army of slaves, far from home, unable or unwilling to recognise freedom when they are given the chance. It fills his stomach with lumps of lead. But the dragons above rage on, and Sansa - Sansa - is not yet free of danger. Had the Unsullied thrown down their spears, Jaime would have honoured that, in accordance with the way the Westerosi wage war. He would have held them hostage for ransom, or else snuck them out under cover of darkest night out to his ships and taken them back to their own lands. But instead they would die here. So be it, Jaime thinks, swallowing. So be it.

He brings down his arm sharply.

And he has for a response a hail of arrows shot from the ramparts to fell the enemy. They die with abortive cries, they do not move or attempt escape, and for a time there is only the sustained, eerie hiss-thwack, hiss-thwack of the arrows hitting their mark. Jaime's archers have a line three men deep, each with his arrow nocked to his bow as he waits his turn to fire from the narrow, slitted arrow windows that look out onto the courtyards. He fires and steps aside, his fellow taking his place, firing in turn, and so on and so on until the battle is won.

Then, from above, from the Singer's Gate, comes the haunting melody like waves lapping gently in secret coves, hidden in the cliffs: and who are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low... and from above the arrows fall and fall and fall without end upon the slave-soldiers in a rain melancholy and lethal, trapped and corralled without escape, sentenced to die between these high, proud walls, far from home, fighting a war that was not theirs to fight.

And so he spoke, and so he spoke, that lord of Castamere...
A screeching scream, so sharp as to almost make bleed the ears of men, suddenly overpowers the minstrels singing in the gatehouse, the strains of music floating down to the courtyard like gently falling leaves to the skin and soothing, and induces Jaime to wheel Magnificence around and look up towards the sky. His horse chomps at the bit, tensing, but trusts his rider to such a great degree that the stallion, staunch and undaunted, does not move.

"By all the gods above..." he murmurs, trailing off in horrified, spellbound fascination. As he watches with astonishment one of the dragons, the green one, he thinks, plummets into a dive, avoiding only narrowly a scorpion bolt to the neck, roaring out a rage of flame, but a boulder thrown by one of the catapults halfway up the Seastair clips the tail of the beast, followed by one of the weighted net and barbed arrowhead contraptions shot from an apparatus resembling the scorpions that the military engineer Leonel had dreamed up - Jaime has no conception of how, the young man's mind is utterly unfathomable to him - hooking onto the dragon's wing membranes and dragging, digging into the flesh with an awful scrape of a sound, followed by a scorpion volley of bolts to the shoulders, the body, the neck, and the beast tumbles, head over tail, wings flapping uselessly, sinking like a stone in water down to the earth, crashing belly first into the final fortified courtyard of Jaime's ancestral seat, crushing underneath its bulk a number of its own soldiers, unable to move out of the way in time, so hemmed in by walls and arrow-hail and burning pitch and tar and sand are they. He has seen a dragon fall before, of course, at the Siege of Winterfell, but this is far more violent, far more visceral than that could ever have been. This dragon fights the weapons even as it plummets, falling like the night, writhing in agonised desperation, a twisted, vile mockery of the dragon's own victims twisting and burning in the flames.

The other one, the black shadow ridden by the Dragon Queen, screams his rage to see his brother fall, and rears back its head, wings flapping madly, and belches out a torrent of flame that passes above Jaime's head closely enough that he coughs and reddens from the heat, and Jaime ducks, hugging Magnificence's neck to avoid being burnt to a kingly crisp.

But a well-timed scorpion bolt hits the fell beast in the vulnerable shoulder articulation, and screaming, the black dread launches itself back high into the sky, fleeing in a belaboured flight to safety. Above the sound of the winged shadow, a human cry, womanly, vulnerable, incensed. Drogon! Turn around! Drogon we must save him. Drogon! Turn around! Turn around! The dragon, wounded, wings torn and nearly entirely useless, does not obey his so-called mother, and Jaime breathes a sigh of relief as the danger of the fell fire of those beasts fades away.

Jaime's sharpshooters have more than earned themselves a cask of wine and the praise of their people when this day of death has ended, thinks the King of the West admiringly.

A low, agonised movement from a black lump upon the dead green dragon's back makes Jaime tighten protectively his grip upon his hilt. What in the Seven Hells... The lump groans and slides precariously down the incline of the beast's wing to fall dully to onto an Unsullied corpse, twisted unnaturally, dark eyes open, unseeing towards the faraway sky, blue bleeding gently, slowly, to
crimson as the sun still fatigued by winter begins to sink below the horizon and disappear from their view.

Lady reacts to the lump cloaked in dull black and sooty cloth in a way Jaime has never seen her react to anyone, not even the Dothraki upon the battlefield. She begins to stalk determinedly forwards upon silent, padded feet, her russet fur bristling, hackles raised, her low snarl a fitting counterpoint, he finds, to the song the bards are still playing upon his order.

The lump coughs, raising a battered frame to stand upon shaking, unsteady, near drunken legs like a new born foal and Jaime swears under his breath.

Jon Snow.

The man who loved Sansa and then betrayed her, and covets her still, unless Jaime is much mistaken, and now standing, looking around his courtyard with trepidation, blanching, eyes wide, wild as he begins to make sense of what he is seeing and hearing, a man possessed. His gaze narrows to red-eyed brimstone when he catches sight of Jaime, and he draws his sword, only to stumble with exhausted disorientation, narrowly avoiding impaling himself upon his own blade.

Jaime is surprised the man's fall on dragonback from the skies has not killed him, and he has to remind himself that recklessness now will achieve nothing. His father's ghost, it seems, stands next to him, nodding faintly with approval as Jaime restrains himself, forcing back the urge to run the man down and slaughter him for what he has done to the Queen in the North and their child.

"Jon Snow, consort of the Dragon Queen," Jaime calls formally, harshly. "Do you yield?"

"So you can kill me later?" the bastard retorts, and Jaime sees hellfire in that expression. A lesser man than Jaime would quail. "No, thank you. Kill me with a sword in my hand," the black-haired man spits.

"It would be far from a fair fight, would it not?" Jaime drawls. "You're not worth killing like this, Jon Snow, when you cannot even stand up properly, much less grasp a sword."

"You're a cripple."

"I had not noticed," Jaime answers evenly. "Pick another insult, preferably one that shows a
"You fucked your sister, who was a monster."

"And you fucked your aunt, who is a monster," Jaime corrects his enemy snidely. "Pardon me, allow me to be accurate in my accusation: you are still fucking your aunt, who is a monster. If you are trying to provoke me, then what a dismal, disappointing failure this is."

"I don't love her. I never have. I love Sansa." The man's voice is full of self-centred torment, as though another has been responsible for wrapping him in the tangle of thorn bushes he now finds himself in, and Jaime has no patience for it, for any of this pining, morose defence.

"You dare speak her name?" The King of the West hisses, furious beyond measure, his voice cracking with emotion. "You dare - you dare? After you stood by and watched as your lover, the venerable Dragon Queen broke guest right, broke a signed treaty of peace, and poisoned my wife and unborn child with the intent to kill. You are unworthy of her. You are unworthy to speak of her, look upon her, even think of her. You are unworthy of prostrating yourself at her feet and begging her forgiveness. You are unworthy, Jon Snow," Jaime finishes, pronouncing the words with vicious, brutal flourish, cruelly enjoying the look of misery upon his opponent's face - the man more than deserves it, in Jaime's opinion. How the man could have been so foolish as to take her for granted Jaime will never understand, but how fortunate for him that the dragon's consort had been.

"I love her!" he cries.

"You betrayed her at the first opportunity you had," Jaime corrects, his left hand tightening upon his sword, pronouncing the words in a vindictive, matter-of-fact tone. "You disdain and dismiss her and still you expect her trust and faith. You are despicable. If that is love, then it is nothing more than poison."

"Then kill me," he says, voice low and hoarse with the strain of his fall.

"That would be too easy," Jaime smirks coldly, his words a sardonic drawl. He is wrathful enough to uncover the man's corpse and hack it up and feed the remains to the roaring sunset of the sea, but that would not serve anything but momentary satisfaction. Jaime has not come so far to be undone now by the temptation of momentary satisfaction, not when the lives of his wife, his child and the people of the two crowns, weirwood and gold, weigh against such a vice, and win. "That would be far too easy. In any case, last I looked," he says pointedly, "murdering unarmed prisoners of war was a Targaryen predilection, not a Lannister one." The other man flushes angrily, but does not contest the point. Indeed, he cannot.
"I am armed!" he rasps, stubborn even now.

"Not now you are not." He laughs, gesturing towards the weapon now out of reach after the direwolf tackles the Dragon Queen's consort, taking him carelessly to the ground, knocking the blade from him. "Thank you, Lady." The sigil looks very pleased with herself, pricking her ears up at Jaime's praise.

"If you imprison me, Daenerys will come for you. She will burn you - "

"In our beds?", Jaime interrupts, impatient, his mouth twisting with bitter distaste. "Aerys the Mad said something similar, I seem to recall. In any case," he continues, dismissive and nearly casual, "I have no intention of letting you inside the Rock. You do not deserve to see its hallowed halls."

"Then what will you do with me?"

"Oh, it's really quite simple," he answers carelessly, with deceptive nonchalance. "Your hands will be bound with a length of rope, you will be stripped of armour and released of any other weaponry you may currently have on your person, your hair shorn - I hear it is a Dothraki custom to cut off one's hair if one ever loses a battle, and as your Daenerys Targaryen still holds a Dothraki title she will surely appreciate its significance even if you cannot - and my men will walk you slowly back to the Lion's Mouth, giving you all the time in the world to have a look at the faces of the slaves dead in the Targaryen thirst for conquest. So much for the Breaker of Chains. Old Valyria has ever been built upon the backs and blood of slaves; it seems where dragons go manacles inevitably follow, and Daenerys Targaryen carries on that proud legacy. Do you not understand? We, none of us, Lannister, Stark, Targaryen, can escape our ancestors; their names and deeds are carved into our bones. We cannot escape, but we can be more than our forebears, if we understand first their deeds and our own."

"And you think you have done so?" Jon Snow sneers.

"I know I have," Jaime retorts. "And so too has my wife. But ignorance and wilful blindness only means retreading the same path with a band over our eyes that we have tied ourselves, and inevitably we will falter and fall and taste the mud of defeat. I hope these dead slaves haunt you, Jon Snow. I hope that as you stumble and clamber over their corpses you will think about what you have done that has led you here, to this very moment that finds you kneeling at my feet. Perhaps if nothing comes to mind my bards' lament will remind you of those things."
"You dare play that song, after the Freys used it to kill Robb?" Jon Snow howls, launching himself at Jaime in a pitiful attempt at further violence. Jaime does not even need to pirouette Magnificence to the side, for Jon Snow's weakened legs do the job for him, crumpling uselessly underneath him like a chair made of wool after the man has taken two steps in the King of the West's direction.

"What my father plotted with Lord Frey was an evil thing, I agree entirely. But I was not involved in that plot," Jaime points out. "I was rather occupied recovering from my escaping from Robb Stark. Nor did you rush to your dear, beloved cousin's defence. And then you acted in exactly the same way as he did. Though with Ned Stark as your adoptive father and Rhaegar Targaryen as your true father I cannot say I am entirely surprised. If the two men had one thing in common it was knowing how to betray a lady." And the treasons of those two men against Elia Martell and Catelyn Stark should not be forgotten. For love, those treasons were. Well, treasons have consequences, as Jaime knows only too well. Rhaegar Targaryen and Ned Stark and Jon Snow, now, all seem to have not understood that little fact. Jaime, once he made up his mind to ride North once more, knew he could not afford to make the same mistake, and indeed he had not wanted to. He had been ashamed, deeply ashamed, and when the truth had come out he had made his penitence without any expectation of forgiveness at all.

"In any case," Jaime drawls, almost languidly, though his words hold that lurking, sharp edge of danger, a dagger flashing silver in the sunlight. "The song is mine to do with as I please. If I wish to dance a jig to it, I will. If I wish to use it at such a time as this, I will. I am a Lannister, and if you believe that I am content to allow the songs of my House to be appropriated by a family of weasel-faced traitors, then truly you do not understand the meaning of the words a Lannister always pays his debts. You fell for my trap, Jon Snow. You, Daenerys Targaryen, the Dothraki and the Unsullied. You all fell for my trap, and you fell for it most beautifully. I am a Lannister and the King of the West, and this is my ancestral castle. Did you truly believe I would not defend it with everything in my possession? And now, here we are, another dead dragon at my feet."

"I might be unworthy of Sansa, but do you truly believe that you are?" The expression of misery and self-loathing in the grey-eyed man's countenance twists to something more violent as he believes he has alighted upon a weapon with which to hurt his enemy, something with which to stab him repeatedly between the ribs, something to make him choke and retch.

Jaime is not about to reveal what he may or may not believe of himself in such a public manner as this. Only to Sansa would he confess such emotions, and he is beginning to tire of this bastard's prodding and poking at Jaime's married life. It is none of his business, and Jaime has not forgotten the woeful hang-dog expression mingled with cold possession, dark and furious, upon the man's face at the parley. It is the kind of bitter envy on which bastard claims have ever been stoked to blazing flames, and it has only ever led to ruin.

"The love of my wife is the most precious gift I have ever and will ever receive. I would never be so ungentlemanly as to throw it back in her face. I would never be so churlish as to do anything other except love her with equal devotion in return. She does not love you. She will never love
you. She is with child - my child, and you stood by and watched whilst your lover attempted to kill
them both." A shadow passes over Jon Snow's countenance at Jaime's last words and the King of
the West continues with incredulous, disgusted amazement, it all suddenly makes sense to him:
"That is why you volunteered your services to the Dragon Queen after you left Winterfell, is it not?
You knew, because you know Daenerys Targaryen, that this would end in war, and you believed
you would have the chance to kill me. The chance to kill me, and you believed that Sansa would
what - fall into your arms, and you would comfort her in her grief - ah, you don't like at all the idea
of her grieving for me, do you now? - and that you would somehow be able to win her back
eventually? I'm right, aren't I?"

The Dragon Queen's consort flushes like a greenboy caught with his breeches down behind the
stables, with anger or embarrassment Jaime does not much care to speculate, and the King of the
West knows his summary of his enemy's motives to be accurate. Disgust flares, heavy and potent,
in his gut, and it takes a moment of extreme concentration to force away and down the burning bile
that rises in his throat. "You're a fool, Jon Snow," Jaime spits coldly. "More than that, you're an
entitled fool, blown up like so much hot air with resentment." The last shred of his patience burns
away, an ember quickly and viciously consumed at the sight of such selfish stupidity, at the
thought that this man has the audacity to believe that after taking the Queen in the North for
granted once, after betraying her in the most intimate way known to man, then allowing an
assassination attempt on her before following that up with the aim of slaying her husband upon the
battlefield, he can win her back? She is not some prize to be won. She is a lady of the highest
calibre, and deserves to be revered and admired and loved and respected as such.

"I tire of this inane conversation," Jaime says, before declaiming with deceptive mildness, "Once
you have passed through the Lion's Mouth you will go back to your chosen tyrant at tell her what
happened here. Tell her another of her dragons has been slain. Tell her her Unsullied lie here as
spears, broken and useless. Tell her her Dothraki are staked in my city's trenches, that their
lifeblood today has richly nourished this earth."

"Why let me go?"

"Why would I pass over the opportunity to return Daenerys Targaryen's lover to her as the last
survivor of a massacre? How else would she find out what happened here?" If there is one thing the
loss of his right hand taught him, it is indeed that. Death is easy. If you destroy a man's reputation
whilst he yet lives, if you take from him that which he holds as the core of his being, on the other
hand, he will do half the work for you, making that eventual and complete destruction so much the
easier, and so much the more satisfying in the end. It will also gnaw away like
gangrene blackening a limb at the Dragon Queen's mind, Jaime knows. Why did the King of the
West spare him, she will ask herself - perhaps not in such polite terms - why, why, why, and it will
ferment dissidence and distrust in her camp, fracture and crack it open like a bone until the marrow
is ripe for the taking, to be plucked as easily as a fruit from the tree branch. But Jaime does not
expect a man such as Jon Snow to consider all of that. "Captain, if you would be so generous as to
show this Jon Snow to our gates?"
"At once, Sire," the man bows smartly.

"Oh, there's one more thing," Jaime adds, conversationally, a leonine smirk lighting his green eyes with the cold of flashing gems. "Singers, play on."

Jaime sits tall in his destrier's saddle, though wearied now, and he waits, as on and on the singers play, the eerie melancholy of the melody, water dripping in the dark, thrumming at his heart and he can only think, his insides twisting with dread, an ache of longing rising in his chest, how is my wife? does she yet live? He waits, ruminating darkly, for his infantry to return to him and tell him the man who betrayed his wife is safely beyond the fortress gates, he waits for Ser Daven and Captain Vylarr, still out upon the field of battle, to return.

Eventually, after dusk, all the men have returned, faces smeared with gore, blood dyeing crimson the destriers' slim white legs. Captain Vylarr returns holding securely in his arms the Lady Eleanor Mooton Tarly and her young son, pale faced, dead-eyed, staring unblinking at nothing in particular.

"I will have your report later this evening, Captain," Jaime says briskly. "Go and see to the Lady and her son, and share the good news with Lord Mooton." Someone must have some joy upon this grim day, someone other than the feasting gods of death, Jaime thinks darkly. The captain nods his head in sharp salute and then urges his tired mount into the castle proper.

His cousin, Ser Daven, however, returns slung face down over an officer's saddle, the back of his helm smashed in, and Jaime knows, numbly, swallowing hard, that there is nothing that can be done. His cousin will be buried in the family crypts as befits his name and valour, that Jaime vows. And quickly too; vigil and Silent Sisters be damned. They are at war, under siege. He will not have the risk of spreading disease simply for a vigil, the thought is entirely nonsensical. If the Silent Sisters are occupied in any case through the night stripping the bodies of the dead in this fortress of anything useful, weaponry and armour, then perhaps the issue of a vigil for his cousin might be quietly and discreetly put to rest. The Faith of the Seven in any case has no political power either in his realm or that of his wife's. He gives the order in brief, clipped tones, that the bodies of their enemies are to be returned to the Dragon Queen by catapult during the night. He has not the
faintest notion of what their burial customs are, and he is not about to waste valuable firewood and pitch building a massive funeral pyre. He is a Lannister, not a Targaryen. His cousin will be bathed clean of the grime and gore of war, his helm cut away, and dressed in the finest crimson and cloth of gold before being carried upon a bier by four of his officers through the Hall of Heroes and then down, down into the crypts, where he will be laid to rest in a sarcophagus to be carved with his effigy, his name, and the following traditional inscription in the ancient language of the West: *lancadil lucessa*, which translated signifies *in service to the King*.

A second officer has a bundle slung over his warhorse's withers, and Jaime starts as the hood is indifferently, carelessly pulled off the bundle's head.

There is a long moment of silence, heavy, drawn out like the waning of the summer stars, an aeon passing and mortals unaware.

Tyrion Lannister can only gape, disbelief written all over his unfortunate countenance, at the scene with which he now finds himself confronted, and the song still being sung upon the battlements above them, now mingled with fierce, jubilant cries from the men of *Lancadil! Lancadil!* an augury of victory for his brother, an omen of defeat for the dwarf. Slowly, he lifts his head. "Brother," he begins timidly, "brother, I -"

"Is this Lannister enough for you, *little brother*?" The words are bitter ash upon his tongue, and he chokes upon them, wishing even now that he had no cause to speak them.

When he reaches the private bedchamber he shares with his wife the Queen in the North, his heart wrenches violently in his chest. She is pale, her bright hair sickeningly vivid against her skin, and she lies unresponsive in a simple nightshift in the very counterfeit of death, Fortune the faithful at the foot of the bed. The Wolfsguard around her are sentinels in bright shining armour and silver swords drawn, and he jerks his head to dismiss them, even as Ser Leonidas silently begins to remove his King's armour. Jaime does not take in any of it, not the removal of his surcoat and shirt and boots, nor the washing off of the gore of the battlefield and the blood of the men he has killed today with a soft cloth and warm water, he is entirely dazed, staring numbly at his wife, comprehendingly. To see her thus, what a wound it is. He had thought that nothing could
possibly have been worse than holding her unconscious body in his embrace, curled around her to protect her, but this sight is incomparably worse. She is only missing a gauzy golden veil and she would be a corpse.

"Leave us, Ser Leonidas," Jaime says very quietly. "Leave us."

His Lord Commander bows at once and obeys.

Clad only in a soft clean pair of breeches, he lowers himself gently onto the bed so as not to jolt her and lays down at her side, reaching with trembling fingers to trace her cheek, to tangle his left hand into the silken strands of her hair. "Oh, my lovely one," he trembles, "Sansa - Sansa - come back, come back, lovely one come back." Rage and grief together twist in his chest and grip his heart and he gathers her to him, taking her in his embrace, burying his nose in her neck.

_Come back, lovely one, come back..._

__________________________

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Comments? Predictions?
Chapter Summary

"You don't have to trust me, Your Majesty," the Lady Joanna says. "You only have to ask your questions of me."

"I trust when it is earned, my lady," Sansa replies archly. "Jaime earned first my respect, then my trust, then my friendship, and finally my admiration and my love." Her voice hardens. "The same cannot be said for the rest of your family."

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!

Apologies first for the tardiness of this chapter; I got very close to the end of the instalment when I realised it wasn't working at all, and so I had to tear the whole thing up and start again. Joanna Lannister also proved a difficult character to pin down, and I wanted very much to do justice to the character who casts such a long shadow over canon. My thanks go to northernsky, without whom I would still be tearing my hair out looking at a blank screen. As is becoming a bit of a theme with me, so many things which I originally wanted to include in this chapter, I haven't been able to, or we would have had a 30k monster instalment. The good news is that as a result, I have a fair bit of the next chapter already written, and so it will hopefully be easier to get back to a more regular posting schedule over the summer.

Also, as this is my first update after the end of S8, well, I can only say the following: a) Queen in the North. For a Sansa fan, this is one hell of a vindication. To all the dudebros who have been saying for years that Sansa was useless and would die ignominiously, well... who is laughing now? Would it have been nice to see Sansa fall in love romantically and have the happy ending with a loving husband and family that she has always wanted and deserved? Of course. But just because we didn't see that onscreen doesn't mean it won't happen for Sansa - she's young and beautiful and secure in her position: she has her whole life ahead of her, still.

And b) to all those trolls telling me I was wrong about Jon and Daenerys - well, it seems like I wasn't, so kindly take your "but this is so OOC!" whining elsewhere. Jon was a wet blanket in S8, and Daenerys was a tyrant who committed atrocious war crimes. I'm not habitually so blunt, but given the abuse that has been slung my way by trolls over the past two years, I think that in this case my words are justified.

Now, onto this instalment! I hope you all like it, and I can't wait to see what you think!

a word of warning: discussions of abuse, rape.

So, anyway, enjoy, and until next time xxx

See the end of the chapter for more notes
She blinks, and just as when the sun rises, turning the sky from pale grey to shining gold, when all at once the stars are gone, veiled from view as rapidly as a candle is snuffed out, she suddenly finds herself no longer in that happy, longed-for glade of memory with her littlest brother, her uncle and her lord grandfather, but rather sheltered in a place she has only recently come to know and admire. The Hall of Heroes, that long gallery within her beloved husband's ancestral castle, stretches out in front of her, shadowed and silent. Only the faintest shards of light, diamond-glimmering in the gloom, caught upon those gold mosaics in the alcoves like tears clinging to a sweep of eyelashes dusting a pale cheek, illuminate her way.

Next to Sansa, her good-mother the Lady Joanna Lannister with careful steps leads the Queen in the North on, a banner bright and proud carried into battle, a gentle hand curled around a white-clad elbow. Behind her the great doors of the Rock swing shut, a graceful, final arc, another threshold crossed, another passing place revealed, the abyss of death behind. She trembles, reeling still from all she has learnt - heartbreaking, horrid truths, truths to make her faint and weep with the agony that those she has loved, those she has revered and admired and held up for gods, ever good
and gracious, noble, valiant, paragons of virtue. Her parents whose high opinion and praise she has sought all the days of her life, her brother Robb, whom she had always loved best of all, have hurt her more acutely than she ever could have dreamed was possible. Horrid, horrid, terrible truths! How could they have done such things? How could they have abandoned her like that? How could they have used her as a weapon? She would never have done such a thing. Never. They are her family, and family do not leave one another to the tender mercies of an enemy. Family do not use each other as bait, as a weapon. How deep such a wound is! How rubbed with salt and embedded with shards of glass!

It is incomprehensible to her, unfathomable, entirely baffling. It goes against everything she has ever been taught of family, against every value she has ever held dear to her heart, and gods, but why does it hurt her so much? She must now contend with the crushing, perilous idea, that her family, that her parents, that her eldest brother, and her cousin the betrayer, too, must not have been the men she thought them to be. Indeed they must never have been. The image of them she has held in her mind - a hope; an ideal; a flaming torch in the dark of night; something to cling desperately to in the depths of her most dangerous, painful torments; a symbol of fortitude; an anchor - has never been a memory, but a mirage. Only ever a mirage, and now, in the uncovering light of the sun, this image has all but dissolved, revealing itself to be a trick, a lie, as wispy and as insubstantial as a promise of good faith from Petyr Baelish.

She was not enough for them, she was not worth the saving.

Perhaps it is her fault for hero-worshipping Robb, in the end. But no - she refuses, she does, she refuses to believe that expecting the best from her family is wrong. She remembers once more Jaime's voice, telling her the fault lies with her eldest brother, not her, for not rescuing her, and the strength of his words, the love and affection she hears in his speech, fade away her fears, and then she muses that whilst some of her family have forsaken her, that is not the case for all of them. Her youngest brother, Rickon, who, she thinks with a brief smile, must now contend with her husband for the title of her fiercest, most ardent defender. Even Bran, though now gone beyond their reach, had before his death, in his own wry, grave way, indicated his confidence in her, indicated his convictions of her future happiness.

And then, of course, she has her grandfather Lord Stark and her eldest uncle Lord Brandon. Their praise and approval of her had been the most unexpected. It is one thing to have some of her immediate family, her younger siblings - and oh, how strange, that those younger than she should support her, whilst the elders do not! - but the approval of one's ancestors is altogether a more weighty, more solemn crown to bear. To know that the Kings of Winter look upon her from the other side of the mirror, most of them having seen aeons pass, to know that they look upon her from their thrones of ice and stone, steel strapped to their waists and bronze sitting upon their noble brows, to know that they look upon her and smile, pride shining brightly in grey eyes, it is a heady thing. It is an incredible thing, especially for a girl who had always thought herself less northern than her siblings, dismissed as frivolous and weak and air-headed by them. She had looked upon Winterfell as a child and not understood why needlework and music was so frowned upon by her siblings when it had been quite clear to her, even as a little girl that sewing made the clothes that meant living in the cold of the North bearable, even comfortable, and that music provided
substantial and continual entertainment by the blazing hearths in castle halls during the long, dark evenings. She remembers, too, Maester Luwin sewing up her eldest brother when he'd been too enthusiastic the first time he sparred with live steel, and gave both himself and Jon the wounds to prove it.

But they seem to have forgotten that it was she, and not they, who was born in the cold of winter, it was she who was born in the ancestral castle of her noble and ancient house, not Robb, who came into the world at Riverrun, and not Arya or Bran or Rickon, summer children. Her blood is frost and ice. Her siblings might have a touch of the wolfsblood, more than a touch, in some cases, but she is her realm incarnate, and she remembers and she endures.

She is the Daughter of Winter, the Heir to the Kings of Old, not her siblings.

She is the Queen in the North.

Her hair is the weirwood and lifeblood, wine-dark and rich, her skin frost, her eyes the clear sky and the high cold rivers, her song memory.

She may have been made for sorrow, but she refuses to believe that she was only made for sorrow. For does she not also have love and laughter? Does she not also have hope and a home, and are those not things precious beyond all the gems of the earth, are they not worth fighting for? She knows only too well freeing herself from the shackles of the past, that the healing of jagged bleeding wounds, is far from a simple task.

And yet she would try.

For she has everything to live for.

And though her elders have hurt her, inflicted such grievous torments upon her, they are dead, and she has mourned them, wept and prayed and kept faith despite it all, and she realises now that she cannot allow them to destroy that. She cannot allow them to destroy her. She is stronger than her suffering, stronger than her sorrows, stronger than her silencings.

She wants more. She wants more than to live already with one foot in the grave, to live as a mourning shade, lamenting a past made radiant through the futile longing of what is gone and can never return, not true memory. She wants more than to live for her dead.
She wishes to live for the future. For her future, and Jaime's, and their child's future.

It is time to stop looking back, to cease this infernal torturing of herself, because she is only inflicting once more wounds that others have already carved into her flesh, and her own cruelty stuns her, makes her mind spin with nausea. She would never do such a thing to another.

Why, then, does she do it to herself?

It is a stunning realisation, one that robs her of breath, makes her dizzy and nauseous once more. Some part of her is - she is astonished and - and -

She repeats it to herself, an anchor like the ancient roots of the weirwood trees in the earth, and she thinks once more upon what her husband told her, that first time, when he took her in his arms and told her to take her own advice, that if he was to heed it then so was she for are they both not human? Have they both not suffered similarly? Once upon a time, when they were young and innocent, they were each other's sweetest dream, each other's dearest wish. The knight and the lady. She would no more kill his dreams than she would kill the sun. Not only is she incapable of such a thing, but she would never wish to do such a thing. This, too, she has learned, that it is not the dream that is cruel, but the world. That does not mean she needs must repay cruelty with cruelty, that she needs must become as hateful as those who have harmed her, that she must sink to their level of thought and deed.

She can be better than them. She can prove them wrong. She will do so, on this she is determined, for she, she has everything to live for whilst her tormentors bleed not blood but the fickle loyalties of turncloaks, or else they do not bleed because they are dead and dust whilst she yet lives.

She has everything to live for, and so she turns her attention determinedly back to her companion.

Nerves tighten her throat and make speech impossible. She remembers Jaime praising with wistful, melancholy affection his mother, that short afternoon when they had taken the horses out, proud and high-spirited, frolicking in the snow towards the Wolfswood. So now to meet the Lady face to face and converse with her, with this paragon of poise and grace, with a light in those green eyes that speaks to formidable intelligence, it provokes within Sansa a surge of emotion, an uncertainty in her bearing that she strives as best she can to hide. Of course, now that Sansa thinks of it, Tywin Lannister would not have fallen in love with, much less married a lady incapable of plotting as well as he. From what she observed of the man in King's Landing she understands he was far too proud to settle for anything less than his equal. This lady, even if she was not taught to scent tricks and treachery in the air from the time she first pulled herself up the bars of her cradle - and Sansa thinks it likely that she might well have been - is still a Lannister both by birth and marriage. It would be idiotic in the extreme to forget all her hard-won lessons simply because she is married to the lady's son and be anything other than cautious.
Such a hypothesis is borne out by the fact that the elder lady does not speak, content for the present moment to stroll along, and Sansa furrows her brows in shock. How foreign a feeling is this? When was the last time she walked thus, arm in arm with another lady? It must have been in King's Landing, Sansa thinks, with the Lady Margaery. But, unlike the Lady Margaery, the Lady Joanna's manner of dress bears no resemblance to the Tyrell girl's crude - if effective - method of managing Joffrey by dragging his cruel and petulant gaze to her neckline, extending a flirtatious invitation to leer at and slobber over it. Sansa, knowing as she now does that the carnal desires of men can be as brutal and as painful as the horrors of their mailed fists and sword-blades, knows the Tyrell girl's method it would not have lasted long. It would not have lasted longer than the wedding night. It would have destroyed the one fêted at court as the Rose of Highgarden, torn the polished petals off one by one until there remained only a crumpled, empty husk, in the same way that cruel boys pull iridescent wings from a dragonfly, observing as it pitifully writhes to death. Margaery was no Cersei to accentuate each bruise and grope, using powders to draw attention to the hurts instead of conceal them. And Margaery was not Sansa herself. Cersei could have been a clever Queen-Consort, had she been judicious with her cunning, instead of desiring to win every single battle, no matter how inconsequential. Nor does the Lady Joanna's patience with Sansa's silence indicate any sort of impulsiveness, the kind that had so damned Sansa's mother.

She sees in the Lady Joanna's eyes that same fierce calculation cloaked in genuine gentleness, and just as she had as a little girl believed Shae brave and brilliant, so too does she now see that her Lady good-mother is formidable. More formidable than the Queen of Thorns, who had mistaken rudeness for wit, evidence of her arrogance and bad manners. Being an old crone should not give anyone leave to mistreat, to belittle and humiliate others in the hunt for a cheap laugh or a trading agreement, Sansa thinks sardonically. Somehow she knows the Lady Joanna would have known better than to make the same mistake. She never would have antagonised another faction - and indeed many other factions - so openly. The lady's calm, gentle, assured mannerisms instead speak to being able to sit down elegantly to tea or a sewing circle even with those one despises or considers utter airheads, and through genuine charm, tease from them choice morsels of information, as succulent and perfect as miniature lemoncakes with seashells for moulds, without the other realising. Diplomacy and intelligence gathering with the flick of a fan and the clink upon porcelain of a silver spoon; a fine, delicate art, often underestimated, though not by Sansa, and indeed not, she can see, by her husband's mother. Like recognises like.

Sansa's Lady good-mother is a master of the Great Game, just as her husband was, and she cannot help but be intimidated. Indeed, Sansa thinks, it would be foolish not to be.

"You are afraid of me, understandably so," the Lady Joanna speaks softly, and Sansa flushes, feeling as though she is once more a young girl. Her Lady good-mother is dangerously, piercingly incisive, Sansa realises. There is no room here for dissembling and half-truths; they shall be picked out with the precise skill and eye for detail sharpened by the choosing of specific colours of thread for the embroidering of a doublet hem, for example.

*I am a Stark of Winterfell; I can be brave. Yes, I can be brave,* she reminds herself determinedly, lifting her chin, thinking of the shards of ice clinging to her castle's ramparts, the deadly hush of
snow upon the ground that masks all manner of traps, and the howling winter winds that bite and sting the face like a swarm of wasps. "Can you blame me?" she points out fluidly. "From what I know of you, my Lady, you were Tywin Lannister's closest advisor for decades, and that man engineered the downfall of my House as ruthlessly and as swiftly as a falcon falling from the skies onto its prey, talons outstretched." Arrogant fool that her brother had been, he had not even thought or suspected Tywin Lannister would take advantage of such an obvious mistake as reneging on his betrothal to Roslin Frey. After all, broken betrothals have a history of leading to violence, do they not?

"Others would give my husband the credit," comes the even reply, spoken with a smooth countenance. "You do not." It is not a question. It is a statement of fact.

"Your husband's love for you is legendary. Tywin Lannister's principal occupation, I believe I am correct in saying, having listened to both your sons speak of him, was the legacy of his house. He believed - and prided himself - on belonging to what he thought of as the greatest House in the Kingdoms. It follows, therefore, that he wished his wife to be equal to such a state. If those logical conjectures of mine were not enough," Sansa continues, thinking aloud, "given that he gained no political alliance or prestige in his marrying of you, a Lannister cousin, it follows, does it not, that to assume you are nothing more than an ornamental broodmare - well, that would be incredibly silly of me."

"If we suppose that what you say is true," the Lady Joanna drawls, and her expression is all of a sudden so like Jaime's that Sansa stills, nonplussed, blinking past her sense of disorientation, "why remain in my presence? Why speak to me? You could call your youngest brother and have him take you back to your husband. And yet you do not. Why?"

Sansa presses her lips together, narrowing them to a thin line, considering the question. She could indeed call Rickon, she thinks, though the notion had not occurred to her before this moment, and yet -

"Curiosity."

"Indeed?" A blonde eyebrow arches, the Lady's languid, drawling tone of voice inviting elaboration in the same way that a gentle summer breeze lures carefree maidens to the sea and there to play in the sand and the surf.

Sansa obliges, her own lips curling with something that is not precisely amusement. "Jaime might have been the glue that held your family together in your absence, but your memory is revered by them all. I suppose I would wish to understand why." Sansa pauses, before continuing more tentatively, thinking aloud. "Then there is also the matter of the Targaryens."
"The Targaryens?" Her Lady good-mother stiffens. It would be an imperceptible movement to anyone else, but Sansa is more observant than many. She has had to be, she knows, for that was how she learned and endured and survived.

"Yes," Sansa replies, gentling her tone of voice. She knows the rumours about the Lady Joanna and Aerys, but that is not the subject of her inquiry, not exactly, though she fully realises it is a bold thing she asks of this Lady Lannister. "It occurs to me now that you alone might be able to compare the Mad King and his daughter. I would be most grateful for any insight you could give me. My grandfather Lord Stark also suggested you might be a good source of information upon the failed plot of the Lords Paramount to depose Aerys."

Sansa finds herself in the presence of the only person she can speak to with intimate knowledge of how the Mad King went about his cruelties when he was considered merely eccentric and unpredictable by his Small Council; how he went from irascible to insane, an opportunity unlooked for, but something she can nevertheless turn to her advantage, she hopes. Jaime, after all, had reiterated what her readings of history books in Winterfell's library as a girl had told her, namely that the Mad King had not been born mad. Indeed, she remembers being astonished, as a little girl, to discover that once upon a time, Aerys the Second, as a young man, had been considered one of the better hopes of the Targaryen dynasty, full of fire and verve and desire to reform the Seven Kingdoms. How, then, did he go from bright young King to tyrant put down like a rabid dog?

"Why do you ask?" Again, the Lady Joanna gives nothing of her thoughts or sentiments away, maintaining, out of sheer force of will, Sansa can see, her impassivity.

"Because I want to understand," Sansa replies, struggling to maintain her equilibrium. She is not desperate, precisely, she has faith in her husband and their conclave, but considering that they appear to have underestimated the dragon queen's sheer stupidity, Sansa knows that they cannot afford complacency. "Not just him, but the Dragon Queen. Anything that can give Jaime and I an edge against her, anything that might help, any insight into her character. If I understand my enemy, if Jaime and I can understand our enemy, then we can defeat her. War isn't only about marching soldiers and supply lines. I learnt from your husband, from your daughter, from my tormentor in Winterfell, from that snake of a mockingbird who set against one another the lion and the wolf in the first place: military strategy is not enough, not if I want to win. If I want to win I must understand how mine enemy thinks, and I would venture to say that you could help me in such an endeavour."

The Lady Joanna is silent, lips pressed together, evidently considering the Queen in the North's words carefully. And then, evenly, nearly offhandedly: "How would you define madness?"

That is not a question Sansa had ever expected to be asked outright. "Action without reason, I
believe," Sansa says, after a time, her brow furrowed in contemplation, as she thinks of Joffrey and Cersei and Ramsey, particularly. Madness seems to her to be a notion, a state, capable of taking many forms, capable of shaping itself into an infinite number of appearances. How then, to find the common thread? Where even to begin?

"Action without coherent reason," the Lady Joanna corrects, firm in conviction, but gentle in tone. "Or more precisely still," she elaborates, "belief without coherent reason. For there is always a rationale. Aerys always had a rationale. It was only that his rationale was abhorrent to any sane person. In his mind, where he saw in every corner traitors and treason, burning men alive was justified. His treatment of me he justified because he believed that as King, he could act as he pleased, he could take as he pleased, because more than that he was a Targaryen King, a god in human form, above the laws of men, above morality."

Sansa believes she understands now, and so, she ventures: "And you can see parallels between the father and the daughter?"

"Yes," the Lady Joanna inclines her head in agreement. "But she has something of Rhaegar within her too, I think. Tell me, would you consider Baelor the Blessed sane?" The Lady Joanna's mind works faster than Littlefinger's ever did, leaping nimbly from thought to thought, and spinning from the air itself a web of silk, and from the silk a tale entire, as though a conjurer from smoke, and despite the gravity and strangeness of the situation, Sansa finds herself fascinated.

"He was beloved of the smallfolk, I remember from my lessons. He was charitable." It seems wrong to smile about so serious a discussion, but her heart is leaping, not with happiness, but nonetheless with enjoyment. This was not something she had known she needed: discussions with another, as politically astute as she, where, unless she is much mistaken in her Lady good-mother's character, and Sansa does not believe she is, the objective is not to best an enemy or a rival, but instead to teach and learn. It is more than refreshing. It is what she instinctively senses a political education should have been.

"That wasn't my question, Your Majesty," the Lady Joanna says, and her voice is not cold, precisely, but as Sansa's elder elaborates the silk and velvet are discarded like gloves whose material is far too worn and frayed for continued use for something more steely, more direct and altogether more disconcerting, more challenging to Sansa. "Yes, he was those things. But he also was the man who raised an eight-year-old urchin to the position of High Septon because, so the tale goes, this child could perform miracles. He imprisoned his sisters in the Maidenvault and caused great political unrest by refusing to sire heirs and humiliating lords. He was a man so pious he starved himself to death in a bid to cleanse himself of earthly lusts. An obsessive piety."

"It is certainly evidence of incredible stupidity, that is true enough, my Lady good-mother," Sansa says cautiously, still.
"Would you say Maegor the Cruel was mad?" The Lady Joanna continues. There is a ruthlessness to her continued pursuit, her continued questioning, a glint in her eyes that tells Sansa this will not end until Sansa has put together the pieces of the puzzle. The Lady Joanna will help - and what a thing that is, Sansa thinks, considering the tangled histories of Houses Lannister and Stark - but she will not do the work for the Queen in the North.

"No. He knew exactly what he was doing. He simply didn't care about the damage he inflicted on others," Sansa realises.

"Aerys, in the end, was not of sound mind," the Lady Joanna's voice is melancholy no longer, but as brutal as the angry white waves buffetting the cliffs in a storm. The sympathies of youth are faded like snow from the hills in spring - slowly, at first, an erosion of friendship, and then all at once the deluge, consuming in its destruction, entirely without remorse. "He was paranoid and impulsively cruel and slaked his lust with terrible crimes. And you could argue that his actions were evidence of madness. He had Maegor's cruelty combined with Baelor's absolute belief in his own superiority and righteousness. Is this starting to sound familiar?"

Sansa blinks, and then her heart sinks. "Yes. Daenerys."

"Precisely. But Rhaegar too."

"Why?" Sansa murmurs, her eyebrows furrowing. There is a connection to be made, some terrible conclusion to stumble upon, she can feel it, just beyond her reach, like trying to keep hold of a dream after awakening, but chasing it only makes it slip and fade away more quickly.

"You have all the information already." There is a faint smile upon the Lady Joanna's countenance, and Sansa finds it heartening, this confidence in her, the way it flows comfortingly through her veins, like a hot, steaming drink in the cold of a winter night, sipped languidly under a pile of furs and blankets.

"Rhaegar was obsessed with prophecies," Sansa thinks aloud, her mind racing, starting again from the beginning, attempting to order all the information coherently in her mind. "There was an abrupt shift in his comportment and beliefs."

"Precisely," her husband's mother drawls, almost languidly. "So, we have, obsession, in the same way that Baelor was obsessed with religion," she summarises. "What does the Dragon Queen want?"
'The Iron Throne,' Sansa drawls in unconscious imitation of her husband.

"Indeed. To the exclusion of all else?"

"Yes," Sansa nods emphatically. The connections between the Dragon Queen and the Mad King are more manifold than she had up until now understood, and it terrifies her. Some connections are obvious: the pyromania, the utter disregard and disdain for Westerosi custom and law, these are clear enough. But the impulsive, erratic behaviour that Sansa understands the two share - that is more troubling. The evolution - that is much more dangerous and unpredictable than the penchant for burning men, women and children alive. Perhaps Daenerys had began with good intentions and beliefs when she was just a young girl - Sansa does not know. But then, as the Lady Joanna has so rightly reminded her, so too did Aerys the Mad. Whatever innocence of mind and spirit the Targaryen had once possessed, it has long been burned from her, crumbled to ash.

"Rhaegar began a war due to a prophecy, and his absolute belief in the righteousness of his interpretation of his prophecy," the Lady Joanna continues sardonically, open disdain dripping from her words like venom from fangs, a rare lapse in propriety, and Sansa fights against the trickle of fear slipping like perspiration down her back. "You do not abandon and humiliate your lawful wife and children so publicly and tear a continent apart unless you are utterly convinced by your cause."

"It was a terrible and cruel thing to do to the Princess Elia and their children," Sansa shudders. To be betrayed and humiliated, publicly, and then abandoned to die in the claws of a madman, of a brute? It is the kind of thing Sansa had deliriously imagined happening to her at Joffrey's hands in the Red Keep. The only thing that meant Sansa had escaped sharing the Dornish Princess's fate, was a sliver of luck, and that is all.

"That it was," there is a terrible melancholy to the Lady Joanna's words, and not for the first time Sansa wonders how it must be, to be married to a man both great and terrible, with the equal capacity for great cruelty as for great love, and she shakes her head hurriedly in order to attend properly to her elder's words. "Do you see it now?" the Lady Joanna continues, "Baelor, Rhaegar, Daenerys - they all share that same belief, in the utter righteousness of their cause, and the consequences be damned. It is a more insidious form of madness, true enough."

"But madness all the same," Sansa surmises grimly.

"Exactly."
"So she is as open-minded and as cautious as her eldest brother was, and as kind as the worst tyrants of her house," Sansa laughs, desolate.

"Unfortunately so. Be careful, Your Majesty." It is not a mere platitude; the Lady's visage and voice both are stoic, almost as though stretched too thin, near breaking and snapping like thin blue ice with the effort of keeping an even countenance.

"I will be," Sansa vows, solemn and earnest, dipping her head briefly. "I give you my word." It is not that she has naively believed up until this point that a single set-piece battle, one sole negotiation, would solve the problem of the Dragon Queen and secure freedom and peace and prosperity for her and Jaime's people, because Sansa has not believed such a thing, but the repeated warnings, both from her Lord Grandfather and the Lady Joanna, turn Sansa's thoughts once more to prudence, and she comprehends that an end to war may not be so immediate as she had hoped. The way forward is yet treacherous, and she must remember that.

The strained set of the lady's shoulders loosens at Sansa's reply. They stroll on for a moment in a contemplative sort of silence. "You have a fine, intricate mind, Your Majesty. My son could not have found a finer bride."

Sansa blushes at the compliment. "Thank you, my Lady."

The Lady Joanna turns to her, leonine amusement flashing in her green eyes. "Shall we cross our fans a while longer, Your Majesty?"

A startled laugh falls from Sansa's lips. "I am not the Lady Olenna," Sansa returns dryly, warmly even, "to whack those who would disagree with me over the head or upon the knuckles with such an instrument. Indeed I fear you mistake me." She had seen the Queen of Thorns do such a thing, and on more than one occasion, if one of the young Tyrell cousins flitting around like preening birds showing off their plumage, had had the grave misfortune to make a remark the dowager did not find amusing, or, heaven forfend, serve mint tea instead of the rose infusion the bannermen of the Rose had long made a habit of drinking with flamboyant gestures and a particular way of sipping from the teacup, inhaling noisily steam rising from the porcelain to taste the aroma, before swirling around upon the tongue each tiny mouthful with an energetic movement of the cheeks that even now makes Sansa snort with remembered bafflement at the affected ridiculousness of the style.

Her interlocutor smiles an amused, glimmering-eyed thing. "Oh, I don't think I do mistake you, Your Majesty. You are far more politically refined than Olenna Tyrell could ever have hoped to be, much less make that two-faced granddaughter of hers."
"She knew me when I was a naive little girl, and thought me the perfect pawn," Sansa scoffs. "I did not understand it then, but I came afterwards to realise that the Tyrells did nothing without ulterior motive. Margaery Tyrell could have had a loyal friend in me, but she overplayed her hand. Had she not abandoned me after my first marriage, I would have been loyal to her. I could have become her confidant. But she saw in me only a broken little girl, she saw me as my tormentors did, she saw me as my tormentors wanted me to see myself. My refinement, as you term it, my lady, has been painfully won. I am not likely to make the same mistake twice." The old wound is now a scab, a dull throb, an ancient scar upon her heart, and she does not hide her bitterness, her embarrassed humiliation. She had only been a young girl when Margaery, a whirlwind, a force of nature, had pretended to take Sansa under her brightly-coloured wings, green and gold and dripping with jewels, only to ignore her to the point of feigning blindness when encountering Sansa. The Tyrell cousins had followed suit, and Sansa had been alone once more, utterly blindsided by the whole affair.

"My point precisely," the Lady Joanna answers, drawling lightly. "So, what would you know of me?"

"You know my motive, my lady," Sansa says, undaunted. "I would know now your own."

"To reprise the expression, though I see you are not fond of it: I knew I would enjoy crossing fans - as it were - with you, Your Majesty," the lady replies dryly. Sansa smirks to herself and waits for her lady good-mother to continue. She is not expecting for the conversation to turn wistful, even melancholy, but it does, and Sansa is momentarily wrong-footed, though she quickly recovers her equilibrium. "Your aim is the same as my son Jaime's: independence of your realms and an end to the Targaryen yoke. But more than that, my husband and I shared that same desire. And we, in turn, shared that desire with the other Lords Paramount, and all of us together shared that desire with our ancestors, since the beginning itself of Targaryen rule, as you learned from your grandfather Lord Stark."

"I did," Sansa nods.

"You don't have to trust me, Your Majesty," the Lady Joanna says. "You only have to ask your questions of me."

"I trust when it is earned, my lady," Sansa replies archly. "Jaime earned first my respect, then my trust, then my friendship, and finally my admiration and my love." Her voice hardens. "The same cannot be said for the rest of your family."

"That I know, and, what is more, that I do understand," she pauses, and the names weigh heavily between the two women; though unspoken, and something like shame flits briefly across the elder lady's face, so briefly that Sansa wonders momentarily if she has imagined such a thing. And
then she continues, more smoothly: "may I offer this in reassurance? Consider these two things, if you would. Few people have as much cause as I to revile House Targaryen - perhaps only my husband and your grandfather and uncle may make the same claim. And the second: I love my son. I love Jaime, and I would see him happy, as he is with you. I would see him live, prosperous, free and well."

"And what of your other son? What of Tyrion?" Sansa narrows her gaze speculatively, determined challenge glimmering in her sunset eyes. She will have an answer. It is not only her love for Jaime that makes her ask such a question as this, but also her desire to make absolutely certain that even if sentiment does imbue the Lady Joanna's words, Sansa is not led into a trap. Nothing is more important to Sansa than Jaime and their people's lives, freedom and prosperity. Tyrion Lannister is not included in that category, and Sansa will not apologise for it, not after what he has done to Jaime, and not after he has led a conquering invader to their gates.

The Lady Joanna swallows and looks away, and Sansa says nothing, giving her the privacy to recompose herself. When she speaks, her voice is quiet, so quiet that Sansa strains to hear it. "Can a woman love a child born of one of the worst moments of her life?"

"What do you mean?" Sansa asks gently, her brow furrowing. There is a suspicion forming in her mind, though she hopes she is wrong. She hopes to the Old Gods and the New that she is wrong, and bile rises in her throat.

"If I had not died in the birthing bed, many things would have been different, I know that," the Lady Joanna sighs, a melancholy, acrid thing. "And yet some things, some things would have remained. Some things my life could not have changed, I know that too, as bitter and as bleak as that sounds. I am sorry I left my children to grow up without me, and my husband... my death broke him. But at the same time..." her laugh is hollow with grief and self-disgust. "I am not certain I could have loved Tyrion, and my death spared me from ever having to find out that painful truth. Perhaps that is selfish and cowardly of me, to feel thus, but I am grateful nonetheless."

Sansa narrowly prevents herself from retching, digging her nails into her palm, the sharp bite of pain cutting across the sudden, whirling dizziness pounding without remorse at her temples. "You were raped," Sansa concludes. "But you loved your husband and he loved you, he treated you with the highest consideration and devotion, that is common knowledge, so it was not him. It was Aerys Targaryen, was it not?"

"Clever girl. Yes, it was him." The friendship of her girlhood with Rhaella Targaryen could not survive Aerys's behaviour, and Sansa hears no echo of it here. Whatever mourning the Lady Lannister has done, it is long gone, like a child's sandcastle built at dusk and washed away during the night by the ravenous rising waves so that when the red dawn bloodies the water no rampart remains, no memory lingering, and it is as though it was never built at all. Whatever bitter tears had rasped hoarse her throat; none now remain, and Sansa cannot blame her for it. Rhaella had
banished the Lady Joanna, had she not? Had the Targaryen Queen not said that she preferred her King not make whores out of her serving ladies? Sansa remembers overhearing her parents so discussing with Maester Luwin in the library at Winterfell. None of the adults had seen her, hidden behind a bookshelf, curled up on a window seat with her harp songbook and poetry scribbled upon yellow sheaves of parchment. But the Lady Joanna had been raped and the Targaryen Queen had called her not a lady upon whom senseless, horrific violence had been inflicted, but instead a whore?

Sansa remembers only too well being called a Bolton whore by - and it shames Sansa to recollect this - some of her own Northmen and women. Jon had not defended her, but remained mute, as, she now realises, is only too habitual for him. The only man who has ever immediately defended her is Jaime. How lucky she is, to be happily married to a man who not only loves her but respects her as well! From her own experiences, observations and conversations with other high-born women like the Lady Roslin, for example, she knows that such a thing is unfortunately all too rare, like finding a parure of diamonds, glimmering and radiant with dappled light, upon a leafy forest floor. Though her conclave have now understood their error, it is a grievous wound to inflict, and sympathy makes Sansa's eyes prick thickly with stinging tears.

"You should not have had to endure that," Sansa says hollowly. None of them should ever have had to endure such humiliation and suffering, and despite her various tormentors' efforts to make her believe otherwise, Sansa no longer believes such a horrifying thing. She had believed it, of course she had, but her beloved husband has made her see the terrible fallacy in such thoughts, and she is no longer prey to that consuming sentiment of guilt that had ripped her stomach apart in a flurry of claws every night. Jaime's words have become a shield impenetrable, strong enough to render blunt those attacks of shame that are as vultures or ghosts, unrepentant and cruel.

"Tywin never knew for certain that Tyrion was not his, though he suspected," the Lady Joanna continues, almost as though speaking to herself, and Sansa has to concentrate to understand what she is being told. "Given the circumstances, how could he not? I knew he suspected, but I held my silence upon the matter of Tyrion's paternity, and he never pursued the subject. I did not wish to hurt my husband, you see," she smiles ruefully. "I knew him. He would have taken the fury, the blame and the guilt upon himself, thinking that he had been unable to protect me, and I could not hurt him in such a manner. I could never. And I ended up hurting him anyway with my death."

"But that was not your fault either," Sansa exclaims.

"I know, believe me. I know that, but thank you nonetheless for your defence of me. I was born a Lannister and then married to the Great Lion. I know my own worth." The Lady's voice is low and hard, something nearing a snarl. The words are as a flood, unstoppable now unleashed, falling upon Sansa's ears like blows from a hammer, chest-crushing in their pain. "Tywin knew Aerys had attacked me. He saw the blood and the scars and my tears because it was the vaunted Lord Commander of the Kingsguard in person who delivered me back to the Tower of the Hand after the Mad King had done with me, as though I were some possession or parcel. That same Kingsguard hailed as some of the finest, most noble men in the country and they stood there and
did *nothing*. They did nothing as Aerys raped and burned his way through the capital. And that, according to men, is the keeping and upholding of a vow. That is honour. Aerys's Kingsguard disgust me - Hightower, Whent, Darry, Barristan the Bold... those great, vaunted men had all the appearance of honour and none of its substance. Heartless statues," the Lady Joanna spits fiercely. "Heartless, cowardly statues." She shakes her head, overcome. "And my son, reviled for having more courage than they, for daring to challenge them... It is not right."

"It has never been right," Sansa murmurs, and the Lady Joanna lifts her head in surprised agreement.

"Your father..." the elder Lady says, catching herself, trailing off, too well mannered to insult Ned Stark to his daughter's face.

"My father was wrong, and judgemental, and unfair," Sansa swallows, forcing herself to speak through her hurt. It wounds her, her father's action in that matter. It shames her. It humiliates her. It burns her throat like fire, and she coughs. "Jaime has committed crimes, I know that well enough. That was not one of them." Sansa shivers, thinking once more upon the unflinching, ceaseless violence of Joanna Lannister's words. It is far, far too close to her own tale of misery, far too close to what she endured at Joffrey's hands. "I know how you feel..." she begins, swallowing, her instinctive sympathy welling in her heart. "I - before - that was one of my great fears: what if I could not protect the child from Ramsey? What if every time I looked at the babe's face I saw only his sire's mad, deranged violence?" She has not confessed such a thing before, but she confesses it now. She supposes she had been afraid that the mere articulation of such a prospective nightmare would make it come true, a superstition she had been unable to rid herself of. After all, she had thought, the Gods do love their little games. She knows only too well how much they enjoy playing cyvasse with mortal lives, flimsy and fragile and all too quickly and violently shattered.

"What if the child grew up in the likeness of his sire, with his madness and cruelty?" her lady good-mother continues grimly, continuing Sansa's line of thought. "The question all parents ask themselves, the hope they have that their children will inherit the qualities of their genitors, but here that hope is twisted into something dark and terrible, it becomes a shadow, a malevolent spirit to haunt you and tip nightmares into your mind like poison into your ear, and it destroys you, terrifies you. And then, most damning of all: what if I cannot love the child? Born of rape and fear and violence and revulsion, but an innocent all the same. Darkest of all is that question," the Lady repeats, "that torment that turns itself over and over again in your mind, a terrible melody, poisonous and choking as the Strangler: what if I cannot love the child? It makes me curse myself for a cold creature, vicious, a horror to freeze the heart - sometimes in the dead of night, during those lonely hours I would stare up at the canopy of my bed, envying my husband's peaceful slumber and it made me think that the day I was born I would have wished to be carried out into the sea during a storm by my father, to be pushed beneath the surface of the churning white water and made to drown before all that tragedy could have happened."

"I would have tried," Sansa replies, her voice reduced to a hoarse whisper, her heart breaking for the Lady Joanna, and she winds her fingers into her skirts to hide their shaking. "I would have tried
but I do not know if I would have been successful and that frightens me." She knows only too well how her good-mother feels; the guilt, the pain, the shame, all of it is a burden only too painfully familiar to her. What can she do now but reassure her lady good-mother that she is not alone in her suffering? What can she do now but share her own hurts in return? It is both terrible to consider the scope of the violence of men upon women, but Sansa, who has always, for as long as she can remember, felt apart from everyone around her, until falling in love with Jaime, also finds reassurance and strength in the notion that she is not alone in her suffering. "It frightens me still. But I have also realised that if any of those fears came to pass it would not have been my fault. My rape, my fear, my agony, my loathing, none of that was my fault. The blame belongs to my torturer, not to me," she continues firmly, resolute in her conviction. "And in the same way, the Mad King was responsible for what he did to you, Lady Joanna, the Mad King was a horror to freeze the heart, not you, I know that well enough from mine uncle and mine grandfather Lord Stark."

"And yet it is still selfish of me to be relieved that I did not have to find out."

"Selfish, perhaps, but that does not make it wrong," she answers passionately. Sansa believes it. She has to believe it.

Her only reply is a wan smile, and Sansa casts about desperately for words, for a change of subject, anything to lift this grim pain of their speech, and eventually, she says, quietly, embarrassedly, staring down at her hands, touching her thumbs to her forefingers, suddenly struck with the thought that -

"I am afraid," she confesses. "I have never had so much to lose in my life as I do now, and I - if we fail, then..."

"I cannot tell you that you will not fail," the Lady Joanna replies, and Sansa swallows, her headache returning with a vengeance ferocious enough to resemble a storm battering relentlessly upon lonely cliffs, nausea roiling viciously in her stomach. "But you have a greater chance of success than the Lords Paramount ever did, than anyone else ever has, in throwing off completely, definitively, the Targaryen yoke and retaining the independence of your realms. You have the firm unity of four realms behind you, strong and unshakeable as the walls of Casterly Rock itself, you have the greatest strategists on the continent, you have the logistics and the faith and the purpose. You have right by the laws, those ancient and sacred decrees, of our lands. What does she have? A reluctant group of minor Crownlander lords pressed into service by the threat of dragonfire, screaming, unnatural beasts from the Shadowlands beyond Asshai, brought to life with the cruelties of blood magic, and an army of savages and statues. She has very little firm footing upon which to stand; with every step the Dragon Queen takes, the foundation of her empire crumbles and falls behind her, earth and stone and ash into the churning sea as comets of fire plummet from the heavens she has set alight. She cannot last."

"I know," Sansa nods, clinging to the words like a newborn baby to her mother.
"Of course you are afraid, Your Majesty. Only a fool would not be. But fear doesn't matter in the end. What matters is what you do with the fear. Do you let it dictate to you or not?" Always that voice, cool and measured, and nearly entirely unflappable, except when the subject of conversation turns to Joanna Lannister's family.

Sansa raises her chin and looks her husband's mother straight in the eye. "I will not let anyone or anything dictate to me ever again. I have not so recently gained my freedom to give it up once more. Not to anyone, and certainly not the Dragon Queen."

The Lady Joanna's lips flit into a half-smile. "I had no doubt of that. But don't ignore the fear. Overcome it, but don't ignore it. Look beyond the fear, look at what you want, and ask yourself the following: if you let the fear control you, will you regret it in time?"

"It would go beyond regret," Sansa answers immediately. She does not even have to think, the answer falls from her tongue before she is entirely aware she has spoken. "I have no desire to live without my freedom."

"And if your choice were your freedom or Jaime's life?"

The Queen in the North stills. Her blue gaze is suddenly filled with frost and ice, the tender sunset no longer. "That is not a choice," Sansa snarls through the bone-shards cracking painfully in her chest, struggling to force away the nausea that is rising in her throat like the tides under a winter sky morose and grey, suddenly, and far too rapidly for her liking. "And you are cruel, my lady, to ask me such a thing. That is agony. That is not life." Her voice cracks like kindling snapped and flung into a hearth. In the end, it comes down to this: a life without freedom she has endured before and can again. There is strength enough in her heart for that. A life without Jaime is not one she wishes to live.

"Nevertheless," the Lady Joanna persists, evenly. "If your choice were your freedom or Jaime's life, what would you choose?"

Sansa trembles, her mouth wrenching, her mind instinctively fleeing from the pain. "Jaime will always be my first choice. I will always choose him. Always." Despite the cost, she will always choose him, and she knows he will always choose her. That had been their vows to one another, no? Whatever our endeavours, I choose you.

"Your greatest strength, and your greatest weakness in one," the Lady Joanna cautions. "Make sure
"I know. I love your son," Sansa replies, her voice proud and even although her hands twist in her skirts. "I love Jaime. And I hope I am a good wife to him. I want to be. I want to be a good wife to him. I want to make him happy," she continues. She does not say and I hope you think me worthy of your golden son but it must be written all over her earnest countenance because her lady good-mother looks upon her with something that looks strangely like -

"Your Majesty, you are the best thing that has ever happened to him," the Lady Joanna says, and Sansa almost reels with the shock of it. Aside from Jaime, no-one has ever praised her the way her lady good-mother is now doing, and it is too much. It is far too much. "You have given him everything he has ever wanted, everything his father and I have ever wanted for him: the love of a wife, the freedom to be his own man, respect, admiration, a family, the devoted fealty of his bannermen. How could we not think you worthy of him?"

"You honour me," Sansa swallows thickly, tears searing her throat, a sudden flash of anguish. "He... I love him so much," she confesses shyly, almost secretly, with a wet, pained laugh. "He is wonderful to me. I know he has committed crimes in the past, but he has paid the debt of them and repented. He wakes every day with the thought, how may I be a better man today than I was the day before, and how can I not admire him for that? How can I not love him? He inspires me, and he respects me, my mind, my heart, my body. He trusts me, he believes in my competence. He sees me. And he is the only one who ever really has, I think." She cuts herself off abruptly, her cheeks colouring sharply, and she ducks her head, somewhat embarrassed. She had not intended to reveal nearly so much, but there is something about the kind look in the Lady Joanna's gaze that makes Sansa loosen her tongue.

She notes, too, with delayed, sardonic amusement, that Joanna Lannister is far more comfortable when the burden of emotional revelation rests upon Sansa's shoulders and not her own. And yet, a Lannister always pays her debts. One confession spoken merits another given in return. The strangeness of their situation, too, must play a part in this. Given the Queen in the North's circumstances, what is there to be gained by dissembling and half-truths? She will admit to being astonished at first at Joanna Lannister's bleak frankness of speech, redolent with melancholy and resentment and grief and fury as much as love, and she still cannot quite believe she finds herself in her current situation.

"It seems he is the only one of my children still within my reach, as it were," the Lady Joanna sighs, contemplatively tracing a golden mosaic with the careful fingers of a harpist, and Sansa thinks she sees the apricot tree depicted sway as though moved by a gentle summer breeze, the leaves ruffled and shivering, but she blinks and all is still. She must have been mistaken. "Cersei is gone, and we will never be reunited in all the aeons of the world, I know that. But then I think that though her heart yet beat she was lost to me the moment of her wedding night, when Robert mistook her drunkenly for Lyanna Stark, or else the first moment he struck and beat her with his fists. From that moment she had vowed revenge against him, from that moment she decided to live only for power and vengeance and there was no turning her from her path, and it led her to her ruin."
I wish it had not! I wish with all my heart that it had not, but that is a futile mother's wish, alas."

"And I am sorry for it." It is deeply uncomfortable for Sansa to listen to this, but she will not interrupt the Lady Joanna, for it would be the height of bad manners. She is no Olenna Tyrell to speak over others simply because she disdains or disagrees with what is being said. Listening to her Lady good-mother speak about the previous lover of the man Sansa loves and is married to is not - pleasant. Speaking about her with Jaime is one thing. Speaking about Cersei with Joanna Lannister is another thing entirely. Indeed it is far from pleasant, and she wishes desperately to not be having such a conversation, but it is a desire that is futile. That much is apparent, clearly, to Sansa.

"She made it difficult for me to love her - she made it so incredibly difficult," the Lady Joanna chokes upon the words, mournful, bitter ashes in her mouth. "Even as a very young child she thought the world revolved around her. I should have seen... but I suppose I did not wish to." She laughs darkly, and Sansa's heart breaks at the sound. She cannot imagine the depths of her good-mother's agony. "She was always a temperamental, volatile little girl, and only I could restore her to some sort of equilibrium, and how exhausting that was. Always having to placate her, to soothe her tantrums when she did not get her way. She believed she was the centre of the universe, that Jaime and I existed to love her. I should have known... but I only believed her difficult and not a monster." She shakes her head. It would be easy for Sansa, removed from the situation, able to observe from the outside, possessing the knowledge of Cersei's evolution, to say that Joanna and Tywin Lannister should have understood far earlier what their daughter was capable of. But Sansa knows the reality is not so straightforward as that. "But I could not - I did not wish to believe the worst of my only daughter. The truth was too heartbreaking, too terrible for me to face, and I was a coward, and then I died."

"She made her choice," Sansa says firmly. "You cannot blame yourself."

"Perhaps... and yet it is not so simple as that."

"I know," Sansa says softly, reaching out to squeeze her lady good-mother's small hand, wishing to offer what little comfort she can.

"What kind of girl kills another girl out of - I could not tell you Cersei's motives for killing one of her ladies." The Lady Joanna stares blankly at a golden column, reaching out with a pale hand to steady herself against the pillar, bracing herself against it, shaking her head like a hound shaking out its fur after a leap in the lake, as though to blow away from her mind the pain and the shame and the incredulous disbelief. "I could not possibly speculate. Jealousy, cruelty, madness - I know not."

Sansa pales. "What do you mean?"
"Some years after my death," Joanna Lannister explains mechanically, "Cersei consulted a woods-witch outside Lannisport, desiring to know her fortune. She killed one of her childhood companions, Melara, that same night, to prevent her from ever detailing that prophecy to anyone else."

"My gods..." Sansa breathes. She can understand the Lady's disbelief, but she does not share it. Not after what she has seen, personally, that which Cersei was capable of as an adult. In a terrible, horrifying manner, it does make sense to Sansa that Cersei should have killed another child in cold blood when she was herself a child. It reminds her of Joffrey drowning and skining and cutting open Tommen's cats whilst they yet lived. She cannot help but wonder if Cersei had been born, somehow broken in mind, as Joffrey had been. The childhood cruelties and attitudes are certainly similar, she realises, comparing what she has now learned with what she remembers of Joffrey. The only difference was that Joffrey had greater power and therefore a greater circle of cruelty than his mother at the same age. It is a terrifying thought.

"But it is a bitter, hollow thing, nonetheless, to see that in the end, even Ellyn Tarbeck made greater use of her arrogant, simple mind than my own daughter," the Lady Joanna continues, and Sansa wonders whether it is the first time her Lady good-mother has said any of this aloud. It certainly seems so to the Queen in the North. "Cersei could have ruled the Seven Kingdoms through her brutish oaf of a husband had she the mind and inclination for it. But she did not, the cruel, golden fool."

"It was her decision to let herself be ruled by her spite and hatred, not yours." Indeed, Sansa thinks, given what she now knows, perhaps it had always been Cersei's nature, and nothing would ever have made any difference, just as Joffrey's nature had been.

"I know, your Majesty," Joanna Lannister replies. "That does not make it any easier."

"I would imagine it does not, my lady," Sansa answers gently. And then, because she really cannot stand any more of this, she continues, more lightheartedly, forcing herself to ease. "There is no need to call me by my title, my lady good-mother. Please," she says elegantly, "call me by my name. I am only Sansa, your son's wife." It is no hardship to Sansa to extend this invitation, and she wishes sincerely to be on good terms with her. She thinks, too, that given the subjects thus far of their conversation, standing on ceremony is perhaps somewhat silly.

"Very well, Sansa. But then you must call me by my name, none of this my lady good-mother business," she gestures airily, and Sansa can only admire Lady Lannister's nonchalance, before she continues more soberly. "Though I would disagree that you are only Sansa. You are not only anything. You never have been. Not as a young child, not through any of your ordeals, even though your tormentors wanted to make you feel as though you were. And you are not only anything now."
"You are generous, and kind, my Lady Joanna," Sansa replies, blushing despite her desire to keep her even countenance.

"And you make my son a better man." The reply is immediate and almost sharp, but for the smile glimmering in the older lady's eyes, stars shining in the distant heavens, warming them.

"I did nothing," Sansa demurs. It seems arrogant to her to take credit for Jaime's improvement of his character. "It came from within him, that desire to better himself." And she would much rather talk to Joanna Lannister about her eldest son than her daughter, so she takes the thread of conversation, seizing upon it with alacrity.

"You have not done nothing," the Lady Joanna returns, swiftly enumerating her points. "You have encouraged him, supported him, believed in him. He could not have chosen a finer last chance for honour had he tried."

"He truly - but he has always had honour, it was only the world that judged him harshly and unfairly," Sansa stutters out an ungainly answer, frowning as she attempts to articulate her thoughts coherently. Being Jaime Lannister's last chance for honour is flattering, but it is not wholly true, by any means. Because she has always known him to have an incredible capacity for good; and it was his choice to restore and nurture that part of himself, and she would never presume or want to take such an accomplishment from him. Love and admiration for her husband gives her voice a quiet, fierce intensity. "Slaying the Mad King was his finest moment, and he was reviled for it."

"He crippled your brother and committed incest willingly with his sister," the Lady Joanna reminds her gently.

"I know he did," Sansa says swiftly. "But he has both paid and repented that crime against my brother. For that he has been forgiven, and for my part, I cannot condemn him for laying with Cersei, not after my own actions, and not after knowing how badly her husband treated her. I would not wish such abuse upon anyone, not even my worst enemy, not even if mine enemy was a monster. I cannot condemn him for loving her, not after those whom I also have loved. I cannot even condemn him for the terrible things he did in service of that love, because how can I know that I would not do the same if I had been confronted with such a choice? How can I admire my own family fighting for the ones they love and not expect or admire Jaime or indeed his father for doing the same?"

"As I said: no finer last chance for honour. You are... astonishingly and profoundly good of heart. Such sentiments do you great credit, and my son is very lucky to have your love." The Lady Joanna pauses, before smirking impishly, and in that expression, Sansa sees that Jaime is his
mother's child. "I hope you remind him of it, often, especially if he is being arrogant and insufferable as I know only Lannister men can be."

Sansa laughs, her heart lightening, a shaft of warming sunlight after an eternity of night, cruel and cold. "He can be utterly impossible and insufferable, that is very true." She shakes her head, smiling to herself, her thoughts drifting, her cheeks heating. He smirks and drawls and teases her, and she loves that part of him, she loves that he is so playful with her, that he can make her laugh so heartily. He makes her feel innocent again. He makes her feel able to dream again. He only has to turn that boyish grin upon her, he only has to wink or drawl out a compliment so sensually ardent or a statement so ridiculously adorable that she melts instantly - something he is only too aware of. Something he exploits with typical Lannister ruthlessness to their great mutual advantage and satisfaction. "But I would not have him any other way," she continues mischievously, "and I do not need to remind him how lucky he is: he tells me so himself."

The Lady Joanna laughs with her, a rich, throaty sound, before turning once more pensive and melancholy as a solitary walk through autumn woods lonely and still, when all the game has fled and underfoot the leaves are wet and dark with rain. "Though I admit that in all these years I have often wondered if I would have been able to prevent - well, I am sure you can guess the things I mean - but we will never know, and that is my family's tragedy. That is my family's curse."

"The Lannister name will come to mean something noble once more. Jaime and I will ensure it," Sansa vows, firmly, earnestly. "We will make you proud again." No more darkness, no more cruelty, and in its place only sunlight, nobility of thought and deed alike.

"Your Majesty, you already have, and it makes me happier than I can coherently express." She smiles as though she has half-forgotten how, but it is a true smile, edges flickering with real joy, and better than the tight, dry, sardonic expressions that have preceded it, and so Sansa is heartened nevertheless.

"It will mean a lot to him to know that you are proud of him," Sansa smiles, thinking already with a wistful heart of what her husband's expression will be when she tells him, of the way the light like the sun will enter his gaze, of the way his mouth will soften with emotion, the way he will gather her to him, trembling, and whisper hoarsely of the way that she, with her gentle words, has moved him and thank her for this gift. "Jaime and I will name one of our daughters after you. He and I have not spoken directly of it, but I know, I know that it is something he would dearly wish."

"My dear girl... I would embrace you, Sansa. May I?"

She has not before seen the Lady Joanna Lannister so moved as she is in this moment, overwhelmed, even shaken, and Sansa nods, close to tears herself. All at once she is enfolded by silks and the light, delicate perfume of white night-flowers that bloom only long after the sun has
set, petals unfurling only under the cold, glittering light of distant stars in a sky of velvet midnight. The embrace is warm and comforting and - and - motherly and Sansa had not realised, she had not known how much she has missed such warmth and tenderness, how desperately she has missed such a thing in all her years of loneliness and captivity, how desperately she has needed and wanted it, and she bursts into tears, great, hacking sobs that make her shudder and choke. When was the last time she had received the comfort of a mother's embrace? The morning she left Winterfell for the first time, in all likelihood. That had been the last time either Ned or Catelyn Stark had put their arms around their eldest daughter and told her all would be well. Not even after Ned had stuck a dagger into Lady's neck. That had been her first true experience with pain, with loneliness, with grief. Her own father mutilating her soul, and the subsequent isolation. The childish sense of difference and displacement, the disdain of her siblings growing up at Winterfell had been nothing, Sansa had quickly discovered, to the agony and isolation of her time travelling south without her direwolf. That had been excruciating, and she whimpers and sniffs in a manner that is most unregal.

But instead of pulling away with a nose wrinkled with disdain the Lady Joanna only holds her closer, more tightly. "Hush, dear girl, it's alright. It's alright," she says against Sansa's hair, and the kindness, the love she hears in that richly musical voice only makes her sob harder. "You are allowed to mourn, you are allowed your anger, darling."

Sansa trembles. This is too much, this is entirely too much. Catelyn Stark had attempted to disown her, but Tywin Lannister's wife welcomes the Queen in the North with open arms and genuine affection and she doesn't understand. As grateful as she is - and she is, because the blessing of Jaime's beloved mother means a great deal to her - she does not understand how it is possible. Because if even Sansa's own mother disdains her, what reason does Joanna Lannister have to accept her? If even her own parents find unforgivable fault with her, how can anyone else do any less? Such painful musings make her blood frost in her veins, and she feels herself sink once more into melancholy, and apathy, becoming as distant and as untouchable as her ancestors of carved stone in the crypts cold and dark and silent.

But in the crypts all of a sudden there falls a shaft of light upon a tomb, turning white and gold the grey stone and a breeze, warm and gentle, toys with her hair, and then she hears a voice, yet ardent and strong though far away: come back, lovely one, come back it calls tenderly and she turns instinctively towards the sound, towards the sunlight cracking open the earth, and she stumblestowards it, his name tumbling from her lips in a murmur, a prayer, a hope, a plea - Jaime, I want to come back to you, I want to come home, why can't I come home, Jaime show me what I must do, where are you - Jaime -
Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Predictions?
SANSA STARK XVI

Chapter Summary

It is not right. It has never been right.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Thank you as always for all your comments and support and enthusiasm; it truly means a great deal. Thanks too to galaxiasincognita for all the help with this chapter!

I promised some Jaime in this chapter; and therefore Jaime we shall have. I hope you all enjoy reading this latest instalment!

xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART THIRTY

SANSA STARK

She blinks and finds herself back in the Hall of Heroes without the warmth of her husband's voice to soothe her, and she feels naked and vulnerable without him. She had not eaten that apricot she
had been tempted by in that strange clearing, and yet she cannot return to the living. Why can she
not return? Why can she not wake up? Why can she not find herself in the embrace of her husband,
ardent and tender? The walls are silent; she will not find answers here, not in this stone forest, not
amongst the shadows that dance amongst them, drawn to the hazy, golden light, tumbling through
the air into a shadowed alcove like a ghost, like the whisper of a memory. She whirls around, her
hair sticking to her nape, sweat trickling down the line of her spine like the slow dripping of salt
water down the slick walls of a cavern in the cliffs, dank and dark and hidden, waves lapping at the
stone, and trails of ropey seaweed to tangle the unwary traveller as though in a net. The Lady
Joanna Lannister gazes at her, her kind countenance sorrowful and patient, and Sansa sways and
narrowly escapes falling but for her good-mother helping her stay upright by gently grasping her
elbows.

"Jaime..." Sansa gasps wildly. "I heard his voice, he was calling me, I have to go back to him. How
do I go back to him? How do I see him? Where is he?" Her tongue trips over the words in her
panicked haste. She has to see him again. She has to live. She has to. She has to wake - why can she
not wake, by the gods, let her wake! The thought of not seeing him again rips at her battered heart,
and she cannot, she cannot - her mind spins, her temples pound, and her knees threaten to buckle
underneath her - let me go back, she pleads dizzily, let me go back to him, please, please let me
go back, I want to go back, let me go back -

Gentle hands take her elbows, holding her upright. "Only the dead can watch the living," the Lady
Joanna reminds her, and Sansa nods, dazed, disappointment thick and viscous upon her tongue like
a too-large spoonful of honey, searching, frantic, for some sliver of hope in those solemn green
eyes. "But that does not make you blind. Look there, look at the mosaics, and let what you see
soothe your troubled heart."

"Will I go back to him?" It is perhaps childish of her to ask, but she asks nevertheless, her voice
small. She must. She does not want to think about what will happen if she does not. Her stomach
twists, and she suddenly has to concentrate hard on avoiding retching and soiling Joanna
Lannister's skirts. She breathes in sharply, several times, forcing down her instinctive whimper
back into her throat. She must be delirious, because she feels her husband's soothing hand upon her
brow, a caress, something to lean against and from which she can draw much-needed strength, but
this impression is as fleeting as a breath caught upon a frosted glass window, a brief imprint, and
she feels cold and bereft now that it is gone.

"You will," the Lady Joanna brings her to her feet, and Sansa flushes with embarrassment that her
clammy hands have dampened the Lady's sleeves. "But not yet. Look, and have no fear."

Sansa, with trepidation, does as she is bid, approaching with quick, silent steps, a careful hand
outstretched so that if her vision begins to swirl wretchedly once again, she has a chance at
remaining upright. She looks at the scene depicted with the coloured glass squares first with
confusion, and then bemused awe, as the golden-haired little boy upon a fat red pony begins to
move. At first, she thinks it a trick of the light, but then she realises it is not, that the red pony truly
is shaking his shaggy mane and that the boy is laughing and she steps closer, entranced. She
reaches out with a dainty hand to caress the cool, shimmering glass with a dainty forefinger, and it ripples under her touch like the still surface of a hidden mountain lake suddenly disturbed by a gust of wind.

The glass shatters into thousands of glimmering shards, as diamond-bright as gems, and Sansa throws up her hands to shield her eyes with a startled cry. There is a weight pressing down upon her chest, and wind all around, whipping her hair into her face, and she is drawn, powerlessly, down, down, down she falls, and the wind pours like water into her mouth and down, down, down and not again, please not again -

"Mama, look!" the boy upon his pony laughs, golden hair ruffled by his speed, green eyes bright with exhilaration, and the pony canters mischievously around the arena. It is an innocent voice, filled with joy. "Come on, Red! Let's show Mama and Father what we can do." Sansa watches as the pony flicks an ear and then halts at the boy's command, stamping a hoof against the sand, before setting brightly off again, ears pricked forwards, trotting and cantering towards the boy's parents, and Sansa inhales sharply, for leaning casually upon the balustrade are two people she recognises. She cannot be seeing - a memory - Jaime as a child, learning to ride? The thought is ludicrous, but then Tywin Lannister turns sharp emerald eyes upon her and she jerks backwards, tripping over her skirts in her haste, unable to suppress the instinctive urge to make herself invisible, the urge that was beaten into her during her captivity in King's Landing, for she has the horrifying, vague sentiment that even in a memory, the Great Lion can sense her presence, somehow.

"What on earth..." she breathes.

"Jaime insisted upon having a pony with a coat in his house colours," the Lady Joanna says with a wistful laugh, and it is with no small amount of confusion that Sansa realises she finds herself once more in that hall with her good-mother, and not in a strange memory she now realises must belong to Tywin Lannister's wife. She tries and fails to hide the great gulping breaths she takes, trembling, her fingers twisting in her skirts. The Lady had not lied when she said that seeing her husband as a young boy, happy and without a care in the world, the golden heir, had eased her heart, but Joanna Lannister had failed to mention how unnerving the experience would be. Fighting for her equilibrium, she wonders morbidly if the other memories the Lady Joanna intends for her to see are similarly unsettling.
"He was bold," the elder lady elaborates fondly, "even as a very young child, and he declared proudly to his father that as he was a Lannister he would only deign to learn to ride upon a mount fit for the ancient name of his house."

Sansa has to laugh at that, soothed by the return to a more jovial subject of conversation. She can imagine only too clearly the scene in her mind's eye, and with a jolt, she wonders if her own sons with Jaime will look like their father. She hopes they do, and the notion makes her heart swell and ache with longing, with the sweetness of such a vision. Sons with his mischievous smile playing upon the beach, carefree as they splash each other with salt-water, laughing giddily. She wants that. She wants that future.

"My husband thought this fitting, of course - Lannister arrogance, as I'm sure you can understand - and so granted Jaime's wish." The Lady Joanna smiles again. "And my son has loved that pony, for it has been one of the truest, oldest friends of his life."

Sansa swallows harshly against the onset of tears. "That is beautiful," she sighs, moved beyond anything she can coherently express.

"I am gladdened that you think so, dear girl," her good-mother says, before gesturing once more to the mosaics, her voice becoming resolutely, studiously more even, and Sansa must swallow harshly against the nervousness building once more, twisting her entrails painfully. "There is more if you wish to see it. Moments of great importance, that I think you would benefit from knowing."

"And they are not so light-hearted as Jaime learning to ride," Sansa surmises heavily.

"No," the Lady Joanna agrees stoically. "Nevertheless, the choice is yours."

"You're hesitating," Sansa realises, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Sansa lifts her chin, determined to make a truth of the fortitude she has been labelled with. "I am not afraid of the past," she says evenly. "Though it might hurt me and torment me, I do not fear it, for I am a Stark of Winterfell, I am the Queen in the North, and I can be brave." How can she fear the past, now, when at last she knows the worst of her family, when she has endured her worst torments?
"Then take my hand," Joanna Lannister says quietly. "You will need an anchor, I fear."

And then Sansa feels as though she has been doused with iced water, for she suddenly finds herself in a lavishly appointed room in which there are two blonde haired children, curled up on the settee, heads close together, two adorable co-conspirators. She recognises them instantly; the elder is Jaime, entertaining his younger brother by spinning fantastic tales of brave lions in the mountains.

"I'm the little lion," Tyrion crows, his voice childishly high, "and you're the big lion, and we're def-def-"

"Defending," Jaime supplies helpfully, "defending the princess from the evil, evil wizard who goes I will destroy the lions - but the little lion, being clever, sneaks up behind the wizard and pulls on his cloak so he falls flat on his face and then - "

"The big lion roars!" Tyrion interjects with giddy enthusiasm.

Jaime nods, grinning. "He does, and he hits the wizard on his nose and together the brother-lions save the princess and everyone lives happily ever after."

"The End!" Tyrion pronounces proudly, and the two brothers dissolve into giggles and Sansa's heart melts.

"Telling stories, again, Jaime?" Sansa whirls around at the spite in the voice, and she thinks she will be ill at the sight of the malice twisting in the girl's face. Cersei. Sansa has to remind herself that this is only a memory, and that Cersei is dead, and she can no longer hurt anyone, but that doesn't stop the ball of dread in her stomach from growing. It does not stop Cersei from striding forwards as though she is cutting down flowerbeds with angry petulant strikes of a branch. "Stories are stupid."

"No, they're not!" Jaime disagrees.

"They are!" Cersei shouts, her face reddening, scrunched up, tears welling from venomous green eyes. "You're sitting there, telling that monster silly stupid stories when Melara is gone, no-one can find her and you're sitting there, laughing!"
"Tyrion is our brother."

"He's a monster, he killed Mother and Mother is gone!" She begins to sob in earnest, and Jaime panics.

"Please don't cry, Cersei!" He says, tugging at her hand. Cersei throws herself at him, weeping loudly into his shoulder. "Tyrion is our brother. Please don't cry."

"Mother's gone, Melara's gone, and you're telling the little beast *stories!*" Cersei shouts wildly, whacking Jaime anywhere she can reach and he stumbles onto the carpet, holding his hands out.

She kicks him in the ribs, pulls his hair, and Jaime doesn't fight back. "Cersei! Stop, please stop!"

Sansa can only look on in sickened horror, her feet frozen to the flagstones.

"You stop! You stop telling stories!"

"Alright, alright, I'll stop telling stories." Jaime is curled up on the floor, knees touching his chest, protecting his head and face from his sister, shaking, as his young brother looks on, wide eyed.

"Cersei used Melara as an excuse to throw a tantrum and hit Jaime?" Sansa reels, her mind spinning, bile rising acidly in her throat, her ribcage rising and falling harshly. She rubs her temples, wishing her headache might fade, to no avail, it seems, for she is once more in the Hall of Heroes, horrified by what she has seen and learned. "She killed Melara, you said, and then what - pretended to be upset about her so she could - oh my gods she - and Jaime and Tyrion they - gods, I -"

*That* was Jaime's childhood? Jaime had told her Cersei had always been difficult - but that, Sansa thinks, that is not being difficult. That is Joffrey, in the body of a girl. Sansa's heart is breaking for Jaime, and for the child Tyrion once was. Neither of them should have had to endure that. No matter what Tyrion has become, he should not have had to endure that, Sansa believes that firmly. It does not negate his later betrayals and kinslaying, but all the same, he should not have had to bear his sister's cruelty.

"Yes," the Lady Joanna replies, softly.
"I'm sorry." It is the only thing to say that Sansa can think of. She is afraid to ask what more there is.

"So am I. And now I have shown and told you all I can."

"Thank you, my Lady," Sansa replies formally, relieved.

"Go now," her elder urges calmly, gesturing towards the mosaics. "The rest you must learn for yourself." Sansa stares after her, bewildered. There is more? She has no desire to throw a tantrum like a spoiled infant, but she is beginning to lose her patience. She wants to return to her husband. She does not want to wade her way through the heartbreak of more memories.

"My Lady?" Sansa frowns.

"My dear, valiant girl," Joanna Lannister smiles, and the colour of her countenance begins to fade, to blur around the edges. "You are the bravest of us all." The voice is a caress, gentle and warm like a summer evening wind dancing across a balmy terrace heady with the scents of laughter and night-blooming flowers. Sansa startles, bewildered by this sudden, almost off-hand farewell, taking an aborted step towards the mother of her beloved husband, but it is too late.

"My Lady Joanna!" Sansa calls, but the sound is swallowed by the stone and the glass and the ever-golden light, and only silence remains, as still and hushed as a tomb, long-forgotten beneath the ground, and undisturbed for aeons even by the eerie memory of an ancestral ghost.

She is alone.

"Jaime!" she cries. "Jaime!" Let me come back to you, how do I come back to you, let me wake, please let me wake -

A gust of wind buffets her, and she stumbles into one of the alcoves, hitting her shoulder against the mosaic behind the tall statue of an ancient Lannister king, and she stifles a cry of pain, biting her lip. A tremor runs through her, and her head feels as though it has been split in two with a Wildling axe.
The coloured stones are warm, warm like the walls of Winterfell with the hot springs running through them to heat the castle, and then the words to a song, a refrain she knows only too well, softly at first, growing louder in a warm, proud baritone, and she looks around wildly for the source of the sound.

*And who, are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low...*

The statues draw their weapons in a loud, hissing rasp and hold them high in a salute, emerging from the clouds of dust like the sun from behind the clouds.

She screams.

"*Lancadil! Lancadil! Lancadil!*" the statues call proudly, a drumming rhythm, a declaration of victory, and Sansa wonders vaguely what it means - has Jaime? has he defeated the Dragon Queen, somehow?

She is pulled from her musings, her heart still pounding frantically, by the statue in her alcove turning to her, blade still held aloft, and winking raffishly at her, in an expression so reminiscent of her husband that she can only stare, her jaw slack. She coughs up a mouthful of dust, and realises her gown is now as a result a sandy colour. With no small amount of frustration - why in the Seven Hells do her gowns insist on being ruined by these strangest of happenings? - she brushes at her skirts ineffectually, attempting without success to shake them free of this golden dust.

"*After you, Your Majesty,*" the statue-king drawls, gesturing with his left hand.

And then her vision tilts and Sansa falls through the shimmering, rippling glass, and finds herself observing once more, as though through a window. A forest in summer, the trees tall and heavy with leaves, the ground dry underfoot, and men in plain brown and green clothing, mottled like a pastry disaster, unappetizing in the extreme, leather and rough cloth, bearded and grimy around a smoking fire, and a dull metal pot bubbling away, a thin wisp of smoke rising from the greasy surface of the stew. Sansa hesitates to speculate what it might contain, and she has had her fair share of rancid, inedible meals. It had been one of Cersei and Joffrey's favourite, petty ways to torment her. Lemoncakes made with salt instead of honey, turning a favoured treat of her childhood into something she spat out when dining alone and forced herself to swallow in public. Baking maggots into her bread so that she choked and retched with revulsion. Bacon blackened to ash and soot, and so in the end she'd starved in her pretty gilded cage.

From the grey colour of the broth in that pot, Sansa surmises it is boiling a few wilted vegetables, limp and half rotten. A hunk of black bread to thicken it, and what the cook swears upon the graves
of his pauper ancestors to be venison or rabbit but is much more likely to be squirrel, chewy and stringy. Then a low rumbling growing louder, louder like the steady gathering of an oncoming storm, dark, growling like a feral beast, crackling and sharp with lightning, and the men stand hurriedly, reaching for weapons which they draw with easy familiarity, dappled green light falling upon the steel.

"In the name of the King, I bid you yield!" A knight upon a white warhorse, proud and energetic, cries, his white cloak floating behind him like a banner, and upon his shield painted violet tumbles a falling star, blindingly bright. Ser Arthur Dayne, Sansa knows instinctively. The only man Jaime has ever wholeheartedly admired, and she is curious to see a memory of the legend, to take her own measure of the man behind the title. His blue eyes glitter like the cold gems belonging to a king of ancient places, ever alert, and though the knight's posture upon his destrier is at ease, Sansa notices he is in fact rapidly taking the measure of those who would oppose him. His nonchalance belies the forceful menace he is there to unleash, should it be required of him. She imagines he is as quick to laugh and sing as he is to speaking solemnly about matters of great import. The Sword of the Morning has not come thus armed alone, for Sansa recognises with a jolt Ser Barristan and Jaime, too, older now than a boy, but still with the soft cheeks of childhood. He sits comfortably upon his destrier, sword drawn, emerald eyes youthful, and attentively scanning his surroundings.

She recognises Ser Barristan from her time in King's Landing, though he was then more grizzled than now, but the proud tilt of the brow is the same, the stalwart glint in the eye is the same. Though her path in that foul cesspit of a city had only overlapped for a while with the Bold's time, the details of the Kingsguard are those she will never forget. By the time she fled, she had by necessity learned to distinguish the difference in each man's tread, the difference in the way the fingers of their hands curled in their gloves or gauntlets, the better to know which man would beat her or push her down the stairs or threaten rape, the better to brace herself against their onslaught. And so now Sansa recognises the man from the way he sits in his saddle, having seen him ride - in Barristan the Bold's future, and her past, and she admits to curiosity to learning what the man was in his prime. He holds the reins of his horse more gently than Meryn Trant ever did, he sits in the saddle with more ease than Arys Oakheart, though that is not difficult. His brow, though, his brow is sterner than Sansa's own father's ever was, and she begins to suspect that as talented on the battlefield as Ser Barristan Selmy might have been, he was also rather intransigent, upholding his duties to the letter of the law. From the Lady Joanna's words, from Jaime's words, she sees why the first was so furious at her treatment and that of her son's, and the latter so heartbroken the Bold's attitude towards him and towards the Mad King.

The men in these woods, an armed group of bandits, Sansa believes, do not yield, and with little ceremony, the battle is joined. Sansa finds it difficult to know where to look, for though she has never grasped a sword in her life, she still knows skill when she sees it from the many hours spent watching her brothers in the practice yard, hours spent watching swordsmen drill in King's Landing, in the Vale, in Winterfell. Ser Barristan fights with a stoic sort of efficiency. Ser Arthur with a lilting grace, and when his opponent drops his sword, instead of pursuing, he gestures for the man to pick up the weapon again. A fair fight, and honourable. Something from the songs of old. He is better than Ned Stark ever was, Sansa can see that clearly, and so she wonders, of course she does, how her father was able to kill a swordsman of Ser Arthur's incredible reputation, a reputation she can now understand was entirely justified.
But it is Jaime who truly draws her attention. Despite the fear she sees in his expression he fights valiantly, better than any of the other squires, better than most of the men, equal to the likes of Ser Arthur. She sees him cross swords with the Smiling Knight when Ser Arthur is forced to abandon his duel as another man rushes him, roaring and snarling incoherently, a beast taunted and provoked, fatally wounded, lashing out with a wild swing of his blade. She sees Ser Arthur trust Jaime to fight with him, back to back, and pride wells in her breast. There is an instinctive sympathy between the two men, she can see, so well-honed that unlike the soldiers of the guard who have accompanied them, Ser Arthur and Jaime need not communicate to work together effectively, and she likens them to the way her younger siblings Arya and Bran had ever been able with a flash of an eye between them cause all manner of mayhem at Winterfell.

Before long the men who crossed swords with Ser Arthur's company are dead, slumped around the clearing, and Jaime's sword is stained with blood like crimson wine. Where a moment ago the clearing had been desperate with the shouts and clamour of raging men, bellowing like bulls as Kingsguard confronted outlaw, there is now only an eerie hush. Jaime stares at his blade, before swallowing and lifting his chin defiantly. Sansa can see him fighting valiantly down the desire to rid himself of his breakfast. The air yet lingers with the echoes of those throats gurgling feebly with the blood of the dying. A death rattle, sounded again and again, punctuated like some macabre symphony by the dull thuds of corpses dropping like flies to the earth, by the sounds of bellies sliced open and entrails ripped out to slick the leaves and soil with steaming gore. It is not a sound Sansa will easily forget.

Ser Arthur scans a sharp gaze over him, before saying evenly, "Jaime of House Lannister, I bid you kneel."

It takes Sansa only a moment to understand, and pride and joy war in her heart for her husband. For it to happen in such surroundings as these! When his heart pounds with exhilaration for what he has done, when he has acquitted himself so gracefully, so valiantly, with the light of the summer sun falling upon his armoured shoulders, turning the metal to burnished gold, rendering him a more youthful version of the god she thought him when she married him in her godswood at Winterfell, upon that quiet, gentle dawn. For it to happen at the hand of the man Jaime admires most! She is more than proud of him, she is elated. She allows herself the indulgence of feeling the full extent of the happiness and pride that is her right and duty and heart as his wife, and she feels like the giddy little girl she once was, nearly swooning with the wonder of it all, and she laughs lightly at herself, at her high spirits.

Jaime's brow wrinkles with confusion, but he does as he is commanded, ignoring the blood and mud staining his knees. Ser Arthur draws his blade, the legendary Dawn, radiant as the sun in the dappled light, and places the flat of it upon the youth's right shoulder. Jaime swallows hard in understanding, bowing his head. Sansa can see the way his frame quivers tautly with repressed emotion, and her heart aches for him. He could not have dreamt up a more incredible, humbling, noble ceremony had he tried. Despite the gore and the ache of physical tiredness, despite the horror and terror of battle, the cuts and the mud soaking his knees, Jaime has never been more honoured in his life, and he looks up at Arthur with something akin to worship of the gods. Jaime might not
worship the Seven since the death of his mother, but Arthur is to him an embodiment of the Warrior, the embodiment of all that is good and noble and chivalrous, an ideal made flesh and blood, and he does worship the Sword of the Morning, with all the idealism and fervour and love of innocent youth.

"In the name of the Warrior, I charge you to be brave," Ser Arthur begins formally, his voice holding both pride and warmth. "In the name of the Father, I charge you to be just. In the name of the Mother, I charge you to defend the young and innocent. In the name of the Maiden, I charge you to defend all women..." the Sword of the Morning continues the formal ceremony. "Jaime of House Lannister, do you so swear?"

"I do," the Young Lion replies hoarsely, and Sansa knows how much this vow means to him. "I do."

"Then arise, Ser Jaime of House Lannister, for valour in the field, a knight of the Seven Kingdoms."

Jaime stands, bright-eyed, and looks upon his hero with determination writ deep into his countenance, and Sansa wants to weep for the innocence and idealism she sees there. Some short few, nightmarish years on from this moment, and that youthful hope, that belief in the greatness of men and the goodness of their hearts, will have been shattered by the final madness of a dynasty of dragons, dragging in their death throes a continent entire, and for Jaime that death knell sounded by a particular epithet, a title drenched in hate and scorn by her own father: Kingslayer. Her father had been a hypocrite in the extreme, calling another man an oathbreaker when the honourable Ned Stark, without remorse or explanation, broke vows of his own. She cannot help but ask the question: had his sister's honour truly been worth the strain on his marriage? Had it truly been worth injuring every day for years his wife? Sansa could never do such a thing. She has been her brother Robb's scapegoat for years. And the honourable Ned Stark had made of his wife and nephew both scapegoats of Lyanna Stark. Had it haunted her father? Had he felt the slightest bit of shame to endanger politically not only his wife but Robb, and later her and her younger siblings? Had he felt the slightest bit of shame at the humiliation of betrayal Catelyn felt?

Sansa knows it had not haunted Robb to make her his scapegoat. She could never imagine doing such a thing to Jaime, and she knows he could never do such a thing to her. Love aside, such betrayal and cruelty - for her father was cruel in this, to both Catelyn Stark and Jon Snow - flies in the face of every marital vow. Love aside, it is about duty, Sansa thinks firmly. Furthermore, given both the Blackfyre Rebellions and Jon having once been declared King in the North over Sansa, in the face of all the laws of inheritance and birthright - well, she knows it was not farfetched for her mother to fear Jon as a threat, for that is precisely what at last did happen. Jon and Robb's individual personalities would not have mattered, in the end. Not to the bannermen, and not in times of great instability and war. Someone would have attempted before very long, to make a weapon out of Jon against Robb or her or Arya or Bran or Rickon. And indeed, that is exactly what the Dragon Queen has managed to do. She thinks, too, what is crueler than to dangle constantly in front of a child that which he cannot have? Raising Jon at Winterfell, giving him the constant
reminder that Winterfell would never be his - well, she does think Ned Stark was cruel to do such a thing. And all for a vow made to a dying girl! What of a vow, previously made in front of the gods, to his lady wife? Given the fact that a civil war over one man's infidelities had just been fought and had culminated in the downfall of a dynasty of dragons, what an intensely stupid thing it was for Ned Stark to do, to insist Jon be raised at Winterfell! She wagers that only because the Riverlands had been utterly ravaged during the Rebellion, did Hoster Tully not seek some form of military vengeance for the humiliation and betrayal of his daughter, retribution that would have been justified.

"I will make you proud, Ser Arthur, I promise." Jaime's solemn words wrench Sansa from her thoughts. "I will prove myself worthy of this great honour."

The Sword of the Morning draws him into a firm embrace. "You already have."

The glass ripples again, and when Sansa's vision clears it is to see looming, blackened ruins, obscured and then revealed and then obscured by the early morning mists, pennants flapping in the wind, a black bat there, a red dragon there, the clamour of a camp at rest beginning to rise; cooking pots set over campfires for the breaking of fast, horses stamping their feet, whinnying their impatience, intermittent bugle-blasts loud enough to send the sentries leaping out of their armour, and the bats flying above, fleeing to the ruined eaves under which they make their homes.

Harrenhal.

That eerie ruin.

More precisely, Sansa knows, Harrenhal at the time of Whent's great tourney, when the smiles had withered like grapes on the vine infected with a sudden stench of rot. She blinks again and shudders. Spinning upon her heels, she thinks she catches sight of a flash of gold out of the corner of her eye, over there -

She knows that colour. Fortune.

Gripped with the sudden, intoxicating notion that if she manages to get to Fortune, the living sigil would be able to bring her back to the land of the living and her husband, she rushes after where the flick of a tail disappeared past the supporting post of a luxurious pavilion of dark green velvet, picking up her skirts with clammy hands. She is running now, losing a dainty slipper first to the dew soaking the toes and then to the trampled mud, bitingly cold against her toes, but she forges on regardless, through the fog and smoke and moonset upon the still, silent waters of the lake, catching the shadow of a powerful shoulder in the mist, and strange, dark shapes that swirl
and dance and that when she approaches turn out to be utterly mundane; a warhorse greeting the
day with an agitated piaffe, ears pricked, tugging impatiently upon his leading rein, a soldier
stretching, a shivering girl in a flimsy, gaudy silk dress and brown blanket wrapped around her
shoulders, having serviced and been paid, rushing back to the brothel, and Sansa is lost. She is
invisible.

Now the bugles brandished by the sentries more resemble a blaring cacophony than a fanfare of
trumpets, and as she grits her teeth against the sharp ache in her temples, her vision spins and the
brightly coloured pavilions in a riot of golds and greens and reds and blues whirl around her
dizzingly. Her breath comes in short, harsh pants of ice and she must be delirious because she
sees again the elusive Fortune's mane as he passes a pavilion to her left, silveryed by the harsh white
light of the setting moon in the grey before the dawn. She calls the sigil's name, she calls her
husband's name, but to no avail. The lion is gone, a puff of smoke, a mirage, a figment of her
desirous imagination, and she is stuck in this place, stuck here in this strange land between the
living at the dead, stuck without hope of leave-taking, it seems to Sansa. She doesn't want to be
here. She wants to live, she wants to go back to Jaime, but perhaps she has walked these eerie,
sentient shores too long to be able to return to her husband. Has her curiosity, has her desire to
speak to her family, to those who would help her, meant that she has tarried here long enough that
she is condemned to remain, here, forever?

A destrier, midnight black and powerful, already caparisoned in burnished cloth of gold emerges
like a thunderclap from around a corner, nearly knocking her to the muddy ground, sending her
staggering into a brightly coloured pavilion belonging to a minor Dornish house. She cranes her
neck, twists her body to attempt identifying such a brutish rider, but his shield is wrapped, the visor
of his helm is shut, armour polished but not embellished or enamelled, and he lacks a cloak. The
rolling sound of a warhorse at an energetic canter through the encampment fades away,
accompanied by a manic laugh that sends a biting winter chill down her spine, the sound lingering
in her ears long after the frenzied beast is gone from her sight.

Her heart pounding with fear and shock, she whirls around and finds herself all of a sudden inside a
pavilion of black and crimson velvet, heated, oppressive, the braziers spitting and hissing, devil's
eyes flickering in the dark, and she has no recollection of how she has come to be here, and this
evident fragmentation frightens her deeply, cutting through her like a knife through shimmering
gossamer silk. Two men, standing, evidently in the middle of an argument. The elder's silver-white
hair is tangled, his expression more than a petulant scowl, fury carved with a flaying knife into his
face. The younger has pouty lips that would better belong upon a woman than a man, Sansa thinks,
twisted into an arrogant sort of complacency, and she shivers again.

This is the man who burnt her noble grandfather alive and strangled her dashing uncle. This is the
man who would have made King's Landing entire his funeral pyre. This is the Mad King, she
thinks, ice dripping down her spine, her teeth clacking with terror. And this is Rhaegar Targaryen
with him, the man who seduced her aunt into forgetting honour and duty, this is the man for
whom Lyanna Stark embraced hypocrisy, this is the man who seduced her right into a war. Her
stomach twists, violently, and she thinks she sees shadow dragons dancing upon the thick velvet
drapes, though there is no wind, though inside this pavilion all is stuffy and still with the kind of
thick, cloying heat that makes it difficult for her to breathe. Had she not experienced the sweltering heat of King's Landing she would already have fainted dead away, she knows.

"Even if it is Jaime Lannister, Your Grace, he's only a boy, a young fool, wanting a taste of glory, and nothing to worry about," Rhaegar Targaryen says, voice unctuous with reassurance. His smarmy confidence reminds her of Petyr Baelish, and she shudders, wondering how her aunt could have found such a thing attractive, wondering again and again how Lyanna Stark could have - well, not ignored her duty because from what she remembers her uncle Brandon and her lord grandfather saying, Lyanna disdaining duty was in her character - but how she could have been so utterly hypocritical to refuse to marry a man because of his infidelities and then commit adultery herself? Had her aunt not seen the fundamental and blatant, hypocritical contradiction in her actions? Or had she simply not cared? Sansa's dashing uncle and lord grandfather seem to consider it the latter, and Sansa knows enough, now, to agree with them. It is not an example she ever wishes to emulate, and she decides then and there that if she is ever so lucky as to have a daughter, under no circumstances would she name her daughter Lyanna. The last Lyanna Stark is not someone Sansa would ever wish any daughter of hers to emulate.

"And you know that, do you," the Mad King spits, jolting Sansa from her musings, "in your vaunted wisdom and many years of rule, Prince, you know that? You know who the Lannisters are, do you? I am surrounded by lickspittles and cowards and traitors, you limp vegetable! Tywin Lannister hates me, he wants my Crown, I know it, and you tell me he is nothing to worry about? Jaime is mine now, the Young Lion is mine, not Tywin Lannister's. Tywin Lannister wishes to humiliate me - and with this Knight of the Laughing Tree, he has succeeded." His grating tones set Sansa's teeth on edge, they make her temples throb with spikes of pain and she is lightheaded with fear. She wonders vaguely, if she retches up spatters of black poison upon the Mad King's boots, will he notice? "Tywin will pay, and I will make you watch, my son. Perhaps that will make something grow between your ears. If that is how you intend to rule then you will throw our dynasty away, you stupid, stupid, idiotic little boy."

"Let me find this... Knight of the Laughing Tree, Father - Your Grace," Rhaegar Targaryen corrects himself hurriedly at the sight of the Mad King's furious gaze. "I will go, and I will find and apprehend this man and bring him back to you in shackles, if it please Your Grace."

"You! You alone!" Aerys Targaryen laughs coldly. "You could not find your cock if a whore showed it to you. No, this foolhardy, reckless scheme of yours does not please your King. If you will go, you will take fifty men with you, and perhaps then your incompetence will not matter too much and they will keep you from too great a disgrace because the fine men of the guard know their duty. They know to obey their King's command without protest. Go, you lily-livered fool, you feeble-music maker, get out of my sight!" The Mad King throws a goblet of wine after his heir, and Rhaegar must duck hurriedly, shoulders hunched and cowed, through the heavy drapes to avoid growing a goose egg upon his forehead. Sansa's nose wrinkles as she steps quickly to the side of the pavilion. The vintage is unpleasantly sour, even whiffy, and she has no wish to soak her skirts.
The glass ripples once more, and Sansa gasps, disorientated, struggling to make sense of what she has just seen and heard. She knows what it is to be ruled by a tyrannical madman, and so she sympathises with Rhaegar's evident misery at this situation, but it does not make his actions and behaviours any less disgusting, any less unforgivable. He brought a continent to war because he believed absolutely in his own righteous superiority, because he believed he was above the law, because he believed his lusts and desires overruled those of others. She had not had a high opinion of the Dragon Prince prior to this, and now that she has seen him in this memory her opinion of him has only sunk further still. To the insidious madness born of extreme arrogance and impulsivity she must now add the defect of sheer idiocy. Not factoring his father's cruel, erratic behaviour into how his plans would play out is not merely carelessness, it is utter stupidity.

She finds Rhaegar pitiful; a woefully unimpressive figure, as disappointing to a glutton as a cake made of sawdust, unpalatable in the extreme. Even if Aerys the Mad had indeed not been mad, Rhaegar would have made a terribly ineffectual king. She has learnt, from Robert Baratheon, from Robb, from Jon, that negligence and sheer, incompetent stupidity can be just as dangerous as erratic cruelty. But then again, had not House Targaryen's lineage been rife with men and women cruel or stupid or both? Had not House Targaryen had many, many babies born with deformities severe enough to kill them in the womb or at birth? Seeing Rhaegar and the Mad King first hand only make truer and more terrifying the conclusions drawn from her conversation with the Lady Joanna. It is truly a wonder, Sansa thinks, that Daenerys looks even half-way human, what with centuries of sustained, voluntary incest. She had overestimated the Dragon Queen before. She and Jaime will not make that same mistake again.

That the Mad King would accuse Lord Lannister and Jaime of being behind the personage of the Knight of the Laughing Tree, given the publicity of the feud, makes sense, Sansa thinks. Except for two things, and they are rather important, significant things. Firstly, Tywin Lannister, as Hand of the King, would have known first-hand how volatile Aerys was, and so he would not have endorsed something that was so obviously going to send the Mad King into a rage. What is more, Sansa knows Jaime. She knows he is far too proud, and was prouder still then, ever to compete in a tourney in colours he considered not rightfully his. She knows that her husband, denied the chance to compete either under the white or the lion, would not have competed at all, and therefore it cannot have been him. As a small girl, Sansa would have been caught up in the thrilling, romantic mystery of it all, but what she has just seen makes her blood turn to frost. The political implications alone... she swallows. It is sheer luck, she concludes shakily, sheer, dumb luck, that the Rebellion was not centred around a Lannister-Targaryen Blood Feud. Had Rhaegar not absconded with Lyanna, it might well have been the case, in time.

She barely has the time to collect herself before the scene changes yet again and she recognises the stone corridors of the Red Keep, though she could not say precisely where in the fortress she now finds herself. What she does recognise, however, is the voice raised in argument, echoing off the walls, and she tiptoes closer to the sound. Her throat closes up, her hands she brings instinctively to clasp in front of her, and she reminds herself no longer to bow her head. It frightens her, how quickly she had slipped back into those old mannerisms, and she trembles, breathing through her shock, fighting to remain clear-headed. That she does not recognise the voice she hears tells her, through rational deduction, that if she is not in Joffrey's time she must instead be in the Red Keep at some point during some point in the Mad King's reign, if she is to judge from the dragon banners, blood in the dark, hanging from the sconces like the unfortunate souls strung up by their
thumbs in the Godswood at Winterfell by the monster Roose Bolton’s bastard was, and she cannot decide which prospect she finds more abhorrent.

But there are some things she *does* recognise, though they bring more bile to her throat instead of settling her nausea. She makes her way down a flight of stairs, slippers silent upon the stone, noting with surprise that she is once more in possession of both slippers, and sways when she passes the obscenely carved archway from whence Boros Blount had on one occasion appeared as she went past. He had pushed a meaty hand to her back and sent her careening into the stone walls, slipping on the steps. He had left her with bruises to her shoulders, her elbows, her back and her heart upon her tongue. She considers it nothing more than a miracle that she never was seriously injured as a result.

She flees from the scene, only to come upon a small courtyard where the Tyrell girls had pretended she was invisible after the Lords of Highgarden had failed to secure her claim for themselves. She remembers how her pride had revolted at their cut direct - a family of jumped-up stewards daring to ignore her, a Stark of Winterfell descended in a line unbroken from the Kings of Winter - she remembers the sickening feeling in her stomach when she had realised that, once again, those she had thought to be true friends had in all truth not been that which she had supposed them. She remembers, too, the utter humiliation of their actions, the way the tears had burned at the corners of her eyes and the way her cheeks had flamed with embarrassment, the way she had pretended it did not bother her, stubbornly raising her chin and straightening her shoulders (*they would not break her, flowers cannot hurt a direwolf*) that she had not intended to stop in that courtyard at all and in fact was continuing on to the godswood. After all, what need had she of some snobby Tyrell cousin flouncing around such a cesspit in a gaudy, vulgar cut of garish green silk and lace? She remembers days, weeks and months of biting through her tongue as a reminder to keep quiet, tasting the iron tang of blood, that crimson wolf-wine, a steel rasp in a clearing of sentinel pines and a winter frost upon the earth. She remembers being on her knees in the godswood, a pale, lifeless imitation of the one at Winterfell, choking upon the loneliness that had hollowed her insides and scraped the flesh from her bones.

The corridors through which she sweeps are unnaturally empty, but there are voices, voices she recognises that echo ominously upon the stone walls, and she finds herself helplessly drawn forwards, the voices increasing in cadence and ardour and disdain as she approaches, as though in a trance. She could not turn away if she tried.

"It is *wrong*. Ser Jonothor, are we not meant to protect the Queen? Have we not sworn to do so?" Jaime Lannister's voice is passionate with earnest fury, youthful with incomprehension.

"Yes, we have. But not from the King."

When Jaime replies, it is with the heavy disappointment of shattered illusions, and Sansa's heart shatters in sympathy. "I see, Ser."
And then before her eyes flash visions of Jaime arguing and arguing and arguing with his elders, not changing his position despite his elder's disapproval. At the end of one such argument wherein Lord Commander Hightower responds by taking him off guard duty, he storms from the room, ignoring the heavy chair that crashes to the flagstones in his wake, and only Ser Arthur Dayne and Prince Lewyn Martell get up to follow him as he strides, fuming, to the practice yards, where they watch him exhaust himself hacking at training dummies, until he is breathing harshly with exertion, surrounded by wisps of straw, his blade pointed to the ground.

Sansa watches curiously as Ser Arthur nods to Prince Lewyn before approaching Jaime like a man approaching a skittish, mistreated destrier, cautiously, gently, with a measured pace, laying a gentle hand upon the youngest Kingsguard's shoulder. Jaime takes one look at the sympathy writ upon his mentor's countenance and collapses against the Sword of the Morning's shoulder, the Dornishman's clothes muffling Jaime's scream.

"Tell me how you do it, Ser Arthur, please?" he asks, desperately, eyes reddened with tears, eyes wounded and young and utterly, utterly betrayed and Sansa reaches out to hold one of the sculpted columns in support, because she thinks her knees might collapse. "I did not think the Kingsguard was this. I did not know. I did not know," he gasps. "I understand now why Father was so angry, but I did not know. I did not realise. I am a knight, I swore, I swore to protect the innocent, I swore but there is no honour here. I did not know - I did not."

"There's no remedy, Jaime," Ser Arthur says sadly, returning the embrace fiercely. "We can only endure, and uphold what vows we can." And thus, Sansa sighs, the legend becomes just a man, no better or worse than any other, and she catches a glimpse of self-loathing in the eyes of the Sword of the Morning when still Jaime looks to Arthur for answers, answers Arthur cannot give.

"But it's not right," Jaime chokes. "I won't resign myself to it. I can't. I won't."

By the gods, this is unendurable, Sansa thinks. The proud, fierce despair on Jaime's face, carved into the stubborn lines of his posture, is too much for her, and she aches for him, she aches for what he has seen and been made to do, and she can only echo his words in her head. *It's not right. It's not right.* Only when she raises a hand to her mouth to muffle her sobs does she realise she is crying, and she leans her forehead against the pillar, the stone smooth and cool against her skin and she weeps and weeps and weeps.

She had not thought it could possibly get worse, but it does, because after watching her noble lord grandfather burned alive and her dashing lord uncle strangled to death with a torture device - how intimately she now understands the sheer horror of her beloved husband's nightmares! - Jaime again argues the Kingsguard has done wrong not to intervene, the Lord Commander's rebuke is immediate, and a slap in the face to both Jaime and Sansa: "You swore to guard the King, not to
judge him.”

She retches, and black spatters the dull grey flagstones like ill-formed clumps of ink. What if it was the Lord Commander's family burned and tortured to death? Would he have kept his equanimity then? Sansa wonders wildly. Jaime looks at his Lord Commander as though the elder man is a wild animal, feral and utterly incomprehensible. *It's not right.* Nothing can ever make this right, she knows, and now she understands the Lady Joanna's vehemence, now she understands the sheer depths of Jaime's resentment towards all those good men held up as paragons, when the truth is they were far from such exemplary figures. She will change that, she vows. She will change that. Jaime will be celebrated, not reviled for his slaying of the Mad King, and of the Night King too, that she vows. She will make it so. So long as she lives she will never forget the acrid stench, overpoweringly bitter with grief and rage, of mortal men, of her eminent lord grandfather, being burned alive. She coughs and coughs and coughs, smoke stinging her throat, until she thinks she might cough up her very heart and soul. She will never forget. She will never forgive. And she will fight to the death and beyond, with redoubled determination, to be free of the Targaryen yoke, once and for all.

She understands, too, she understands much more heartbreakingly and clearly now, not only how like a snake in the shadows, like a slithering tangle of ropes slowly tightening Cersei’s control of Jaime was; even when they were children, but also how she had with ruthless and indifferent callousness exploited his isolation from every other man, woman and child in King's Landing after the fall of the dragon kings, to tighten that control upon him for her own ends, destructive and twisted. And then, after Sansa's father had branded him a Kingslayer, what more natural than for him to turn to the only person in that damned city who did not reject him? Cersei had manipulated him from the beginning, and the Rebellion had only tightened her hold on him. It is testament to his resilience and heart that he has any decency left, Sansa thinks. A lesser man would have shrunk to some twisted ghost. A lesser man would have become the stuff of nightmares. A lesser man would not have endured as he has endured, and a lesser man would not have sought to rebuild himself in the long aftermath of Cersei's final betrayal and death as he has done.

The rebukes and reprimands come again and again, falling like rain formed from shards of glass, cutting and interminable, opening shallow wounds upon Sansa's skin, painful and weeping with blood, and now there is no Ser Arthur to console Jaime, for he is away with Rhaegar, though Jaime did not know it then, at the Tower of Joy. When the Silver Prince returns to King's Landing to lead an army to the Trident, Sansa watches with despair as Jaime pleads with the Targaryen to keep more of the Kingsguard behind to defend the city. Her tears make the bleeding cuts upon her face sting fiercely. Ser Jonothor Darry silences Sansa's husband sharply with cruel, caustic words, humiliating him, and ending with “You will do your duty, *Ser.*”

How alone Jaime was, Sansa thinks. How alone he was, and afraid, and young, and then unjustly reviled, and she weeps into her hands for his suffering, for his furious helplessness, for his stubborn refusal to resign himself to simply being a piece of meat for cruel kings and princes to move about like chattel, for his private, admirable rebellion. He had challenged his elders continually, and she admires him even more now than she did before. How can she not? A lion bewildered, lost and alone, wandering listlessly the halls of that foul fortress, attempting valiantly
to show himself untroubled, unruffled, entirely unperturbed by the horror, to become as of stone in 
the image of the elders of the Kingsguard. In the eyes of all others, Jaime succeeds valiantly at this 
task, but Sansa, with a fiercely aching, bleeding heart, sees through him to the wounded, haunted 
man beneath. She sees the tight clench of his jaw, the fixed rigidity of his shoulders, the distance in 
his gaze, the white grip of his knuckles as his nails dig into the tender flesh of his palms, and Sansa 
watches as he endures and endures and endures until at last he can endure no more, and in the 
name of innocents he sacrifices his good name to the flames of history.

*Jaime, my love, my husband, my King, what they did to you, what they did was - oh, my love, my 
love, my love - I -*

And then, she hears his voice, broken, pleading: *come back, lovely one, come back, come back...*

*Yes, she thinks deliriously, I must go back.* And she gets up, walking those nightmarish corridors 
towards some distant sunlight, hardly noticing the rippling glass, distorting every surface around 
her to refract rainbows of light until -

*Come back, lovely one, come back...* she will. She must. She is. Again his voice, an anchor, a 
warm hand outstretched if only she can grasp it.

She reaches for the golden light, for the sunrise, her husband's voice calling, calling, calling to her, 
a refrain, a melody melancholy in her ears, and all of a sudden she is no longer walking but lying 
down, and all is gold above her, glimmers of light and soft bed sheets, and always his voice, 
comforting and warm.

She reaches again, reaches for the sunlight, for his voice and the emerald of his eyes, for the 
warmth of his hand in hers, and she murmurs his name.

She breathes in the scent of his skin lingering upon the sheets, once, twice, to fortify herself, to 
give her strength and courage, to give her hope, and she murmurs his name again, a plea, a prayer, 
a promise. *Love and defender of my life, guide me now.*

And then she opens her eyes, despite the drugging heaviness of her lids.

*Come back, lovely one.*
I have, she thinks, dazed. I am.

"Lovely one," her husband sighs in relief, shoulders heaving. "Lovely one, my wife. Sansa. Fucking hells, Sansa." His tears wet her cheeks, but his lips are gentle, the taste of him is achingly familiar to her. His mouth moves over hers, and she is home again. She is alive again.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Comments? Predictions?

All of Jaime's scenes in this bar the one with his pony - Red - are taken from brief references in book!canon, and I simply extrapolated upon those references. The senior members of the Kingsguard did really argue pretty constantly with Jaime, and I thought that would be a fascinating dynamic to explore. In retrospect, given his arguments with Jonothor and Barristan and Gerold, I am not surprised in the least that he ended up killing Aerys for the reasons we all know.
Chapter Summary

Where is their faith? Where is their courage? Where is it all now, Jaime asks himself bitterly, morosely, venom building upon his tongue. Where is it now, when it is most needed? When will it show itself to be something of substance, and not merely an insubstantial, superficial shadow of the real thing? Where is it now?

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Thank you as always for your lovely, thoughtful comments, for your enthusiasm and encouragement, it really does mean so much to me.

I have created a music playlist for TINTB over on Tumblr, which I'm excited to see what you all think of. You can find it on my Tumblr @starlightasteria :)

Thanks as always to galaxiasincognita for being such a fantastic beta. Thanks too to TM for our discussion of fluff (it really isn't my strong point; as is probably apparent, writing angst is much easier for me)

A word of warning: the chapter begins in a pretty dark place with Jaime. Warning too for graphic descriptions of violence, and discussions of sexual violence.

I can't believe our protagonists have been separated for over 50k! Anyway, without further ado, I give you the long awaited Jaimsa reunion!

Enjoy! I can't wait to see what all you lovely people think of it.

xxx

See the end of the chapter for more notes
JAIME LANNISTER

The past three days have been the longest and darkest of Jaime's life. His rage is not spent, but tempered instead to something simmering darkly in the shadows, which awaits only the briefest command to flare violently anew, and he is reigned now by the most acute despair. He had wanted to be left alone with her, in the quiet and seclusion of their apartments, but that hush, that silence, had felt too much like mourning, felt too much like leaving the door open wide in invitation for the Stranger and preparing for the unseen one, that horrid decayer of flesh, the prince of mourning, for Jaime to hold to any sense of hope. All too quickly it became oppressive, suffocating, unendurable. And yet he cannot imagine not being at her side. If this is to be the end, he does not want to miss a single instant with her, his other responsibilities be damned.

She’d screamed at the beginning, the maesters tell him. Screamed and thrashed and fought the concoctions they’d forced down her throat in a frantic bid to save her life, holding her down to prevent her from injuring herself further, unresponsive all the while, locked inside her own mind. And then the screams had quietened first to sobs strangled in the back of her throat, and then to the slow drip of tears down her white cheeks, bleeding from her like the soft gurgles of a dying fawn brought down by the hunting hounds in the woods, a sound so horrific as to gut the soul from a man with a rusted knife.

By the time he’d returned from the field of battle, victorious, weary, and heartbroken, she had quietened to that last state, and what wakes him in the night is not her movement, for there is none, nor her cries, for she is ever silent, but the sensation of her tears wetting his neck in the dark, a sensation that is in every possible way nothing short of shattering, and he weeps with her, and prays to gods he no longer believes in, let her live. Let her wake. Let our child live. Let them live. Let them live. Please.

But he cannot ignore the world outside their chambers. As much as he wishes he might have the leisure and luxury of locking the two of them away and letting the rest of the world rot, for without her his life is no life at all, that wish must forever remain unrealised, a bitter hope ever beyond his
reach. For what does his heart beat if not for her, for the love he bears her? And yet outside those
doors on and on the world turns, and he is a King, and his land and people and home are under
siege. Never has he less wished to be a King, than when being a monarch means he must tear
himself away from his lovely one’s side and deal with paperwork and conclave alike, when he
needs must hear reports from the battlefield, lists of the dead and wounded and arrangements for
the bodies. If he were merely a man he would be able to hold vigil over his wife, uninterrupted.

The first time Brienne had entered holding a sheaf of despatches and parchments for his attention
he had sent her away with the snarls and shouts of a wounded, cornered animal staring down death
with a ravine behind, and he would feel guilty and ashamed of his outburst but for the fact that he
turns his gaze once more to the motionless form of his wife and everything else pales in
comparison, fading to the dull grey of common rock from the vibrant veins of sunset and gold that
run through the mountains of Jaime’s heartlands.

Some things can wait.

His wife cannot.

The earth will not crumble to dust, the heavens will not crash and fall down around him if he does
not attend to this or that missive immediately. And the look of pity and disappointment upon the
face of the commander of his wife’s Wolfsguard is more than Jaime can bear. What does Brienne
know of such agony and grief as this? Nothing, Jaime fumes silently, bitterly. He sometimes feels
as though the female knight’s friendship is conditional on him behaving in very specific ways, and
it cuts him with every breath he takes. He feels humiliated and ashamed, and damn it all, this is not
the time for that!

Again and again he thinks of his father, and the way he’d gone quiet in the aftermath of Joanna
Lannister’s horrific, violent end. His father’s stillness had frightened Jaime, the way the Great Lion
had stared and stared at the bloody sheets for hours, only to rouse himself once more, to stand and
give the funereal orders, in a carefully clipped voice, every syllable too precisely enunciated. Later,
when Jaime was meant to be in bed, but had instead snuck back into his parents’ bedchamber,
something cold and painful hollowing his young heart, he had seen his father curl himself around
his wife’s cold corpse, blind, uncaring of the world around him, in the same way Jaime himself has
done with Sansa.

And then, only days later, whilst playing on the beach, looking for seashells because they were his
mama’s favourite, and he’d thought perhaps his father might want one, he’d caught sight from the
seclusion of a cove, of his father wading out into the water, face to the sunset. Jaime had crept
forwards, nervously, watching in horror as Tywin Lannister crumpled as he had done as his wife’s
face had been leeched of colour by death - only this time his father had not stood up again as Jaime
had expected him to. Instead, the Great Lion had let the waves buffet him, crash over him, and
Jaime had known, with the surety of childhood, that something was gravely wrong. He had known
that his father had not wished to get up again, but instead wished for an end. A man does not sink to his knees in the waves at sunset if he is happy.

And so Jaime had dashed towards his father, barrelling towards him, barefoot over the golden sand, his heart in his mouth, throat burning with tears, and wrapped his skinny arms around the Great Lion’s waist. For as long as he lives Jaime will never forget the way his father had jolted with surprise at Jaime’s appearance, the shocked, painful intake of breath into his powerful chest, large hands coming to rest tentatively upon his son’s crown and back.

He remembers pleading mournfully into his father’s seawater-soaked shirt. *Please, please, I need you, please Papa. Please - please - I love you Papa, please don’t go. Please don’t go.* He’d been shuddering, nearly hysterical, hacking great sobs making his whole body tremble, and the tense line of his father’s shoulders had eased, and Jaime remembers being carried, lifted up and out of the cold water to safety and life, pulling his father back with him.

The Great Lion had never spoken of that day, and Jaime had kept his father’s silence. But some things cannot be forgotten. Not the numbing cold of the seawater, nor the strength yet apparent in his father’s body, nor the way he had been unable to let his heir out of his sight as he was bathed and coddled by the servants back at the Rock, stripping him of his wet clothes, seating him next to the fire, pouring spiced cider down his throat to warm his body from within and prevent illness. Only when Tywin Lannister had ascertained to his satisfaction the wellbeing of his heir had he retreated to his own apartments, cold and empty and silent, devoid of Joanna Lannister’s smiles and warm laughter, to grieve, and then, yes, to grit his teeth and rise from his bed the following morning, and all the mornings after that.

And now, as Jaime thinks of his father, he draws strength from those memories. His father had found the strength to go on, even after horrific tragedy, even when in such excruciating pain: he had gathered the courage and clawed his way back like the lion he was. Jaime can do no less. He is resolute on the matter. He will not do less than his father did.

Sansa lies between life and death, she is in pain, she is bleeding and he is helpless, powerless, he can do nothing but watch and hope desperately and - and Brienne thinks to berate him! and he is disappointed, acutely so. He had thought better of the female knight. He had thought that a person he considers his friend would understand his grief. Especially since the Queen in the North is the one Brienne is sworn to, by the gods! He had thought Brienne would share his grief, that she would be equally affected, and he confesses himself disappointed, bitterly, acutely disappointed that she is not, not that he can see, at least, and that she instead chooses to berate him over not attending to non-urgent paperwork, to tell him that the rest of the world turns on and does not wait, does not care for his grief. The rest of his wife the Queen in the North’s Wolfsguard, by contrast, he cannot reproach in the slightest for their conduct. Like clockwork, they appear for their shifts, swift shadows, alert as predators on the hunt at dusk, astute enough to leave Jaime to his silence, helping with alacrity when the maesters change the bandage around her head or pour concoctions down her throat. Wynafryd Manderly tastes everything, even the dull, salty beef bone broth that is the invalid’s sustenance, before she allows it anywhere near her queen. Jaime had turned to her in
surprise when she had first done the same for Jaime’s own meals that are served to him at his wife’s bedside. They cannot be too careful, Jaime knows this, but he finds himself humbled and grateful even so. And when Wynafryd Manderly is off-duty Morgana Mormont and Ser Leonidas willingly take up the office, the latter also taking it upon himself to calm the febrile, agitated conclave.

More broadly, to his great relief, after he snaps at Brienne, Sers Addam and Leonidas take over the task of keeping him informed of everything he needs to know. Addam has known him since they were both young boys, and Leonidas, though a few years younger, he has known for decades, and Jaime is self-aware enough to know that both men are managing him, for lack of a better word. But they do it without rancour or judgement and so he can only find himself humbled by it, and be deeply, deeply appreciative of their indulgence of him in this matter.

He takes an awed sort of comfort in the way his Lionsguard and his wife’s Wolfsguard treat him, the way they sit with him in silence, Addam and Leonidas clapping a hand on his shoulder, Wynafryd Manderly and Morgana Mormont expressing their firm conviction that she will live, that she will wake, for the alternative is unthinkable.

Addam knows not to take offence when Jaime does not take his eyes off Sansa as he reports on Ser Daven and Captain Vylarr’s successful raiding of the Targaryen camp whilst Jaime was busy luring the Dothraki and Unsullied into a carefully laid trap. Jaime’s oldest friend knows his king is listening to his tale, even as Jaime lays down upon the bed, the better to trace his wife’s features with a gentle touch.

Despite the circumstances, Jaime does find himself marvelling at the story Addam tells. Inflicting such violence and destruction as the captain and his cousin both did is an impressive achievement. As per the orders of the King of the West, both men had led their men in a simultaneous pincer movement, their avowed targets the capture and killing of as many persons of importance in the Dragon Queen’s retinue, and also the swift retrieval of the Lady Eleanor Mooton Tarly and her son.

Taking advantage of the distraction caused by Jaime and his cavalry, the experienced captain had swept into the camp from the east at the same time as Jaime’s cousin had done the same from the seaward side, using to his advantage the craggy lay of the land. What was a tent against a warhorse at full canter? A man reaching for a weapon with one hand, hurriedly pulling up his breeches with the other, against a fully-armoured knight? Braziers overturned, canvas set alight, shelters trampled into the mud, tent-poles snapping like twigs for the cook-fire. The enemy trapped under tent-cloth, burning, smoke and screams, choking, faces streaked with mud, cut down on the privy, utterly overrun, bone and blood trampled and churned into the earth, bugle and flag flying, the onslaught inexorable like the rush of a river, like the sea waves driven by storm-winds to crash upon the shore, all this conducted with careful, masterful calculation by Ser Addam from the top of the Seastair, a god above, and pawns below. A sword-singing, blades biting bitterly at legs, arms, hacking with a brutal finesse at any exposed part, the better to raze the encampment entirely to the ground.
These men have been entrusted with the verdict of the King, and by the gods they will enact it, and make of their enemy a feast for the carrion and battle hawks circling in droves in the grey sky above - that is their charge, no more and no less, for battle is of peace the deliberate destruction, and what was begun with the Dragon Queen’s attempted assassination of the Queen in the North, these men must now do their part in bringing to a swift and victorious end.

And as the sky darkens to a bed of stars their embassy is done: the fair lady and her child rescued, the Imp captured, the encampment scorched beyond repair. Thus, they retreat, called by the proud flags to turn as one, a flock of birds, distant and swift in flight in the burning, crimson-gold light of the setting sun, for home. The lions leave in their wake a scene of chaos and carnage; one whole half of that threatening sea of tents savaged and trampled into mud, smoking and burning, a fitting counterpoint to the trees crackling and screaming still upon the mountainsides, victim of the violence of the dragons, and the other half in considerable disarray, death birds feasting well upon the bodies of the dead, drinking deeply of the corpses dripping with the dew of battle, dark as wine in the dying of the light.

A successful operation, Jaime thinks with grim, vicious satisfaction, but for the death of Ser Daven. According to the men, Jaime’s cousin had dismounted, the better to set the Lady Eleanor upon his own destrier and carry her and her young son to safety, when a cowardly blow had felled him, a single, powerful strike to the back of his head, the metal of his helm crumpling like parchment in a fist under the force of the blow. Lesser men than those under Ser Daven’s command would have turned tail at the sight of their officer falling some distance away, but instead they had as one rallied, urging their warhorses forward and into a protective formation around the Lady, before proceeding to fight their way to the Captain Vylarr, and then back to the safety of the Rock itself. Upon the suggestions of Morgana Mormont and Wynafryd Manderly, two of Sansa’s Wolfsguard, Jaime has now placed the Lady Eleanor under the care of her father Lord Mooton, and his aunt the Lady Genna jointly.

He wants desperately to honour his cousin in the manner he deserves, to say the words over his tomb - but he cannot leave his wife. He would never forgive himself if something happened and he was not there. And so he pulls Addam into a fierce hug, shuddering his gratitude, teary-eyed, on the afternoon of the second day of his vigil at his wife’s side, when he learns Addam has done what Jaime could not: clothing himself in the crimson velvet robes worn for the funereal rites, descending to the cold chambers beside the crypts where the bodies are prepared for burial. Once, in the ancient histories of the land, such a task had not fallen to the Silent Sisters, but rather to surviving family members, most often the one of highest rank, and so Jaime hopes he will be forgiven for not undertaking the task himself. And then, in the Targaryen era, such practices had been outlawed and hidden as a result; the rites of the Seven performed in public, and the ancient ones in private, after dark in the depths of the crypts, in the greatest secrecy. Jaime wishes he had been able to perform such an office for his own father, for Myrcella, but in those terrible days madness and chaos had reigned like Essosi jackals in that foul city named King’s Landing. Ser Daven had been the one to perform the rites for Tywin Lannister, and Jaime’s aunt the Lady Genna had done so for Myrcella in the end.
Addam had washed Ser Daven’s body, once with warm water to rid the skin of blood and earth and then a second time with a sweet-smelling tincture of diluted shadewine and herbs: hyssop for cleansing, and mint for freshness. Then the Commander of the Lannisport garrison had been clad in ceremonial armour of burnished gold and laid upon a bier, carried by eight of his own men to the crypts and laid in his sarcophagus of carven stone, carved into the mountain itself of that white, gold-veined marble. And then over the eyes were placed stones with painted eyes upon them, and a gold coin under the tongue. Upon the head was laid a wreath of laurel, thinning the veil between the land of the living and the dead, thereby granting Ser Daven an easier passage between the two, and in his hands his blade, polished to a shine. Rosemary, that dew of the sea scattered at his feet, so that the dead man might see the path that he must tread laid out before him, the way of the setting sun over the water into eternity. And then over the whole body is set a fine woven veil of cloth of gold, over which fall leaves of sage, sacred, cut only at dawn for the health of the living, and at dusk for the safeguarding of the souls of the dead, with small, sharp blades of bronze after a libation of wine, red and young, is poured into the ground before it. This is carried out in the strictest silence, and only after the stone slab is pushed into place, sealing the sarcophagus, can words again fall from living tongues.

And so Jaime waits, sits at that bedside from which his wife does not stir, no matter how much he pleads, how much he begs until his throat is rasped raw, he waits, and hopes - because he must hope. He has no choice. He must hope. He believes in his wife’s resilience, and so he grits his teeth and hopes, he sets his gaze protectively upon her and wills her to come back to him. Addam tries to keep the whispers like smoke in the night away from Jaime, but he hears them nonetheless. What if she does not wake up? What do they do then? He sees it in the maesters’ non-committal humming and haw-ing when he asks them for signs of progress. He sees it in the pitiful gazes of the handmaidens that bring in the meal trays and then return later, a pendulum clock by which Jaime finds himself absently marking time, to take them away again.

Where is their faith? Where is their courage? Where is it all now, Jaime asks himself bitterly, morosely, venom building upon his tongue. Where is it now, when it is most needed? When will it show itself to be something of substance, and not merely an insubstantial, superficial shadow of the real thing? Where is it now?

Jaime finds it in the sluggish beating of her heart, the slow movement of blood through her veins - the Queen in the North is not dead yet. He finds it in the way his wife’s condition, though indisputably serious, does not, in the three days of his solemn, melancholy vigil, show any visible
signs of worsening, and he seizes upon this little fact with desperation, clutching at any small sign that all might not be utterly lost.

And then, at dusk on the third day, he finds his hope justified. It begins with the faintest fluttering of her eyelashes upon her pale cheeks, as soft and swift and as tentative as a butterfly’s wing, and then the minute turn of her head towards him, and it comforts him that even now she seeks his presence, seeks the comfort and love and assurance and respect and admiration he so readily offers her. Her lovely throat swallows, her pink tongue darts out to wet a dry mouth, and then he thinks he hears her murmur his name. He moves closer to her, urgently, even as her lips form the syllables again, louder this time. He must be dreaming, he thinks wildly, his heart pounding. He must be dreaming, he must.

“Jaime… Jaime…” her voice is hoarse, a low rasp, strangled by disuse, and Jaime has never heard a more beautiful sound.

He collapses in his chair, almost sliding to the ground, the wood digging painfully into his back through his shirt. He brings her hand to his lips with shaking fingers, and inhales the sweet, soothing scent of her skin, leaning over her, bracing his elbows upon his knees. She has come back to him, and the iron bands around his heart unravel like one of the pretty, delicate ribbons she uses to tie her gauzy silk shifts, and he can breathe again. She has come back to him.

Out of the corner of his eye he sees Ser Leonidas discretely slip away and out of the bedchamber, to fetch the maesters, Jaime knows, and to alert the conclave that the Queen in the North has awakened.

She blinks open her eyes, slowly, heavily, but she opens them, and looks at him and recognises him because the light glimmers once more in her gaze like the reflection of stars upon the midnight sea and she smiles his name and the rest of the world fades away.

"Lovely one," he sighs in relief, shoulders heaving. "Lovely one, my wife. Sansa. Fucking hells, Sansa.” He’s weeping, his hand trembles, and he doesn’t know what to do first. Trace her delicate features to reassure himself that this is no dream? Sink his thumb into the pink give of her bottom lip and cover her mouth with his and let her steal the breath from him with alluring kiss after alluring, decadent kiss? Climb onto the bed and gather her form to his so he can hold her, so he can keep her safe? In the end he does all three, but not before indulging them both at languid length in kisses whose gentleness belie Jaime’s desperation. Into his kiss he pours all his fear and despair and relief and love, shaking with the brutal violence of his emotions that all but overwhelm him.

“My love, my love, my wife,” he murmurs, over and over, gasping. “I love you, I adore you, I need you - Sansa. Sansa. Forgive me, please. I promised you my sword would always stand between you and the world, and I could not protect you. Forgive me. Lovely one, forgive me.”
“My lord,” she murmurs, and how everything in him is soothed to hear once more her gentle voice, that is more wondrous a sound to him than any song. “My beloved lord, there is nothing to forgive. Indeed I am the one who must crave your pardon, for I should have realised. I should have anticipated that she would break guest right in such a way, but I did not, and I am sorry to have caused you so much grief.” Her voice is thick with horror and self-loathing and he will not have it, he cannot abide it.

“No, no, she would never have been able to know that such a thing was possible, not she. I had not even thought of the possibility until she actually did it.”

“Never apologise for that, Sansa,” he chokes out, shaking his head vehemently. It breaks his heart to hear that she thinks any of the blame lies with her. It does not. “You have nothing for which to be sorry. It was not your fault.” He will not allow her to take upon her shoulders the crimes of Daenerys Targaryen; they are not hers to shoulder. But he should have thought, he should have realised… he made the vow to protect his beloved wife, and he failed her, and it more than humiliates him, it shames him. More than failing as a King, he feels he has failed as a man, as a husband. But his life is replete with those painful ironies: of course it would transpire that the vow above all others he desires most to keep he should break, not because he had no choice, but because he was not enough. He was not good enough. He was not good enough to save her.

His wife understands instantly that which he does not say, and responds in her gentle, tender way. “Then understand that it was not your fault either. The blame must lie solely with the Dragon Queen. Do not let your misplaced guilt let her avoid her responsibilities.”

He swallows hoarsely, his voice rasping. He does not deserve her. “Only if you agree to take your own advice, lovely one.”

“I will try,” she murmurs, a shadow, haunting, ill, in her gaze. “I will try.”

“And I shall repeat it until you believe me,” he replies, pressing a chaste kiss to her forehead, enjoying her soft, contented sigh at his gesture.

“Likewise, love and defender of my life.”

“I do not deserve such a title,” he chokes, shaking his head, his hair falling into his eyes, love and admiration crashing through him like the violent waves battering the cliffs below the Rock, so fierce and consuming that he does not know how he does not break under the force of it.

“You do deserve it, Jaime. You do,” she rebuts gently, and the conviction in her voice, the glimmering in her sunset eyes, makes his breath hitch, and he trembles, moved beyond anything he can express. When she looks at him like that he thinks himself a giant, a god amongst men, her faith and confidence in him making his soul fly, and he thinks his childhood ambition of becoming
a hero of the songs might not be so far-fetched a notion. “In any case,” she continues impishly, and his spirits soar to see the return of her playfulness, “it is my choice to make. It is my choice to give it to you.”

“Thank you,” he swallows thickly, pressing another reverent kiss to her forehead, her delicate eyelids that flutter shut under his caress, the tip of her nose, her cheeks, ignoring the dull crick in his neck. His discomfort means nothing to him. “I will endeavour every day to deserve such a title. I will never take it for granted, I vow it.”

“And you say you are unworthy!” She shakes her head slowly. “You are worthy,” she insists, her tender heart in her eyes.

He lifts her hand to his lips, and presses a swift, gallant kiss to her palm, before his countenance soars once more. “You went where I could not follow, lovely one.” He aches with the pain of it, the helplessness and the fury and the horror of it consuming him. He had felt his insides turn to ash and salt, and could not understand that his heart yet beat in his chest.

“I know,” she murmurs mournfully. “I did not wish to be torn from your side, I wished to come back to you, I longed, I ached for it. But I was relieved you were not there with me in that land of shadows at the grey river’s edge, for what I saw… I am glad you were spared that.” There is something cold and lonely in her tone, some painful edge to her words that he hears but cannot grasp however much he tries, something that makes him wince and shiver. He never wishes to hear her speak thus again.

“I could not defend you,” he continues vehemently, the guilt a lodestone in his stomach. Let his blood stain it, for it is no less than he deserves, he knows. “I swore to defend you and I failed you. I was powerless, helpless, only able to watch as you slipped away.” He buries his face in her shining hair, struggling to breathe. “I could not - I could not - damn it all I could not - ” he understands now how his father felt after the Mad King attacked Joanna Lannister. The rage, the shame, the sickening guilt, the helplessness… the spinning, dizzying fury, the urge to vicious destruction and revenge, burning and crackling through him like wildfire. The urge to roar and rip flesh to bloody pieces with his bare hands, lacking the claws of his sigil, to hunt down to the ends of the earth, to feast on upon those blackened dragon hearts. He had thought his rage spent, vented entirely upon the Dothraki and Unsullied and fell shadows sweeping the skies three days ago. But now that his beloved wife is awakened he finds his sentiments sweeping him away once more like a rip tide, and he had not anticipated it. He is reeling, sickened to his bones, and a Blood Oath is not enough. Nothing will ever be enough to repay the agony he has felt these past three days, the longest and darkest of his life. Nothing will ever be enough to repay the danger dealt to his wife and their unborn child. He growls furiously, the sound muffled by the pillows, but his perceptive, clever wife notices, and combs a hand through his hair, her fingertips lingering soothingly upon his scalp, and he shudders, violently.
“I could hear your voice, calling to me, guiding me back to the living,” she begins quietly, and her words drag him out of the darkening, drowning night his mind has thrown him into, back to her, back to safety, back to the warm, tender light of the sun. “Through the horror of memory your voice anchored me to life, your Fortune helped me claw my way back. So you see, my love,” she smiles, “your heart, your faith, your hope, your stubborn endurance, only yours, all served, and now I am returned to you.” She caresses his jaw and he leans into the gentle, soothing warmth of her palm, letting her words wash over him.

“I love, I love, I love you,” he replies fiercely, inhaling harshly, clenching his jaw against the tears stinging his eyes. “I adore you, beyond the ending of the world. And I - I have missed you, lovely one. By the gods, I have missed you.” He collapses against her fully, wrapping his arms around her waist, sinking on his knees to the floor, ignoring the cold of the flagstones seeping through his breeches into his knees, and losing the battle he begins to sob violently, wetting the fine material of her shift. “I have missed you,” he repeats. “I cannot do this without you. You’re mine. Mine. The Dragon Queen cannot have you. Your cousin cannot have you. They cannot. They cannot have our child because you’re mine. Please,” he begs, vaguely feeling her hands carding through his hair, rubbing his neck and back in an attempt to calm him, but he is beyond restraint - he has had to force through the pain to think coldly and rationally, and it has meant his battlefield gambits have been successful, and now he is finally allowing himself to feel, fully, the crashing, overwhelming torrent of emotion that has been roiling through him in a vicious, consuming release. “Please do not go where I cannot follow. It will destroy me.” He swallows. “It has almost destroyed me,” he amends hollowly. “Please. You are mine beyond the ending of the world.”

Her hands, her touch, her scent, the soft silk of her skin achors him, anchors him to life, to this moment, a shield and respite from the pain, and she murmurs her love to him, her admiration and devotion and faith in him, a balm to his jagged, bleeding soul, as she again and again caresses his head, his nape, slipping her dainty hands under the collar of his shirt to warm his shoulders in gentle circles, again and again and again, until the violence of his outburst subsides to something quiet and still, and he sighs deeply against her, eventually raising his head to look at her once more.

And what he sees eviscerates him all over again, provoking in him a pain so acute he can hardly breathe. She is weeping too, silently, in what he has observed seems to be her habitual manner, a manner he knows is born of the humiliation of being abandoned by her family, born of the notion that she could not let anyone see her suffering because it would be used against her, and it is an ember thrown upon the ashes of his rage, making it once more burst into life.

Her soft, dainty hand comes to cup his cheek and he sighs into her palm, relishing the sweet, overwhelming warmth of her skin. “You look exhausted, my love,” she murmurs softly, brushing her thumb over his cheekbone, disarming him of rage with her evident concern, and at last he allows himself to feel the searing exhaustion that weighs upon him, seeping from his soul into his bones, now that his wife is alive and safe, now that he can feel the warmth of her skin on his, now that he can feel her veins thrumming with life-blood, now that he can tangle his fingers with hers and feel the responsive fluttering of her heart in the slim underside of her dainty wrist.
“I have not slept,” he replies, his brow furrowing. “I could not. How could I, when you and our child - you were - I have been sick with worry and rage. How could I sleep?” He rambles, almost bewildered. “I did not - if the worst - if this was the end - I did not wish to miss a single moment with you.”

“My love, no,” she sighs, eyes welling with tears. “Jaime…”

“I could not - I could not leave your side, lovely one,” he replies shakily. “I am dreaming - I must be dreaming - I do not wish to wake. Dear gods, if this is a dream let me sleep forever, never let me wake - lovely one - ”

“Jaime, Jaime, Jaime,” she says. “Look at me. My love, look at me. I’m here. I have returned to you. I am yours, and I’m here.”

“I am dreaming, I was so afraid,” he rambles. “I’m dreaming, this is a dream, lovely one.” His head hurts, he can barely breathe, barely think, barely see and he must be dreaming. Her presence is too sweet for this to be anything but a most glorious, impossible dream.

“Jaime! How long has it been?” she demands.

“How long?” He blinks, her tone making him attend to her, but he doesn’t understand her question. He blinks again, fighting the pounding like the drums of war in his head.

“When was the last time you slept?”

“I - ” he shakes his head to attempt to clear it of the sharp, numbing fog that greys his mind. “Before the parley,” he mumbles.

“And when was that?” She persists urgently. “How long has it been since then?”

The blue of her sunset gaze anchors him, and he understands now what she is asking. The pain in his temples recedes, a low hum upon a far and distant shore, and no longer the crashing thunder of a storm. “Three days,” he answers sheepishly.
“Well, no wonder, my love. No wonder you are so exhausted.” She pauses then, twisting her fingers into the sheets, an old nervous habit, and stills only when he lays his hand over hers to tangle their fingers together. He inhales sharply at the feel of it. It is too much, he feels too much, and he sees his lovely wife is similarly overwhelmed, her fingers trembling in his. “What happened?” She asks softly, looking at their entwined hands. “Whilst I was - what happened?”

“I swore a Blood Oath,” he replies, and her gaze snaps to his in incredulous shock.

“A Blood Oath?” She stutters, blushing, eyes wide. “I am worth a Blood Oath sworn by a Lannister King?”

“Yes,” he confirms solemnly, holding her gaze. “You are worth everything. You and our child are worth everything. You are worth everything I can give you, everything I can do for you, and more. For you I would declare a thousand Blood Oaths, without regret. Without hesitation. Believe it,” he continues fiercely, heatedly, enjoying the deepening blush on her cheeks. It gladdens his heart to see the colour returning to her skin, a sign of life and vitality. He kisses their entwined hands. “You are everything to me, lovely one. Our child is everything.”

“Our child?” She stutters. “Our child lives?” She pursues, reluctant hope brightening her features, illuminating them like the sunrise.

“Yes,” he replies. “Our child yet lives, for you do, or so the maesters tell me.”

Her lovely face crumples with relief, and she pulls his hand to her lips, sobbing against his skin. Thank you, thank you, thank you. An incredulous, watery laugh bursts from her lips and he cannot help but answer her radiant smile with one of his own, ignoring his damp cheeks.

“Yes, lovely one,” He continues, stroking her cheek. “So I swore the Blood Oath, and then girded myself for battle, and led our legions to war for you. I lured the Dothraki and the Unsullied into the prepared traps, as we discussed in our conclave. Lady Eleanor Mooton Tarly and her son were successfully recovered.”

“Oh, thank the gods,” Sansa chokes.

“Tyrion was captured as well. He now languishes at my pleasure in a cell in the bowels of the Rock. Bronn shot down your cousin’s dragon, and Jon wanted to fight me, but could barely grasp his own sword,” he recounts, with a certain amount of dark and grim satisfaction. Better this than
the hollow bitter defeat of betrayal. His brother. His younger brother. Fury pricks at his skin. Her cousin. He swallows down a snarl, reigning himself in with difficulty. “He was the sole survivor of the trap I laid for the Unsullied, and so I ordered his head shaved in the manner of the Dothraki when they lose a battle - a sign Daenerys Targaryen will recognise, and something that will sow further discord through her camp - and he was marched back to the gates so he could make his own way back to his Dragon Queen, humiliated and shamed and defeated.” He tells his story in sober, clipped sentences, looking at his wife. “And I would do it all again, for you. Even though - even though - ”

“Even though?” Sansa prompts him gently.

He can barely form the words upon his tongue. “Ser Daven, he - ”

She catches his meaning instantly, sorrow and heartbreak cracking her voice. “No - Jaime - no - oh, my dearest love. My Jaime, my love. I am so very sorry, my love.”

“I sent him to his death,” he chokes. “My cousin. I love - loved - him, I mourn him, but I sent him to his death. And I would do it again. Because you are my first choice. Always. That is the man I am. I have blood on my hands. These hands are stained with the blood of my kin and my enemies alike, and I would do it all over again. I cannot regret any of it. Not when I did it in your defence, and not when you are lying here with me now, alive. After everything, alive. I cannot regret any of it. In your name there is no task that is too great, there is nothing that is asking too much of me. What does that make me? How can you love me?” He asks her, filled with the blackest horror. What monster of a man does this make him? How can she love him? She is all that is good and pure and bright and worth fighting for in this world, and he is not. How can she love him?

“How can I not?” She answers, reaching out to trace the straight line of his nose, and he sighs, melting. “I know who you are, my love. You do not need to hide from me. I know who you are, and I love you. How can I not? You have championed me and defended me, respected me and loved me. How can I do anything but love you? And I will love you whatever our endeavours. I will love you, defender of my life, beyond the ending of the world.”

“I would do it all again,” he says, looking desolately at her. He wants to believe her. He needs to make her understand, somehow. “Everything. I stood in my courtyard and looked up at the Singer’s Gate and watched until the very end. I watched as my archers fired hail upon hail of arrows in the shadows of the walls upon our trapped enemy. I watched until all of those men, far from home, fighting a war that was not theirs to fight, fighting, pressed by a tyrant into her cause, had fallen. I watched as they were stuffed full of arrows, I listened as the bards from the Singer’s Gate above those wretched, bleeding, dying men, sung The Rains of Castamere, until at last it was done. That is the man I am. That is the man who loves you. That is the man you are married to, to whom you have given your faith and heart and body, and I am unworthy of it.” It sickens him to say the words, but they are true.
“And you tell me you could not defend me! You swore a Blood Oath for me - so you did defend me,” she rebuts softly, though her voice is no less fierce for its quietness. “You have defended me more completely, more ardently, than any other. What my father should have done, and did not. What my brother should have done, and did not. What my mother should have done, and did not. The bonds of family and love and duty and honour should have compelled them to do so, and they proclaimed that intention loudly enough, grandly enough to all who could hear, to all who would listen, but when the time came for more than mere declarations, when the time came for action, they faltered like new-born foals in the snow, tripping over their own legs. When came the time for action, they did nothing at all to defend and protect me, and indeed they looked the other way. But you, the Kingslayer, the man my family considered less than honourable, you have defended me and protected me and loved me. Your words and intentions are matched by your deeds.”

“Lovely one…” he trails off, humbled. She is too good to him. Too kind, too forgiving, he does not deserve it. He does not deserve her, but he is too selfish to give her up. He will keep her if she lets him, for as long as she lets him, and defend her and love her and perhaps, if there is any mercy in the unfathomable hearts of the unfeeling, cruel gods, one day, he will be worthy of her. He will attempt such an impossible labour, every moment of every day that is left to him in this life, and beyond.

“You must know, my love,” she continues pensively, a touch shakily. “I never thought - I never thought anyone would marry me for love. And that notion was beaten into me by Joffrey’s Kingsguard, by my tormentor in Winterfell, by so many others who took it upon themselves to snuff out the light in my eyes because the world had been cruel to them. They could not stand my idealism, my belief in the goodness of men. Even my own family - my parents, Robb, Jon… they all thought me an air-headed little twit who deserved to have her illusions shattered in the most violent way, simply for the crime of innocence.” How could her own family be so cruel to such a perfect, radiant creature as his wife? He will never understand it. He growls, low, under his breath. How dare they. How dare they.

“And you, who had every reason in the world to be wary of me,” she continues, always so gentle, so tender with him, every word filled with the admiration he will never deserve but covets and hoards greedily, like some avaricious old miser from the ancient tales, “to be cruel to me - I am not so naive as to think that my family was the only one to suffer - you did not look at me and think, here is a girl who is hardened by the cruelties of the world, and she is better that way. It is what she deserved. You looked at me and sought to restore that light to my soul. You who had been on the opposite side of the war between our Houses for so many years, you looked at me and thought, she does not deserve this. And so you sought to remedy that. You, alone of all men. How can I not love you for that?”

“Well,” he quips, taking refuge in humour, feeling too much to parse, feeling too much to speak in any other way, “you know well enough that there are no other men like me. There is only me.”
She laughs lightly then, a joyous, sunlit sound, and how he revels in its return, like the glimmering
light of the stars in the darkness of the night! “And I must tell you that you have the gratitude of my
brother Rickon, the thanks of mine uncle Brandon, and the respect of mine lord grandfather
Rickard Stark, for your defence and love and respect of me.”

He swallows, dumbstruck, reeling, unable to do anything but gaze upon her with all the ardent
admiration and affection he possesses, and it is not enough. It will never be enough.

“So you see, my love, you are indeed the defender of my life,” she concludes playfully, a smile,
sweet and true and vulnerable, glittering in her eyes, playing about her delectable, wondrous
mouth. “You have the blessing of my younger brothers and the respect of my ancestors.”

He swallows past the lump in his throat, screwing his eyes shut against the burning behind his
eyelids. He can scarcely believe his ears. “You honour me.” Her words to him - those words - are
the highest honour of his life, and shame burns through his veins a vicious, destructive path, black
and bleak like the ashen remains of his mountainsides, and he trembles. She gives him far too
much, and he loves, loves, loves her. He had been afraid. He is not too proud to admit that. He had
been afraid she would think his actions too extreme. It is one thing to make the vow whatever our
endeavours, to make in the privacy of their secluded bedchambers, and it is another to hold to that
selfsame vow in the aftermath of a declared Blood Feud. And so to hear her say that she truly, truly
understands their private vow to one another in the same way that he understands it, that her
affection and love for him is truly, wholly unconditional - it undoes him entirely. It overwhelms
him. He has never had that before in his life. He has always loved like this; Sansa is the only one to
understand that and instead of using it as a weapon against him as both his siblings have done, she
speaks the same language of love to him, and it settles something that goes to the heart of him. It
makes peace and solace flow through his veins, it makes him love her even more.

And then he feels upon his skin her hands as she raises her arms to cradle his face, and he sighs
into her mouth, kissing her again, somehow finding the presence of mind to slide one arm under her
knees, and the other behind her head to lift her, to hold her to him as he stands fluidly, the better to
resettle them upon their bed in such a manner that is comfortable for them both, because as utterly
enjoyable as kissing his wife always is, he would prefer not to be painfully sat upon a chair at her
bedside, his upper body awkwardly folded over hers, bracing himself on his elbows beside her
head.

He groans his satisfaction as he situates them both so he holds her in his arms, leaning back agains
the pillows and headboard whilst his wife curls up between his outstretched legs, pressing her ear
to his heart, tilting her face up to his. He can barely believe it, but it is true, somehow. She is here,
and alive and awake, looking up at him with such an expression in her eyes that makes him want to
fall at her feet in reverence, so full of love and trust and admiration that she steals his breath.

“I love you,” he says, brokenly. He can never say it enough, and somehow, he feels the words
themselves are not enough. How can three little words encompass so great, so moving, so consuming a sentiment as this? How can three little words mean the beating of his heart, the thrumming of his blood through his veins, the way he inhales sharply when she turns her alluring, sunset gaze upon him? How can they mean the elegant, clever turns of her mind, her resilience, her determination? Her belief in goodness, despite all that was done to her? Every breath he takes is hers. He could look only upon her for a thousand lifetimes and miss neither the sunrise, sunset, or starry night. How can he feel so much that he gasps and aches and bleeds with it?

“I love you, my wonderful man.” By the gods, her voice. The melody of it makes his soul shiver, makes a hazy, languid warmth unfurl in his chest, and he noses her collarbone, her neck, filling his senses with her. The feel of her against his torso, her bright hair tangled upon his shoulders, brushing his arms, holding her, wrapping himself around her, and she in return clinging to him, dainty hands twisted in his shirt, melting against him - it is too much, and not enough at the same time.

He watches intently as her brow furrows suddenly, something occurring to her, and drawing him from his contemplation. “Is that why it is called the Singer’s Gate? Because in times of war the bards use it to sing the anthem of your noble and ancient house, both a warning and a lament?”

“Yes,” he confirms. “For as long as anyone can remember, it has been so named and so used.” It had been something he had marvelled at in his lessons with the maester as a child, and it had only fed his love for the chivalric songs of old. For how could it be something to despise when his most ancient and noble house made such astonishing use of them? It had awed and frightened him. It still does, and in some part of him he still cannot quite believe that he has made use of that ancient tradition.

“I thought I - when I was unconscious, I heard it,” she begins slowly, before continuing with more confidence: “I heard it sung. And I was in the Golden Hall, I was dreaming, and I heard it sung, and all the statues of the ancient Kings of the Rock came alive, then, and drew their swords to raise the blades in habitual salute. Lancadil, they cried. Lancadil, Lancadil…” she trembles at the memory, and Jaime shivers, his stomach twisting with visceral unease, and he tightens his embrace of her. What strange magic is this?

“Not a dream, Sansa,” he says, though he can barely conceive of the hows and the wherefores. “It did happen. Not the statue-kings, but the song, the salute and the cheers - that did indeed happen, Sansa.”

“Then… then the rest… oh gods…” she shudders, and he presses a kiss to the top of her head, trying to reassure himself as much as her. He hates to see her in distress, and he does not know what to do to alleviate it.
“What do you mean, lovely one?” He asks quietly.

She is silent for a time, long enough that he thinks she will not answer him. And then, in a small, tight, embarrassed voice, as though she is afraid he will not believe her, that he will think her mad, that he will think it some fantastical delusion brought on by her ordeal, she says, “Do you remember the dream I had about Torrhen, before the parley?”

“I do, yes.” It is not something he is likely to forget. The way she’d screamed herself awake, twisting and turning in the sheets, sobbing helplessly… it haunts him. It will haunt him for the rest of his life, and he never wants to hear such a sound again. He had believed her then, and he will believe her now. Whatever it is, he will believe her. Does she not know that he will always believe her?

“That was - that was not the only dream I had. These past days I have dreamed and dreamed and dreamed. More than that, I have lived there, trapped beyond the waking world in a land of mist and ghosts, wandering through memory with loved ones and demons alike, and some who had all the appearance of the former and all the substance of the latter.” She trembles again, more violently, and her voice cracks with pain, the words tumbling from her mouth, and he is sickened, terrified at the picture she paints. “I could not breathe, I drowned in the darkness, I tried to hold on to the green light of your eyes but I could not, and I drowned and fell, alone, I drowned in the darkness, and when I woke it was to face a demon with the face of a man.” He shivers again, recalling only too well the sensation, of being pulled down, down, down, into the depths, of seeing above him the receding light, reaching for it, though a futile endeavour. There is nothing akin to that kind of fundamental terror, the burning in the chest, the tightening of the throat. “I tried to fight him but he was too strong, he held me down and then he - he - I promise I fought him, Jaime. I promise. I didn’t want him. I did not. I have never wanted him and he never cared. In the Eyrie he never cared, not once.” Her voice turns pleading, frantic, and he cannot abide this a moment more. He never wishes to hear her so defeated, begging for him to believe her. “I know you did not, lovely one. I know you did not. I believe you, Sansa. You’re my wife. I believe you. I know your heart; I know you would not lie,” he says firmly, concentrating on reassuring her, setting aside for the moment what she has just revealed about that jumped-up, vile, treacherous pimp of a man. He wants to dig up the man’s bones from his unmarked grave and chop him to pieces and then throw the bloody remains into a ravine, steep and rocky and treacherous, as a feast for the wild beasts in the mountains of the West, there to rot and be devoured and even that would not be enough for what he did to Sansa. For what he did to both Houses Stark and Lannister, pitting them against the other for his own personal satisfaction, for his own enjoyment of the ensuing chaos.

“When I returned from the battlefield, the evening of the parley, the maesters told me you had been thrashing about, and they were worried about you injuring yourself further, so they sedated you,” he says, forcing himself to calm, forcing his mind away from the seductive, hollow thoughts of mindless violence and vengeance.
She grips his wrist, her nails digging into his flesh. “What with?” She asks urgently. There is something in her gaze, some sudden, excruciating realisation she has had that yet escapes him. “Do you know what they used to sedate me?”

“You retched up the dreamwine, so they had to give you sweetsleep, apparently,” he responds soberly.

He has never seen his wife pale so quickly, so dramatically, and something painful and leaden twists in his stomach.

“In the future,” she swallows harshly, “I do not care how much pain I am in, I do not care how many maesters recommend it, never give me dreamwine or sweetsleep again. Promise me. You must promise me, please. Please.”

“May I ask why, lovely one?” He replies softly, tenderly, fighting down the growing feeling of nausea rising in his throat, fighting the shattering of his heart. What more horror has she fought? What new offense has been committed against her to join the long list of offenses she has already endured? Is this never to end?

She traces his shirt cuff, fiddling with the cloth, and her voice takes on that flat tone he hates, the horrible, blank, dead one that makes him shiver, that makes his insides twist with nausea, that makes the rage burn like fire in his chest, and he already knows, knows with a numbing, vicious, sickening certainty, that he is not going to like in the slightest what he is about to hear. “In the Eyrie… Baelish took it upon himself to teach me about poisons, and he did this by drugging my food, my drink. Sometimes merely with a dose of sweetsleep small enough to incapacitate me, but not render me unconscious. It works similarly to hemlock. In small quantities, it immobilises a patient whilst they are still awake. A slightly larger dose will both immobilise and send them to sleep. Add a pinch more, and it will paralyse the body, it will stop the flow of blood through the veins, and eventually, it will stop the heart. You can build up a resistance to it, which was Baelish’s stated reasoning for drugging me - that it would prevent my death by assassination through poison if I could build up a resistance to it, that he had my best interests at heart. Purportedly having my best interests at heart did not stop him taking advantage of my incapacitation. He did not take my maidenhead, but I learnt then that there are other ways to be defiled.”

He growls, light-headed with rage, feeling as though the ground has fallen away beneath him, as though he is once more drowning in his armour as he did in that river upon that nightmarish Field of Fire. Only the presence of his wife in his arms, and the knowledge that she is there and safe and with him, prevents him from leaping up from the bed, strapping his sword to his waist, calling for his armour and his horse, and riding to the ends of the earth and the Seven Hells to find that little worm and gutting him with a blade, rusted and dull, making him bleed and suffer, ripping out the entrails like a bloody ribbon. He quite likes the idea of letting Magnificence trample him, of
snapping that weasel’s limbs like twigs. How sweet that monster’s screams would be, Jaime thinks, indulging for a moment in the notion. But Sansa is far, far more important to Jaime than that scheming, conniving bastard, and so he restrains himself. For Sansa he has sworn a Blood Oath. By contrast, Petyr Baelish is as about as important to him as a gadfly.

“And so even the merest taste of either is enough to make you recall that horror,” Jaime surmises grimly, controlling himself with great difficulty.

“Not even a taste,” she corrects dully. “I can smell it a room away, and that is enough to entirely sicken me.”

He growls again, snarling into her hair, pressing fierce kisses to her shoulder, her collarbone, her neck. Mine, he thinks darkly. Mine, only ever mine. Not yours, Mockingbird. She responds by taking his left hand in hers and sliding it up her body, coming to rest over her heart, and he feels the steady beat of it under his palm, and it reassures him. He rumbles his pleasure and she sighs, tilting her head back against his shoulder, exposing her neck, and he takes full advantage of this, nuzzling at her, growling, murmuring mine, mine, mine into the silk of her skin.

“Yours,” she replies softly. “I am yours, Jaime.”

“Treating the wounded at Winterfell… my brave, brave wife,” he continues, more calmly now, shaking his head, awed, marvelling at her courage. She is braver than any man he’s ever met, braver than any of the knights, bold and glorious, from the legends of old, those ancient tales sung around firesides in the light of the setting sun, recited with the aid of a harp or a lyre or a mandolin. “That must have been excruciating, lovely one.” He kisses her forehead, lifting his hand to draw tender, soft circles with his thumb upon her temples in the way he knows she enjoys, in the way he knows soothes and comforts her. “You have my promise, my valiant wife.”

“Thank you,” she smiles, burrowing more closely into his arms.

“I thought you brave and admirable then,” he says wonderingly. Is there nothing she has done and will do for which he will not admire her? He doubts it. “For your compassion and clear-headedness at Winterfell, and now I know - you have more courage than anyone else I have ever met.”

“It was my duty,” she demurs.

“He did not deserve the clean death you gave him,” Jaime snarls. That is the least of it, but they are
prevented from further conversation by the arrival of the maesters and Wynafryd Manderly for the Wolfsguard, Ser Leonidas for the Lionsguard, and Lord Royce for the conclave, who all do not spare their exclamations of joy and relief at seeing the Queen in the North awake at last, after three long days of waiting and hoping. Jaime sees quickly that even as Sansa receives graciously the wellwishes of their subjects, she finds the visit an ordeal and tiring. It moves her, he knows, to see their happiness, and he drops a kiss to her forehead, seeking to bolster her. His strength is hers; it is for her to have, he gives it to her freely.

When only the maesters remain, Sansa raises a white hand to halt proceedings before they truly begin. “I know, maesters, that I must be examined. But you will not touch me. Only Jaime. Only ever my husband, do you understand?” She is trembling, though her voice remains even, and he shifts to lay his left hand upon her stomach, cradling her and their child. Her fingers tangle with his, gripping them tightly.

“How then, are we to do our duty?” The most senior one questions, his extraordinary white eyebrows meeting in a single, bushy line. Around him, the rest quiver and flit about uncertainly like a flock of birds, spooked but not in flight.

“Maester, for such a simple examination, the King of the West will follow your instructions, I am sure.” The command seems to tire her to the point of her eyes fluttering shut again, and Jaime will not even think of gainsaying her in this. He’d seen in his wife’s eyes the horror, the humiliation, as she’d realised servants, maesters, even her Wolfsguard, had been forced to unclothe her to save her life. Knowing her history, he understands how acute an imposition that had been, how it makes her tremble and relive some of her worst memories in a life near filled with them. He is a possessive man, too. He always has been, and the thought of anyone touching her to unclothe her when she could not agree, even to save her life, makes him want to revert to his former recklessness and cut them all down for such a trespass.

He kisses her neck, just below her ear. “Mine, lovely one,” he growls. “You are mine, and I will not let anyone else touch you,” he continues, the words for her alone, and he feels in reply her body fall languid, her body melt against his as he reassures her. “Your cousin, my brother, the Dragon Queen, Death… they all want to possess you, to break you… they cannot. They cannot have you. You’re mine, lovely one. Mine beyond the ending of the world, mine always, mine to hold and admire, mine to love, as I am yours. Mine, Sansa. My lovely one, my wife, my queen, my ally, my lady. Only ever mine, lovely one. Only ever mine.”

“Only yours, Jaime,” she murmurs into his chest, almost deliriously. “Only ever yours.”

“Breathe, lovely one, breathe with me,” he says quietly, caressing her arm, and he feels her respond, feels her concentrate and modulate her breathing to his, and then, to the maesters, raising his voice: “Well, gentlemen, instruct me.” Gently, he follows their instructions, responding with what he sees and feels. The maesters’ humming in reply is reassuring, and it is over quickly, the
signs encouraging. Nevertheless, the Queen in the North is placed on bedrest, at least until her nausea and headaches fade away. Sansa frowns, but acquiesces to this condition, burrowing further into Jaime’s embrace, nodding her understanding, almost shyly. When the examination shifts to the matter of ascertaining the wellbeing of their unborn child, he is suddenly viciously uncomfortable, and Sansa freezes in his arms, hiding her face behind the curtain of her hair. He will have no part in this, so he asks the venerable maesters what the danger signs are. Explanations complete, he reads clearly in her manner the desire to be alone with him, and thanks the maesters, swiftly dismissing them.

The doors shut, and at last they are alone.

“Would you prefer a midwife, lovely one?” He asks her tenderly.

She hesitates, and then nods, once, abruptly, swiftly, hiding her face in his linen shirt.

“Then you shall have one, my love,” he responds, kissing her forehead. “And if you wish it, I will be there with you when the time comes.”

“In the birthing chamber?” She asks, her voice hoarse with surprise and disuse.

“Yes,” he says ardently. “If you wish it of me, yes.” I would not have you go where I cannot follow. He is afraid, too. When he thinks of his father, thoughts of his mother are never far behind, and his parents have haunted him far too much in the dark days since that fucking parley. The sudden, fierce, consuming feel of her lips, soft and sweet, thanking him without words, upon his own jolts him from the melancholy fear of his thoughts, and he reciprocates with alacrity, lifting his left hand to cradle her head, tangling his fingers in her bright hair. By the gods he has missed this. Her kiss, alluring, deep, as lovely as she is, sends sparks of light through his veins, and his blood thrums. He tastes the salt of her tears, and redoubles his efforts, determined to give her all the affection and devotion he possesses. He can hardly believe she has been returned to him. He still half-fears this is some mirage, some dream brought on by his three day vigil, by the lack of sleep and the violence of his emotions. He cannot stop tracing her soft skin, revelling in the alluring warmth of her body, in the pulse of her blood through her noble, regal veins, breathing in the scent of her hair. She’s here, she’s alive and awake, she’s alive, she has come back to him.

He buries his face in the elegant white length of her neck, her hair, kissing her clavicle, and weeps.
Thoughts? Likes? Dislikes? Predictions?
Chapter Summary

He doesn't understand.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone!

Welcome to this next instalment! We are now at over 250K which is just frankly ridiculous, this story has become this huge epic and I could not possibly have done it without all you wonderful readers, your enthusiasm and support, so thank you!

Thanks as always to the wonderful T and K for all their help with this story.

Loads of fluff and angst and Jaimsa and some rather important clues to look forward to in this chapter, so enjoy, and I can't wait to see what you all think of it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART THIRTY TWO
He collapses into the sleep of the exhausted, immobile, dazed, laid out indifferently over the bedclothes, sprawled half-sitting against the pillows, his boots still upon his feet, holding in his arms his wife. How they find each other, how they cling to one another, though asleep! Her soft form is draped over his, a blanket fragrant and heavenly, her ear to his chest, seeking the reassurance the steady beating of his heart gives her, her lithe legs entwined with his. Thus they remain, slumbering undisturbed, until Ser Addam the next morning supervises - with the military precision that earned him the epithet of Tywin Lannister’s most consummate commander upon the battlefield - the laying of the breakfast table. Jaime vaguely hears, in the drifting, languid manner of the half-awakened, his friend moving quietly around the apartments, directing with clipped, even commands the servants. He briefly considers rising to bathe and dress and eat, but Sansa shifts then, a lock of her hair falling across his nose, bringing him that maddening, alluring scent of starflowers and apricot, and he decides rapidly that it is a far better idea simply to drift back into rest, his wife warm and divine in his embrace.

When he does eventually stir himself from the gentle clutches of slumber, it is with no small amount of satisfaction that he realises his headache, born of exhaustion and terror, has vanished, leaving him sharply clear-headed, and he blinks with bewildered shock. Adoration unfurls warmly in his chest like a purring kitten by the hearth as he gazes at his wife, still asleep, and he decides he can wait for food, for this sustenance is more fundamental still. This quiet, still warmth sustains his soul. He runs his left hand up and down her back, revelling in the feel of her. Part of him still thinks he is dreaming; that this is too great a miracle for it to be true, and so it settles him deeply to be able to reach out and touch her, to feel under his palm her every inhale and exhale - he has missed this easy, tender closeness with her in the three days of his vigil. He had lived those three days as if they were an amputation; barely able to breathe, reeling, despairing and numb with the shock of it, delirious with pain. Now, he feels more than settled. He is calm; his fears have melted away like butter in the summer sun. He feels a contented smile tug at the corners of his mouth - how adorable his lovely one is thus! Curled up with him, nuzzling herself ever more closely to him, he admires the fluttering of her eyelashes on her pale cheeks, and he leans down to press chaste kisses to her bandage-covered temple, to the elegant curve of her eyebrow, sighing happily against her hair, tightening his arms around her.

She shifts sleepily, murmuring his name against his skin, and he cannot help but draw the fingers of his left hand again and again through the elegant length of her hair, mesmerised by the silk of the strands, by the richness of the colour, and he almost swoons when the golden light spilling distantly from the courtyard into the bedchamber falls across her in shimmering shafts, turning her to something entirely ethereal, into a creature of deep crimsons and bright white, radiant and shining. It makes his heart ache in his chest, trip and stutter, catch itself. He loses track of time entirely, revelling in the slow quiet of her and him together, so much so that when she wakes it takes him by surprise. She presses a kiss to his heart, close-lipped, lingering, and he jolts.

She laughs lightly, a private giggle that sends sparks, bright and tender as the spring, dancing through his veins, mischief glimmering in her sunset eyes. “Good morning, my King,” she
“Good morning, lovely one,” he replies. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” She wrinkles her nose in the most adorable manner. “Grimy. I need a bath, though I am not sure I can sit, much less stand.”

“Your head?” Jaime frowns.

“Yes,” Sansa huffs. “It aches dully, a constant throbbing in the back of my mind and I wish it would stop.”

“The bath should raise your spirits a little, my valiant wife,” he says gently, gathering her more closely to him, sitting up slowly, humming in sympathy as she whimpers, burrowing her face in the crook of his neck, twisting her fingers into his shirt.

“Dizzy,” she gasps, and he tightens his hold on her.

“I will not let you go, lovely one,” he reassures her. Gently, carefully, concentrating upon not jolting her, he stands, cradling her against his chest, and he makes his way towards the bathing chambers.

In the first chamber he sets her down upon one of the stone benches, amply padded with soft cushions, so she can recline in comfort, whilst he bolts the doors. This is not how he had envisaged first sharing a bath with his beloved wife. Not like this, when she is injured, and in her eyes he reads the same regret, the same longing. He had imagined something - ever since that day in Winterfell when he came upon her bathing in the hot springs in the middle of the afternoon he has wanted to bathe with her, to laugh and play and hold her and kiss her, relishing her slippery skin against his. He has wanted to make love to her there, to lick the water from her neck, to follow the droplets with his mouth as they descend her skin as she sighs and mewls and shudders exquisitely in his arms. He has wanted to feel her lithe legs wrapped around his waist as he sinks into the heat of her, the steam rising from the hot spring to curl her hair, rendering their movements languid and leisurely. Winterfell notwithstanding, such a fantasy would have been how he would have liked to broach the notion of his bathing with her for the first time, and the bathing chambers here in his ancestral castle would have been perfect for such indulgent pleasures.

“Forgive me,” she murmurs.
“There is nothing to forgive, lovely one,” he replies immediately, hating the look of shame in her eyes, for she has nothing for which to feel shame. That she is injured is not her fault. That his fantasy will for a time have to remain a fantasy is not her fault in the slightest. “Let me take care of you,” he entreats her. “Don’t think. Only let me take care of you.”

“Please,” she says, extending her hands to him, and he goes to her, sinking to his knees upon the warm tiles. “With you I can forget the horrors of the world around me. Only you. And I like that.” She pauses, swallowing harshly. “I need it.”

“You have it, sweet wife. You have it,” He says ardently, lifting her hand to his lips, pressing kisses to her knuckles, to her palm, before deliberately lightening his voice when he continues. “Now, lovely one, you must tell me your rituals. You are not a person to dunk your head in ice-cold water and have done with it, though you are the Queen in the North.”

“Indeed not,” she says, her sunset eyes glimmering with amusement. “My rituals…” she trails off, and he is gratified to see her smirking. “Well, to begin with, as a general rule, I am not clothed.”

“I think I like these rituals of yours,” he grins raffishly. Indeed, the notion is suddenly so vivid in his mind that he is rather glad he is already kneeling. Of course he had known that she habitually bathes unclothed, but there is something about her words which makes the lust sear through him, until his mind is hazy with desire.

“I knew you would, you impossible, insufferable man,” she laughs. “Will you undress me, then?” She asks, the boldness of her words countered by the shyness in her gaze, bringing him sharply back to the present.

“With pleasure,” he drawls languidly, enjoying her blush, enjoying the feel of her skin under his palm, enjoying her responsiveness, the way she trembles and sighs softly at his touch. She is laid out before him like a feast, and, he thinks wickedly to himself, what better way to savour a feast than to take his time? Slowly, he grasps the soft material of her shift in his left hand, twisting it in his fingers, drawing it up her body, teasingly, achingly slowly, laughing lowly when she mewls his name, when she shudders at the leisurely drag of the material upon her skin like a whisper. She is revealed to him, beautiful, ethereal, and immensely alluring.

“Lovely one,” he murmurs, dropping her shift to the floor. “Lovely one…” By the gods, the way she looks at him! It is too much, the way her eyes blaze from the sunset to night with passion and wanting. He wants her too much. He wants her everywhere and always, he wants everything with her, and somehow he is lucky enough that instead of such ardent passion and yearning driving his beautiful wife away from him, instead of frightening her, she returns his admiration and affection.
with equal, absolute enthusiasm and possessiveness, and he relishes it. He does not know how not to belong to another, how not to belong to a woman; it is as fundamental to him as breathing, and he is the luckiest of men that his wife understands it as something worth cherishing and defending instead of considering it a weapon, or as something to be entitled to, as Cersei did once upon a time. He does not know how not to belong to a woman, and yet with Sansa he has never felt chained, or like a possession, and he knows it is because Sansa, alone of all people, considers him a man with thoughts of his own in his head. She never claims possession of him and then seeks to direct his every word and deed. Instead, she believes he does have his own heart and mind, and encourages him in his voicing of his opinions and thoughts, and how precious that is! He is the luckiest of men.

To distract himself from his musings, from the pounding of his heart, the lust roaring through his veins, he speaks huskily. “Of your rituals… tell me more…” he bends his head to take her pink-tipped nipple into his mouth, revelling in her responsiveness, the high-pitched moan that catches beautifully in her throat. “I want to know everything…” He trails off, growling, dizzy and delirious at the scent of her upon his tongue, at the heady taste of her skin, utterly enthralled by the softness of her breasts.

“Everything?” She laughs breathlessly.

“Everything,” he confirms, before mischievously nipping at her gloriously silken sides, just where he knows she is most ticklish, and he is rewarded when she gasps another laugh and her dainty fingers with delicate strength come to tangle in his hair, holding him to his task. He obliges her willingly, fiercely, trailing kisses down her sides, up to her clavicles before returning to linger at her breasts, revelling in the pretty pink blush of her skin, in the way she shifts restlessly, in the mewls that fall from her lips. “Everything, everything…” he continues into her skin, ardently. He might be the one teasing her, seducing her, slowly, deliberately building the tension between them to something searingly intense, but with every movement, with every touch and kiss it is he who is falling more deeply under her spell, willingly.

“Please, my lord husband,” she tugs on his hair and he lifts his head to look at her, at the waves crashing in her sunset eyes, and his chest tightens. He bites his tongue, clenches his jaw, fights through the dizziness to restrain himself, or else this will be over before it begins. He reminds himself of their purpose; he means to bathe her, not ravish her… yet.

“Patience, lovely one,” he drawls, reminding himself as much as her, though he cannot resist bending his head to hers, touching her nose with his, inhaling, closing his eyes. “Patience,” he murmurs, chuckling when she lifts her chin in blatant invitation. “Patience.” He nibbles at her earlobe.

“Insufferable, impossible man!”
“Ah, but you enjoy me that way,” he drawls, furrowing his brow to muster the mental clarity to speak, nuzzling at her neck, before pulling away entirely to stand and consider her impressive array of soaps and oils and lotions upon the ledge. He can feel her icy gaze upon his back, and he smirks to himself. “And therefore I shall endeavour to be the most insufferable, the most impossible of men.”

“Jaime!” She exclaims, fighting between outrage and laughter.

“Now,” he continues, “your rituals… I have unclothed you. What must I do now? Which of these phials must I select?” He extends his left hand dramatically over the ledge, pretending to consider each very carefully, though he really has no idea what the purpose of each is. He imagines perfumery is much like alchemy; substances and scents and oils and preparations combined in carefully measured increments, with careful purpose, though instead of creating gold, a highborn lady creates a most beautiful, alluring portrait of herself. What does the cream or ointment or soap in each of these pretty glass containers do? Some subtle, feminine magic, he is certain, he muses with boyish curiosity. He could watch Sansa for hours, massaging creams into her soft, white skin, brushing oils through her hair until her bright russet locks shine like the sunset on gold. Far from shattering the mystery, it would only make the magic of her more potent, more alluring.

“So you are to be my… handmaiden?” She laughs again at his playfulness, and he turns once more to look upon her. The brightness of her expressive eyes steals the breath from his chest. She is radiant, and the notion that he has made her laugh… it makes something like sunlight warm him, down to the depths of his battered soul. He always wants to hear her laugh. There is no sound more perfect to him, save perhaps the liquid syllables that fall from her lips as he unravels her with pleasure in bed.

“I had thought more to call myself your lover, but handmaiden will do,” he teases, revelling in her sudden, violent blush that spreads down from her face, her shuddered inhale. “So,” he prompts brightly, “will you direct me? How might I care for you?”

“The one on the far left,” she stutters, “begin with that.” He does so, and returns swiftly to sit next to her upon the padded bench, phial carefully in hand. He raises his eyebrow at her in question, and she continues, haltingly, shyly. “You only need a relatively small amount, it pours easily.” He finds it is an oil of some kind, golden and thick like liquid honey upon her white skin.

“And now?” He drawls.

She blushes again, and he is enjoying her maidenly embarrassment, but the colour in her cheeks deepens further, and he understands immediately. “You can ask me, lovely one, tell me what you
would have of me,” he says softly, tenderly, his heart breaking when she swallows and averts her eyes, trembling.

“It would be the height of selfishness for a lady,” she replies, her voice tight and small, and damn it all, but he -

“You could never be selfish, Sansa,” he retorts instantly, his voice no less vehement and fierce for its softness. “You are not. And telling me what you want is not selfish in the slightest.” And now that she alludes to it, he realises she has never told him outright. She indicates, through an elegant gesture, or a declaration of love, she makes an invitation, an offer to him, an entreaty, which he then enthusiastically and ardently takes, but she never tells him directly what she would have of him. She knows him so well to read him thus so accurately, he realises, humbled. She knows him better than anyone else ever has, and that comforts him, that bolsters him, and all the while rage sears through his veins at the notion that she has been taught that what she wants is worth nothing to the wants of others, because it is not true. He would put her wants above his own, for that is how he loves, for that is how he has ever loved. And whilst it is not enough, he thinks, it would at the very least be a beginning, and perhaps, one day, his sweet wife will believe it for herself. He will make every effort to see it so.

“May I - I can’t speak the words - but could I - might I…”

“My love,” he says, inferring her meaning, reaching to cup her cheek, to thumb the soft give of her lower lip, “you may do with me as you will.” He smiles gently, tenderly, patient. She turns her head to press a soul-wrenching kiss to his palm, before doing as she did on their first night together, their only night at Winterfell, covering his hand with hers and sliding it down her neck, his fingertips skimming her fluttering pulse, down over her heart, and now further, down over her stomach where their child grows, down over her hipbones to her thigh to where he poured the oil, and he understands. It is to be rubbed gently into her skin, and he begins slow, leisurely circles with his left hand. “All over your body?” He asks wickedly.

“Not my face,” she nods, blushing.

“I’m going to enjoy this, I think,” he drawls languidly, heatedly, and she laughs, aroused and delighted and embarrassed. He sets with determination about his task, resolving to make her mind spin with the delirious decadence of it, to show her the full, boundless depth of the admiration he bears her. He begins with her thigh, then the rest of her lithe leg, prefacing the slow, ardent caresses with his mouth, sometimes skimming, sometimes licking or grazing or nipping her skin, sometimes simply pressing chaste, close-mouthed kisses to her. He loses himself in it, existing in a world where he hears only her soft sighs and alluring moans, where he scents only the dizzying fragrance of her skin like spring, where he tastes and feels and touches only her. Only ever her, always her, her, her. His lovely one. This, this is what the ancients meant when first they curled their tongues around the word ritual; anything else is but a pale, insubstantial wisp, a shadow of an
imitation. He pays substantial attention to her breasts, lathering them gently, grinning against her skin as she arches into his hand, sighing, pleading with him, more, please, Jaime, more, more -

And he stills, shame festering bitterly in his gut. He cannot give her more. He only has one hand and his heart twists, his throat tightens and he - how he wishes he still had his right hand! He wishes it with a desperation that frightens him. To be able to hold her properly - to feel with both hands the slimness of her waist, the soft weight of her breasts, to be able to have one hand warm and heavy upon her wonderful arse and the other tangled firmly in the fall of her hair whilst he kisses her - he wants that. He wants to be able to slide both his thumbs from the base of her spine to her nape to soothe her, to massage the muscles of her bottom when she has spent the day walking up and down the many flights of stairs of the Rock, to rub this oil properly into her back and shoulders - and he cannot.

He will never be capable of that.

“Jaime?” She holds his face in her gentle hands, and struggles to sit when she sees his expression. “Why are you - you’re crying, my love? What is wrong?”

“I cannot - I cannot give you more,” he chokes. Her fingers are tender, her palms are warm, and he leans brokenly into her touch. “I could give you everything I have and am and it would not be enough. I am a cripple. I cannot touch you properly, as you deserve to be touched. And I ache for it. My hand is gone and I feel the ghost of it still; I look down and expect to see flesh instead of gold, and the metal is cold enough to burn me. I cannot hold you properly, and I never will. I never will. If the price was never being able to fight again, in return for holding you properly for a single moment, I would pay it, instantly.”

“Jaime, Jaime, Jaime,” she breaks, holding him to her so he ends up draped fully over her, and he struggles to brace himself on his elbows, to hold himself above her, but she refuses his distance, guiding him closer, wrapping her slim legs around his waist, cradling him, one hand grasping at his shoulder, the other cupping his nape, and he sobs into her neck, wetting her skin with his tears. “You are more than enough for me, Jaime,” she murmurs, kissing his ear. He shivers violently in her embrace. “You are everything; my love, my lord husband, my lover, my friend, my ally, my King. And you alone of all men have given me affection and respect and passion and pleasure beyond what I ever could have imagined existed. You, of all men, because there are no others like you, and I am the luckiest of women to have your heart. I cherish it beyond everything in the world.” The warmth of her breath over his skin makes him groan, and he is hers, utterly, wholly, completely. He is hers to mould and shape and build anew in whatever likeness pleases her. “And I never want to make you feel inadequate - because you are not. You are the furthest thing imaginable from inadequate. You have only to step into my presence and I melt for you, I long and ache and yearn for you. I am yours as I have never belonged to another. I am ever thine, Sire.”

“You have never made me feel inadequate,” he hurries to correct her, sitting up so he can better cup
her soft cheek in reassurance. “Never. Your support and love and care of me, your belief in me - you are the best thing that has ever happened to me, lovely one. It is I who am unworthy of you, it is I who am inadequate. I do not want to be, but I am.”

“You are not inadequate,” she growls wolfishly. “You are not.”

“But my hand…” he continues, eviscerated. “I cannot - I cannot touch you, I cannot feel you… look at it… look at it, it is foul, disgusting…” he rips the metal away feverishly, and the cloth covering his stump beneath too. “It is an abomination… this mutilated flesh of mine… how are you not disgusted by it? How are you not entirely repulsed?”

Her hands come to close around the end of his right arm, where the flesh is a mess of scars, and he slumps and sobs, a marionette whose strings have been cut. The way she touches him is always so generous, so tender, so wonderful he can scarcely believe it to be true, and not an impossible dream. Her fingers are light as they trace his arm, and he shudders, trembles, breaks. He doesn’t understand.

He doesn’t understand.

She is the only - everyone else has either been disgusted by it, or pitied him or revelled in his agony with the dark joy of seeing an enemy brought low. But Sansa - his wonderful Sansa - he doesn’t understand why, or how, or -

She doesn’t recoil. She is gentle, and he jolts, staring in incredulous, despairing shock, as she replaces her fingers with her lips upon such a horrible thing. Her tears wet his skin, and he is utterly overcome, collapsing against her. He must be dreaming. He must.

“Jaime, my love, my love,” she says, her voice haunted, “oh, my love, look at me, love and defender of my life. I love you. I adore you, I admire you, you insufferable, magnificent man. I love you, beyond the ending of the world. Look at me,” she snarls, and he obeys instinctively, everything in him drawn to her. The softness in her features matches the tenderness of her touch. “Look at me, my lord husband. You are enough for me,” she repeats firmly, caressing his jaw, and he leans into her palm gratefully. “You are more than enough, Jaime.” Her voice trembles with the violence of her emotion. “You are everything to me. Everything. You don’t have to hide, Jaime. Not from me. I’m yours. I love you. Ever thine, my lord. Ever thine, beyond the ending of the world. I am yours,” she continues. “I am yours, only yours, because I love you. Trust me. Trust that I know you, trust that I love you for you, for all that you are, for both your greatest deeds and your mistakes, I love you, and there is nothing that you could do, there is nothing that could happen, that would make my heart cease to beat for you. Nothing. Not in all the aeons of the world.”
“I do trust you,” he swallows thickly. “With everything I have and am. Always. And I will always trust you. It is myself I… I fail you. I try, and I am not enough.”

“You are enough because you try,” she says.

He stills, entirely dumbfounded. “I don’t understand.”

“You try, Jaime,” she continues, her thumbs brushing his cheekbones, and he cannot bear to look at her. It is too much. She gives him, far, far too much. “You are the most determined man I have ever met. When you turn your mind and heart to something nothing will successfully prevent you: not a mad dragon, not the loss of a hand - you keep trying nonetheless. You keep going long after everyone else would have given up. After everything, you’re still here. Your heart still beats. You still look to the future. You still love. You still seek to laugh, and make me laugh.”

“I love your laugh, lovely one,” he interjects quietly, helplessly. It is the only thing he has it in him to say; anything else is beyond him.

“You have endured trials that would have cut down lesser men.” Her voice is firm and proud, and he cannot, by the gods he cannot endure this. He does not deserve it, and yet he would happily listen to her speak for the rest of his days. He is greedy for her praise which she lavishes so generously upon him, greedy for her love, her admiration, her devotion. “And yet here you are, because you have more courage, more heart, more pride, more faith, more hope, more determination than any other. Lesser men would have become indifferent before Aerys Targaryen’s madness. Unprincipled men would have crumbled in the face of their peers preventing them from defending the innocent against the King. Weaker men would have lost themselves to drink or despair when forced to watch their lover forced to marry another, and unhappy and beaten in that marriage to boot.” He can only stare at her, his heart swelling with awe.

The strength of her love overwhelms him, and he chokes on the sensual syllables of her name. “Sansa, I…”

But she continues, almost remorseless, ruthless, absolute in her conviction, in her praise of him. “Lesser men would not have borne the undeserved scorn of a whole country with your nonchalant defiance. Lesser men would have lost faith in goodness when faced with betrayal and manipulation from a lover. Lesser men would have let themselves bleed to death after such horrific injuries as yours to your right hand. Lesser men would have let their ordeals beat them down to shadows, lesser men would have let their agony leech the life from their very veins.” The harsh, bleak poetry of her speech settles in his soul, and it is with disbelief and desperation that he scans her lovely features for some hint of a lie, and finding none he can only exhale shakily, wholly captive
to the spell she weaves with her words, hardly daring to breathe.

“But you have not. You are still here. Because you try. You do your best to uphold your oaths, to protect the innocent, to look for the good in the world and admire it and defend it. A lesser man would not have trained his left hand to wield a blade after the loss of his right. A lesser man would have long been dead, Jaime.” She is breathing heavily, a glint, a light in her sunset eyes that is captivating in its intensity, and he is mesmerised by the fierceness of her expression, by the quick rise and fall of her shoulders, her soft, pretty breasts.

And then a doubt, an insidious thought cuts through his mind like a sword to the stomach, sinking effortlessly into flesh and tearing it to bloody pieces. The ruthlessness of it stuns him. “What use is my having survived all of that if I cannot protect you when it matters most?” He responds hoarsely, dropping his gaze.

Because you try, my love.” The tenderness of her smile makes it difficult for him to look at her, but her thumbs brush softly over his cheekbones and he sighs deeply against her wrists, acquiescing to her unspoken plea, and he gathers all his courage to look at her once again. “You do not, and have never abandoned me as soon as the slightest difficulty presented itself. The fierceness of your heart means that instead it only makes you forge onwards more vehemently. And that is what I care about. That is why I love you. Because you try. You alone of all men. You try. How can I not love you?” Her voice breaks and chokes on the words and he feels as though he is drowning again, the weight of the water pressing on his chest.

“And if I fail?” He asks dizzily. He does not ask if it will make her think less of him but it must be written all over his face nonetheless because her fingers tighten in his hair, melancholy tightening her features.

“Then you fail, but it will not change how I feel about you, because I know you will have tried, and that is what matters to me,” she murmurs against his lips. “Jaime, all of us make mistakes. We have in the past, and we will make them again. And I know as well that you will get up and try again, because you never give up. You never give in. You are too proud to ever give up, for you are a Lannister, and I love you for it.”

He rears back in shock, hardly able to believe his ears. “You are profoundly good and forgiving and generous and wondrous and I - lovely one - ”

“There is nothing you can do or say that will cause me to lose faith in you,” she kisses him chastely, and he closes his eyes, savouring the sweet taste of her caress, the soft press of her mouth against his. “You have made me fall in love with you more deeply than I ever imagined I could feel and I must warn you: you will have me beyond the end of my days. Whatever our endeavours.”
“Like a limpet, then,” he drawls lightly, taking refuge in teasing her because otherwise he thinks he might begin to weep uncontrollably, and she bursts out laughing.

“Insufferable, impossible man!” She giggles. “Yes, I will cling to you like a limpet.”

“Not precisely like a limpet,” he muses raffishly, drawing his fingertip down the blushing skin of her cheek, his spirits rising, and he can breathe again. “For one thing, you are much better looking, much more alluring than a limpet.”

“Jaime!”

By the gods her voice… if she continues saying his name thus, the way she does in bed, in tones of breathless exclamation… he collects himself with great difficulty. “Yes, lovely one?” He smirks. She tugs at the fine linen of his shirt, and his smirk widens. “Shall I give you something nice to look at, then?” Her blush deepens in a manner he finds most attractive, but she does not deny his words, and so he pulls the garment off, first pulling his right arm through the sleeve, holding the cuff with his left hand, shrugging it over his head and down his left arm where it drops with a whisper to the floor. Fluidly, he stands to step out of his breeches and boots as well, and then he swallows harshly at the deepening blue of her eyes, a darkening evening sky, at the way she lets her gaze linger upon his frame so admiringly.

“You make me feel innocent once more, my magnificent husband,” she murmurs, and it is his turn for the blood to rush to his cheeks. She heals him, she makes him whole again, she makes him feel capable again, like a man again, and he loves, loves, loves her for it.

“I hope it is something you never lose again, my sweet, valiant wife,” he replies, reaching to tangle her fingers with his, enjoying the way she smiles so radiantly at him. “Your way of looking at the world… of looking at people… it is something to cherish and protect always.”

“I love you,” she sighs as he lifts her palm to his lips, her eyelids fluttering shut. “You make me feel safe again. You make me feel loved again. You make me feel wanted for me.”

“You are,” he rasps. “You are, lovely one. Safe, and loved beyond the ending of the world, and wanted, so very wanted.” He pauses, swallowing, his mouth dry. “Now, now, my lady,” he drawls heatedly, “if you are falling asleep then I am not doing this properly.” She squeaks in surprise as he lifts her into his arms and he carries her through to the second chamber where steam rises in gentle curls from the gargantuan sunken pool. “I think a frolic is just the thing, no?”
Her bright laugh turns to a low, appreciative moan that goes straight to his groin as he lowers them both into the hot water, and arranges her so her back is to his chest and he can wrap his arms securely around her and she can lean languidly against him, enjoying quietly the warmth of the bath together.

“Jaime,” she speaks suddenly, her quiet voice breaking the gentle, dreamlike hush, and her hand wrapping around the end of his mutilated wrist. He shivers, and kisses her neck, compulsively. “Love is not conditional… for then it is not love. I do not only love you only for your good parts. I do not love you in spite of your mistakes. I love you for all that you are, and all that you will be, and that will never change.”

“You are too good to me, lovely one,” he chokes, burying his nose in her neck, breathing in her scent, calmed by the fact that he is holding her securely in his arms, that she is here and warm and soft and his. He has to wind himself protectively around her like this, he has to hold her against him, he has to feel her skin against his. He must.

“You have committed crimes in defence of your family, you have broken oaths to defend the innocent against the mad, and you swore a Blood Oath for me. That is who you are, Jaime, and I love you.” She turns in his arms, holding him to her more tightly, cupping his face between her dainty hands. “I love you,” she repeats solemnly. “You may thinking trying is not enough - Jaime, it is everything to me. Can you not see how admirable and inspiring I find your determination? I keep - I keep thinking - why were my family not more like you?”

“More like me?” He chokes, dumbfounded. She cannot mean that. She cannot possibly mean that.

“Yes,” she growls. “More like you, and I mean that with my whole heart. When my mother captured your little brother you did not even hesitate, you did everything you could to get him back. You did not let the matter of being imprisoned in a cage for over a year and then having your hand chopped off prevent you from defending someone you could hardly stand at that time against a bear. And you swore a Blood Oath for me. Do you not see it?” She asks him, her gaze childishly wide and pleading and brimming with hurt and incomprehension and it is a knife to his chest. “Why did Robb and Jon and my parents not - why did they leave me for dead when I was yet a child? Why did they abandon me and betray me and-and use me and discard me like a rag when my heart yet beat?” Her dainty fingers quiver upon his shoulders. “Why could they not have been more like you, my beloved, wonderful lord husband? Why could they not be more like you, defender of my life? Why did they not even try?” She cries helplessly, the sound echoing around the chamber, the snarling whimper of a wild animal bleeding, hunted to exhaustion.

She trembles in his arms and he draws her more closely to him, humming tunelessly, sweeping his left hand up and down her back, nuzzling at her neck, heartbreak warring with the rage roaring
suddenly through his veins. Her anguish and confused despair rips through him like a lance to the leg, horrific, wrenchingly sudden and savage. “Breathe with me, lovely one,” he murmurs, forcing himself to restraint, “breathe with me. I have you. You’re safe. Nothing can touch us here. Nothing can hurt us here. I have you. I have you.” Nothing matters more than her. Not his rage, not his vehement, consuming desire for revenge. Nothing matters more than her. His wife. His lovely one. He repeats the litany again and again and again until eventually her shuddered sobs subside, and she lifts her head to kiss him fiercely, her hands tangling in his hair, and she does not have to steal the breath from his lungs for he gives it to her willingly.

“I understand now,” he gasps between kisses, nudging her nose with his, growling fiercely into her mouth. “I understand what you mean, lovely one.”

“Truly?” She stills to look at him, and he reads in her sunset eyes reluctant, disbelieving hope. “Truly, Jaime?”

“Yes,” he responds. “Yes. And you have my word that I shall always fight for you, defend you, protect you.”

“Oh, my love, I have known that for a long time.” Her smile is shaky and watery, but it is a smile nonetheless.

“Don’t weep, lovely one,” he brushes the salt from her cheeks, “please do not weep, for I cannot bear the sight of your tears.”


“That is the greatest, most perfect compliment you could ever give me, sweet wife.” He ducks his head to nuzzle once more at her neck and the bright, alluring fall of her hair over her shoulders. He needs a moment to ground and settle himself, and she is his anchor. “You overwhelm me, lovely one.”

“And you think you do not do the same to me?” She grins brightly, and by the gods, how tempting he finds that laughing light in her eyes, like the sun dancing merrily and lightly over the water, the dance of a nymph or a fairy, some ethereal, magical creature. “A look, a touch, a word from across the room, the sound of your footsteps upon the stone… I want you always. I want you for always.”
“Is that not my line?” He retorts playfully, grinning.

“Can I not share it?” She asks, tracing his lips with her dainty fingertips, and he shivers.

“You can share anything you like,” he replies hoarsely. “Everything.”

“How lucky I am…” she swallows, tracing his features, and he sighs with the wonder of it, content to stay thus for as long as she desires, with the butterfly touch of her fingertips tender, admiring, loving upon the skin of his face. “If you are my reward for enduring all that I have endured, then I would walk through the Hells a thousand times and gladly, if I knew I had you at the end of it all.”

He toys with the wet, slippery strands of her hair that have so mesmerised him since their meeting upon Winterfell’s moor, stunned into silence by her words. Eventually, he swallows past the thick lump in his throat and speaks, forcing himself to lightness. “No,” he disagrees quietly, “it is you who are the most wondrous gift. You have given me everything, and more besides.”

“Flatterer,” she huffs, though without any heat.

“No,” he drawls, “truth, and nothing less.”

She laughs, and settles languidly against him, her back to his chest once more. He drifts a while, lulled and soothed by the hot water and the steam and her soft body cradled against his, and so he is startled when she speaks again. “When I was… when I dreamt, trapped inside my own mind, I…” he tightens his embrace, aching at the desolation in her voice. “I thought I… I thought - somehow I thought I already knew the full extent of my elders’ actions against me… foolish little naive girl that I am…” she chokes bitterly, and his heart seizes with trepidation. Not again. Not more. There cannot possibly be more that she has endured. Where does it end? When does it end? “I was made aware of the full extent of my misconception…”

“What do you mean?” He asks, afraid of her answer. Her whole body is rigid with anguish and despair and he folds her more tightly against him, even as she drags his left hand up her skin to rest lightly around her throat, and he can feel against his hand the rapid fluttering of her pulse, the working of the vocal chords in her throat as she begs him in a tearful voice to hold her and never let her go. “Never,” he promises, brushing her cheek with his, his voice low and fierce, gravelled with determination and ardent admiration. “You are mine,” he snarls. “Mine. Mine and only mine beyond the ending of the world. Mine to love, mine to protect and defend and cherish and be happy with. I will never abandon you. Never. And when this war is over I will take you to the beaches in the shadow of the Rock, warm with golden sand, secluded, where we can frolic like children in the surf and we can hunt for seashells. When this war is over we will ride back to Winterfell with our
child and I shall make love to you upon the furs in the light of your hearth, I shall bathe you in the hot springs and you will dance with our child and Lady and Fortune in your Godswood and we will live, happily, I promise you. I vow it to you.”

“I want that, “ she replies quietly, ardently, aching with longing. They both of them are aching with the wanting of the picture he has just described to her, their hearts bleeding for it. He does not know how else to reassure her except to give her this to hold to.

“I spoke to Robb,” she continues eventually, her voice hollow, scraped raw, clutching tightly to his right wrist wrapped around her middle. She is holding him so fiercely that it is as though she fears breaking apart if he is not there. *I am here, lovely one. You are mine, mine,* he tells her silently, nuzzling at her, and she makes herself even smaller in his arms in response. He can only curl his body protectively around her and listen.

“And he told me that he responded to my being forced to marry Tyrion by disowning me, that my mother agreed to it. He didn’t discuss trying to rescue me, or parleying, or anything - he did not even *try,*” she sobs. “I idolised him when we were children. He was my big brother, he could do no wrong, but when I needed him, when the only thing that kept me alive was the voice in my mind telling me I could not throw myself from the balconies of the Red Keep was that Robb would come, *Robb would come* and kill anyone and everyone who had hurt me, and the nightmare would all be over, when I needed him most he left me in my prison to die!” She cries, and he can only hold her more closely, kiss her neck, her shoulders as she shatters in his arms, and he weeps with her. Her misery - her *years* of misery make his blood run as cold as the glaciers of her realm.

“If it would not hurt you more I would raise them from their graves and run them through again, and again and again until they understood what they have done to you,” he growls, weeping and bleeding and aching and raging like a rabid animal for her. “I will defend you against everyone, no matter who they are, because I love you. I love you.”

“I asked him why he did it, I asked him why he left me to rot and die and he said such horrible, terrible things to me, Jaime, he said such horrible things - *Jaime - Jaime -*” she collapses, turning her face into his neck and screaming. He has never heard a more excruciating sound. The way she tries even now to muffle it in his skin, to swallow it back down where no-one will ever hear it, down to her stomach where it will tear her apart in silence, the way she clutches at him, trembling - it rips the entrails from him, and the pain of it stuns him, winds him, makes his vision blur to steam and shadow, makes his heart pound like a war drum in his ears. He can only try to calm and soothe her, caressing her skin again and again, kissing her anywhere he can reach, murmuring how much he loves her, how she is safe now, how Robb was wrong in his actions, again and again and again until her awful shaking stops.

“They were wrong, Sansa,” Jaime says firmly, tipping her chin up with his left hand. “They were wrong. Do you believe me?” She can only stare at him, eyes wide and wounded, so wounded. “Say
“They were wrong,” she whispers painfully. She closes her eyes, whimpering like an animal whose throat is being cut. “They were wrong.” She curls up in his arms, and the familiar way she tries to make herself as small as possible sends another lancing bolt of fury through him. Later, he will indulge himself, and let it form and unfurl in his belly and race through his veins and he will take great pleasure in hacking training dummies to pieces, a rain of straw falling upon him, but now, his attention is solely upon his lovely wife who is hurting, more deeply than he could ever have fathomed. In her soul and heart she is bleeding, and he wishes he could take it all upon himself, and let her be without a single dark shadow upon her, for she deserves always to be laughing in the sunlight.

“My father, too, then,” she continues hollowly.

“Your father?”

She spits out the words. “I was bait, in King’s Landing. My lord grandfather told me. I was a distraction for Cersei and Robert. My father never had any intention of letting my betrothal to Joffrey stand; it was merely a cover for his investigations. Of all the people - and there have been many - who have used me for my claim, I never imagined I would one day have to count my family amongst them, and I never imagined my father would be the first of them.” She laughs bitterly, brokenly, acidly. “Every single time, he chose Robert Baratheon’s peace of mind over me, and by the gods I am sick of being the scapegoat for Stark men.”


“I never imagined he would - but naive, silly fool that I still am - I - ” Sansa says, her voice thick with disgust and self-loathing.

“You are not silly, Sansa,” he rebuts hotly. “You are not. You are not silly, you are not a fool. He was your father, he was meant to protect you, and he did not. The blame for that is his, not yours.”

“I - Jaime - I - ” she shudders, incoherent with distress, and he -

“Lovely one,” he repeats, tightening his embrace, “I know it cannot erase the past, but believe this: you have been wronged, deeply and repeatedly, by those who were meant to protect you. You are
innocent of their mistakes. You are innocent, my gentle wife. You are innocent.

“It is over now,” Sansa replies, her voice taking on that flat, dead tone he hates so much because it never indicates anything good. “I have no loyalty left for them. They have bled it and beaten it from me, and why - why does it hurt so much? Jaime, why does it hurt so much?”

“Because you have loved them, because you mourn what once was, because they were meant to protect you and they failed,” Jaime replies quietly.

“I have no loyalty left for them,” she repeats, dazed. “I am made for sorrow, it seems.”

“You are not,” he disagrees vehemently. “You are not made for sorrow. You are made for the purest joy, and our peoples know it. Our peoples admire and love you for it. They look at you and see hope and faith for the future. And I - I look at you, my lady, and see nothing but the greatest, most perfect, most complete happiness, for that is what you give me, and nothing less than that. You are made for love and life and laughter, not sorrow. You have weathered more sorrow than you should ever have been made to endure, and still you love. Still you are kind. Still you concern yourself with life. You give me life, which is far more than I deserve, but you give it to me in your exquisite generosity nonetheless. You give life to all these dreary, barren, forgotten places, caverns that have forgotten the sounds of joy and peace and solace. You are the rarest and most precious and wonderful of creatures: the gleaming brilliance of all the gems of the earth could not compare to the radiance of your heart.”

“I will tell you now what you have told me more than once,” he continues soberly, after a pause to fill his lungs once more with air after such a passionate declaration, and that gets her attention, and she stills curiously, lifting her head to look at him. “You have no need to hide from me. Whatever wounds you carry, let me carry them for you. It would be my honour to do so. My strength is yours; I give it to you freely. I cannot bear your unhappiness.”

She inhales shakily, before a stubborn glint appears in her sunset eyes. “Then you must promise me the same, my love.”

He gathers her more closely to him, revelling in her silken skin against his, and something quiet and fundamental settles deep his soul. “You have my promise,” he murmurs solemnly, meaning every word down to his very bones, resting his cheek upon the crown of her head. It will take time, for both of them, he knows, but he also is convinced that if they try, they will eventually succeed. He refuses to believe otherwise. He must hope, for else what is the use?

She thanks him solemnly and they are both silent for a time. The more he thinks about it, the more
he - well, he has noticed since she first became his ally that she has never pitied him or been
disgusted in the slightest by him, unlike others, he knows she loves him, he feels safe with her. Her
admiration of him is something he finds entirely too overwhelming, but it feels like the sunlight
upon his face after his long captivity, something pure and good and wonderful. And so he gathers
up his courage, and begins to speak, slowly, haltingly, rolling the words around like water in his
mouth before opening his lips.

“We were captured… again,” he begins quietly, stoically, finding his story easier to tell without
looking at her, for the pain he knows he will see upon her beautiful face will eviscerate him, he
knows, “and I remember at the time laughing bleakly to myself because of course the gods would
grant me a sliver of freedom only to snatch it away again as soon as it pleased them. Though, of
course, it was not true freedom to begin with. Even released from my cage by Catelyn Stark I was
still manacled, and even after my hand was chopped off, I was tied to my saddle. I suppose I should
be flattered that I was considered so great a threat even without my paw. But it was… I was
completely at their mercy, first Brienne’s, then Vargo Hoat - the man who relieved me of my
sword hand - always tied up, even at the beginning of the escape, when I was nothing more than
skin and bones, when all the muscles of my body had melted away in my captivity… sometimes I
can still feel the cold of the iron around my wrists and ankles…” he shudders bodily, squeezing
shut against the tears he can feel pricking at the corners of his eyes. “I can see the sense in it, I
suppose… your mother was desperate. Had I not been shackled, I would have taken the first
opportunity to escape.”

“Of course you would have,” Sansa acknowledges blithely. “I would have done the same. I did do
the same, when I leapt from Winterfell’s ramparts. And that was not my first escape attempt.”

“But you did not kill anyone in your escape.”

“Only because Theon was faster than I,” Sansa admits, her voice blank and distant. “R- he - he had
a mistress as cruel as he. She attempted to stop my escape by threatening me with a longbow. I no
longer cared whether I lived or died, but if I could take her with me as the life bled from me, then it
would have comforted me, to know that there was one less evil person in the world. I was about to
launch myself at her and throw us both over the parapet… but Theon was faster. He came up
behind her and dashed her brains out. I know you understand, Jaime.”

“I do,” he replies thickly, feeling far, far too much. “I wish I did not, I wish you did not, I wish with
all my heart that you had been spared captivity and torture. It sounds horrible, does it not? But I am
comforted somehow, to know that I am not alone in my sentiments.” Those who have not been
imprisoned, abandoned, surrounded at every turn only by enemies, those who have not been struck
and spat upon and abused and hated, those who have not been made helpless by people who relish
their power over their captive - they cannot possibly comprehend this. Indeed, comprehend any of
it.
“I said much the same to your mother.”

“I - you - you’ve met my mother?” He sputters, his mind stilling with shock. His mother?

His wife turns to face him, an impish smile brightening her expression. “Have no fear, my love, she is very proud of you.”

“I - fuck. Sansa. Could we discuss that in more detail later? I - I fear I am not - I - ” he will lose his courage if this goes on too long, he knows that, and he wants, he needs Sansa to know about his hand. Perhaps selfishly, he craves her comfort and reassurance and love. Only in her arms does he find peace, does he find absolution. She is his last chance for honour, for love, for acceptance, for life and passion and everything.

“Of course, Sire,” she replies gently, and he almost moans with pleasure at the tenderness in her voice. “Of course.”

He lifts her hand to his lips. “Thank you, lovely one,” he says hoarsely.

“You must know - Jaime, you must know - the way you touch me,” she blushes fiercely, but holds his gaze. “I cannot imagine a more perfect touch. I love your hands. Both of them, the metal and the flesh.”

“I had noticed your fascination,” Jaime drawls, with an approximation of his habitual, languid tones, summoning somehow the strength to wink at her raffishly, and she laughs in response, ducking her head. “And I confess that it is a fascination I share… the way you tangle your fingers in my hair, the gentle, light tenderness of your touch… the way they look cradled in mine, small, dainty, infinitely precious… nimble when you play your harp…” he rambles, warming to his theme, lifting her hands to his lips, nibbling lightly upon her fingertips, smiling around the way they tremble in response, the way her sunset eyes widen and darken to a velvety midnight. “Precise, refined… whether you are embroidering a gown or sewing up a man’s leg… I could watch you for hours.” Indeed, he finds something mesmeric in her motions, in the elegant repetition of them. “Mine are the hands of a soldier, hands that wield destruction as a weapon,” he continues between kisses to her palms, to the insides of her wrists, “but yours, despite everything, remain hands from which beauty and love and life spring… what a rare, wondrous creature you are, lovely one!” He exclaims.

“Flatterer!” She laughs, shaking her head embarrassedly.

She kisses his cheek chastely, before stilling in his arms, and continuing more pensively. “There are no men like you, and it - when you touch me - that makes me feel safe. I could recognise your touch were I deaf and blind and dumb. The warmth of your left combined with winter’s bite in your golden hand. You touch me with respect. You make me feel human again, not a statue or a doll or a plaything or a scapegoat. You touch me and I am myself again, and it is the greatest gift you could ever give me.”

“I love you,” he chokes, moved beyond coherence. “I love, I love, love, love you,” he repeats, shuddering, and her wonderful hands come up to drift soothing caresses to his neck, his shoulders, and he buries his face in her neck. “I feel safe too, with you,” he mumbles into her ear. “Because you see all of me, and you love me anyway.”

She cups his cheek, lifting his head from her shoulder to reply to him. “There is no any way. I love you for you. Not despite, or any way. I love you for who you are, for all that you are. No-one is perfect, Jaime. Not you or I. But you, unlike every single other man, you try. You wake every morning with the intention of being a better man that day than you were the day before, and there is nothing I find more admirable.”

“You are the only - no-one else I let touch my hands, my wrists,” he blurts out suddenly, inelegantly, his tongue thick and unwieldy in his mouth. He is aware that his retelling is as about as ungainly as it could possibly be, a rambling recounting devoid of the slightest touch of elegance or finesse, one fragmented idea after another. “Only you. Because you are the only person I can trust not to abuse such a thing. More than my being locked in a cage for months where every lowly soldier could insult and spit and degrade me at their leisure, it was being restrained - being helpless, at the mercy of an enemy - I hated the most. And then during my escape, still, being treated with equal disdain, as a monster, as something devoid of any humanity whatsoever… I think I will forever remember the chafing of the irons upon my wrists and ankles, made worse by being able to feel the sunlight and rain upon my skin, being able to turn my head when it pleased me…”

“You could not move your head?” Sansa trembles with horror, her face pale.

He smiles sadly. “How else do you think I was chained to a post, if not by the neck as well as my hands, with my feet manacled as well, on the slim chance that I would somehow be able to break free without decapitating myself, I would still be unable to walk?”

A hoarse, wounded sound of distress tears itself from her chest, and she clutches at him, tightly, desperately, his heart sinking like a lodestone when he feels against his neck the hot salt of her tears. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”
“It was not your fault at all, my Sansa,” he says softly. “Did we not agree that we would not hold each other responsible for the various actions of our families against the other?” She nods, whimpering, weeping. “Well then,” he continues tenderly, rubbing her back, “this is no different.”

“My mother made you swear an oath,” she says eventually, tracing his right arm lightly.

“I would have agreed to anything in return for my freedom,” he admits frankly. Only to her can he confess such a thing, only ever to her, for she is the only one he trusts not to judge him, or worse, to judge him and find him wanting. It is one of his great fears; that he should disappoint her. Only her faith and unshakeable belief in him, in his ability, can pull him from that melancholy, morose state.

“Of course you would have,” his lovely wife replies immediately, sharply. “Of course you would have. I would have done the same.”

“You are too good to me,” he says heavily, bowing his head, feeling the old shame again, cutting like knives through his skin.

“Jaime,” she sighs mournfully, pressing herself more closely to him, “husband mine, that is in the past. We need no longer speak upon it.”

“I love you, lovely one,” he replies, revelling in her affection, stunned again by her capacity for generosity and forgiveness.

“And I know you well enough to know that you would have kept your oath to my mother regardless,” she continues, her fingers gentle and soothing upon his nape.
“How - how can you possibly know that?” He coughs, his jaw slackening in surprise.

She smirks. “Because I know my husband - he enjoys being unpredictable. It is part of his insufferable, ridiculous, arrogant charm,” she explains, the corner of her sweet mouth curling impishly. “My mother never seriously believed you would fulfil your oath, but she was desperate, and you knew this. And so… purely to spite her you resolved to carry out your oath to her.” Her expression turns prideful at knowing him so well. She is the only one who does, and he relishes it, as he would an extra fur laid heavily across his shoulders in the Northern cold. “It may have taken longer than she would have liked… but you have kept your oath to my mother. I have never felt so safe in my life. With you I am not only safe in body but in mind and soul and heart as well.”

He blinks in dumbfounded shock. “Sansa, you give me too much credit.”

“No, I do not,” she disagrees, shaking her head, before her expression turns pensive and melancholy, like shadows over the sun. “It was needlessly cruel, what was done to you then… and to give you the illusion of freedom - that was crueler than the cage itself could ever be, I know that.”

“Do you know the worst thing of it all?” He rasps, wrapping himself more closely around her, drawing strength from her presence, from her quiet fortitude. “I seized every opportunity I could to attempt an escape, no matter how harebrained, no matter how slim, and then, when I finally thought I was safe - we were captured by some sellswords in my father’s pay, that was when it happened. That was when they took my hand. As it turns out they were no longer in my father’s pay but Roose Bolton’s.” He clips his vowels, his voice strains with the remembered agony - the elation of being thought safe at last, with his father’s men, only for it to come crashing down with a flash of an arakh and a spiteful revelation.

“My love,” Sansa gasps mournfully. “My love, my love, oh, Jaime.”

He does not know who reaches for the other first, but all of a sudden her soft, sweet lips are pressed to his in a desperate kiss, and he growls into her mouth, needing her, needing her warmth, her love to chase away some of the darkest of his memories, until there is only her, her alluring taste, her scent, her skin, her. Solace, absolution, softness, tenderness and passion all at once.
Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? Likes? Dislikes? Predictions?

Coming up in the next chapters few chapters: Sansa continues recovering from the attempted assassination, visits are paid, some mournful, some angry, and more clues for you are laid!
SANSA STARK XVII

Chapter Summary

“Oh, my love,” Sansa weeps, “friendship is meant to make you happy.”

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome to this next instalment of TINTB!

Thank you as always for all your comments, encouragement and support, it means a great deal!

Thanks too to K and T for their help.

I hope you all enjoy this chapter, and I can't wait to see what you all think of it.

until next time xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART THIRTY THREE

SANSA STARK

She feels better for having bathed, for having washed the grime of the dark, three-day vigil from her skin, but realises with no little annoyance that the bandage around her head means she cannot wash her hair, and so she plaits it deftly and pins it in a coil at the back of her nape in one of the styles from her childhood. She dislikes the way it reminds her of King’s Landing, when it was the
fashion to have her hair elaborately scraped back from her head in complicated coils and twists. She
dresses in one of her simpler, more comfortable gowns, a cleanly cut white velvet damask, with
blue leaves embroidered around her neckline and the hems of her sleeves and skirts that soften the
austere style. The fabric is soft against her skin, and she startles at the proof that she is awake,
truly, properly awake and alive.

Her husband is determined, it seems, that her slippered feet should never touch the ground, and she
laughs, swooning and embarrassed, as he sweeps her into his arms, carrying her out from their
bedchamber, through the solar, and out into the courtyard where they will break their fast, and she
leans her cheek quietly against his shoulder, content and languid. His touch, his presence, his frame
wrapped around her in the bath make her feel safe, and those quiet moments with him, without the
clamour of the conclave and the siege, are what give her the strength to forge onwards day after
day. More than that, now, it seems to her that he is the only real thing around her. The warmth of
his skin, his heart beating steadily and powerfully in his chest, thundering against her palm, the
masculine scent of him, leather and sunlight and salt lingering upon her tongue, anchor her.

His care of her that morning, their shared frolic in the bath and the heated, sensual caresses that had
preceded it, his consideration of her, is something she revels in. It is more than enjoyment, more
than an affirmation of his respect of her, his care of her. She wants his care; it is a very
fundamental part of her, and somehow it is not selfish, not with him. Not when he relishes so
clearly being able to care for her. These gestures are the purest expression of his love for her, and
they are, along with his respect of her mind, occasions where she feels most cherished and at peace.
And similarly, the purity of his joy at her care of him, her devotion to him, never fails to astound
her. Knowing that she has pleased him is when she is at her happiest. That he does not find her
lacking or cold or aloof, but on the contrary that he revels in everything she gives him, everything
she offers, that settles her, that gives her courage and confidence, more than she has ever had
before in her life.

Their conversation in the bath had been difficult; excruciatingly painful for them both. She will
have nightmares, knowing Robb chained Jaime to a post in a cage by the neck, to say nothing of the
story of how he lost his hand. She knows only too well what it feels like to feel safe, only for that
conviction to be ripped from underneath her. She had thought, going to the Eyrie, to her aunt and
cousin, she might be safe, but that instead had been when the horrors had only begun anew. So for
Jaime to have felt safe at long last amongst men nominally in the pay of his father, and for them to
perpetrate such a cruel act upon him… she shivers.

She fears the muffled sound of her screaming into his neck will haunt her magnificent husband. It
will take time, too, she knows, for her to gain the confidence to ask him outright, to tell him, as he
has encouraged her to do, what she would have of him. She does not know if it will ever be
something she can do; she fears she will never be capable of it. But it reassures her that Jaime
understands this, and has only been encouraging and patient.

Nonetheless the bath has worked its restorative magic, at least in part, and she feels lighter,
somehow. The memories will fade in time, she knows, and there is comfort, too, in knowing now
that she knows all concerning her family’s betrayals and abandonment of her. It is the act of confession to Jaime, not merely the sharing of a burden, not merely the unveiling of a wound yet bleeding, that is both balm and hope. The water and steam have washed her of blood, and her husband’s love has restored her, as she knows her love has restored Jaime, at least in part. His horror and disgust at his arm had turned instead to disbelief when she had, instead of recoiling, touched the bumpy mass of scars. They draw strength and determination and courage from their bond; adversity only makes their affection and admiration grow, a plant whose great beauty is diametrically opposed to the lack in the soil in which its roots strengthen.

It is strange for her to find herself alive. She had thought she had inadvertently tarried too long in those shadowed lands upon those darkened, misty shores, looking into the past, falling through time and memory, and now, back in the real world, none of it feels real. Only Jaime feels real. Only her husband, but the rest of it… she half thinks the light dancing upon the walls, golden and airy, will shatter like shards of glass to pull her screaming into yet another painful reminiscence.

She blinks in confusion when she sees that instead of a table and chairs - their habitual arrangement for dining - there is instead a long daybed piled with more crimson cushions than she has ever seen in her life, and in front of it, a low table magnificently adorned with platters of food. The mere sight renders her dizzy, and she hides her face against her husband’s neck, the scent of his skin, sandalwood and sunlight and leather, soothing her, chasing away the fog.

“You have a wonderful voice, my beloved lord,” she says when once more silence falls, and she has the impression of waking from a dream; everything is a little hazy around the edges. She should not be surprised, really. His voice is so wonderful when he speaks, rich with warmth, languid with
amusement, earnest with affection, drawling and heated like dark honey, that she should have expected his singing voice to be similarly splendid.

“I have not sung in years; I am very much out of practice,” he demurs, his ears reddening endearingly at her praise.

“Why now?” She asks tenderly.

“Because I know how much you love music, and we are alone, and I wished to make you happy,” he responds earnestly, and she melts at the gaze he gives her. Her heart aches with love for him - this wonderful, wonderful man who is hers as she is his.

She lifts his left hand to her lips, her kisses chaste though lingering upon his fingertips, his knuckles, his palm, and she tastes the pounding of his pulse in the inner side of his wrist. “You always make me happy, Jaime, love and defender of my life.”

“Lovely one,” he sighs, overcome. “I always wish to make you happy. You and our unborn child, I always wish to make you both happy.”

“You do,” she assures him, smiling radiantly up at him as he drifts his left hand down her cheek, her neck, tracing wickedly her neckline, down to cup her breast, and then down, slowly, ever so slowly, to rest upon her belly where their baby grows. She marvels at his expression of devotion on his countenance; his whole being seems alight with it, and the depth of his sentiment is something that renders her lightheaded. Compulsively, she holds his hand there, breathing deeply, shakily, unable to break his gaze.

“I had thought,” she begins haltingly, in the manner of a confession, “before the parley, that in its aftermath we would return here and spend the afternoon together. Perhaps even talking of what we would name our child…” She trails off, the idea far too painful to revisit in detail at this moment. Perhaps when she has fully recovered from the ordeal of almost being assassinated by poisoned wine, she will be able to speak at length of what she wishes that afternoon could have been. But not yet.

His shoulders begin to shake, and he is similarly overcome. “Sansa,” he gasps. “Oh, my Sansa… I wished that too.”

“And then you declared a Blood Feud for me,” she finishes, dazed. Of all the events of the past
days this is the one she is most overwhelmed by. It is not merely a declaration of love, a defence of her as she would have wished her own family to defend her. It is not merely a declaration of war against the dragons, those fell beasts, those shadows that tumble through the grey, cloudy skies, against tyrants and tyranny for freedom. It consumes her, overwhelms her, even confuses and bewilders her. She trembles, feeling acutely the greatness of the compliment, the astounding depth of feeling behind his vow. This goes beyond their wedding vows, beyond whatever our endeavours, beyond mine, beyond lovely one. This is more than heart and body, this is lifeblood itself, a wine-dark crimson, this is his soul, bared proudly, defiantly, vengefully for all to see. It is more vulnerable than physical nakedness, or having weapons taken, or having a sword hand chopped off. It is more vulnerable than coming across a lover in flagrante. It is stardust in her palms, cradled daintily, carefully. What an honour it is, an honour unparalleled! She will strive every day to prove herself worthy of the devotion he shows her.

“And I would again,” he answers immediately, certainty and sincerity and pride writ across his whole being.

“And it… overwhelms me, beloved lord,” she stutters, blushing fiercely. “To say in return that I love you seems wholly inadequate, most wonderful and impossible of men. And yet you have robbed me entirely of any eloquence, and I can only repeat, again and again and again, that I love you, that I adore and admire you with everything I have, with everything that I am.”

He ducks his head, his handsome face flushing at her praise. “I meant it. I meant every single word, lovely one.”

“I know,” she replies softly. “I know.”

Their conversation is suddenly broken by the ferocious, angered growling of her husband’s stomach, the sound jarringly loud in the secluded, intimate quiet of this cocoon, his body and hers, eyes and hands mapping each other, reassuring themselves of the other’s presence and safety.

Sansa giggles at the sound, entreating him to eat, and he agrees amiably, but only if she does too.

“I fear I - ” she responds, looking at the food with apprehension. She knows she must eat and regain her strength, and the sooner the better, given the strain of the current circumstances, at the beginning of a siege. But the thought of food is one that she now nearly abhors.

Jaime reads this clearly in the sudden pallor of her face, and reassures her calmly. “Only eat what you can, darling.”
“Darling?” She stutters, twisting to look at him, shivering at the sudden curl of warmth pooling low in her belly. She might not be able to face the thought of food, but his voice brings to the forefront of her mind some particularly pleasurable memories of the two of them, and she relishes the distraction.

He cocks his head in question, arching a raftish eyebrow. “Not to your taste?”

“On the contrary,” she blushes, violently.

“You like it rather too much,” he surmises, grinning broadly, a boyish light in his green eyes, his voice rich with amusement. “I’ll only call you that in bed then, you have my word.”

“Jaime!” She exclaims, hiding her face against his leg, trying vainly to cool her heated cheeks against the cloth, the husky, heated sound of his laughter echoing in her ears. “Impossible, insufferable man!” When her cheeks are no longer flaming, she mumbles her explanation: “you called me your darling in the hot spring in Winterfell.”

“So I did,” he agrees, drawling, his voice deep and warm with affection and admiration, “and you are my darling.” She curls up more tightly against him to mask the way she trembles, shutting her eyes. She smiles faintly at the touch of his fingertip down her jaw. “Come,” he continues softly, “will you not eat?”

He has successfully distracted her before from her apprehension, but all of a sudden she remembers she has not eaten in days, and a wave of nausea buffets her, a sudden chill, her stomach seizes and twists, and she chokes on the pain. She is no stranger to starvation, of course; during her various imprisonments it had been a favourite tactic of her gaolers to keep her meek and pliable, a doll to bend to their whims, a toy to use as they saw fit. But she had not expected such a sensation here, now, where she is safe. Where she is loved and respected and happy as she had always dreamed of being.

“I - Jaime - ” she gasps brokenly, curling up more tightly, gritting her teeth against the pain. “I can’t eat, I can’t, I can’t, Jaime I can’t - hurts too much - Jaime - ” She has a sudden, vivid image in her mind of the bread with maggots she would be served in King’s Landing and she retches dryly.

In an instant she is cradled against him, and she whimpers pitifully, trembling, and he is the only thing holding her together, preventing her from shattering, his hand drifting over the coiled lengths of her hair at her nape, caressing her back, warm and comforting, his other arm wrapped tightly
about her waist. She wishes her hair was loose, that he might card his hand through the strands. And then his voice like honey in her ear, rich and decadent, repeating the litany again and again, patiently, his voice so full of ardent affection that she bursts into tears. Breathe, lovely one, breathe. Breathe. And again and again until the shock of memory and pain subsides and she can breathe once more, modulating her rhythm to his.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly. She feels silly and stupid.

“Never, Sansa,” her husband rejoins immediately, fiercely, certainly. He kisses her cheek, her neck, and she sighs brokenly, she melts. “Never be sorry for that. It is an entirely normal reaction. You do not think I was overwhelmed the first time I had a proper meal again after my captivity?” He takes her chin in a gentle grasp. “Look at me,” he entreats gently, and she does, trembling. His green eyes are blazing with emotion. Too much emotion, and she feels raw, about to break again, and he reads it upon her face, his brows drawing together in sympathy.

“I cannot eat, Jaime,” she repeats. “It is too much.” Overwhelming in quantity and colour and scent and variety. It is too much. “I am afraid.” She could not begin to choose. She cannot even look at the platters piled high with delicacies both savoury and sweet.

“Then do not think, lovely one,” he murmurs, nudging her nose, and the familiar gesture, the achingly light sweetness of it settles her, and she breathes less shakily than before. “Let me take care of you.”

“You are the best of men, Sire,” she replies, letting herself go entirely languid in his embrace, and it is a decadent sensation, something she only allows with him. Only with him, only ever with him. “The best of men, the best of husbands, and I love you, I adore you, defender of my life.”

“Close your eyes, lovely one,” he says, arranging her to his liking upon the pillows, upright enough that she can chew and swallow without difficulty, but still half laying down, and he lays himself at her side, so he has to lean over her to reach the table and the food upon it, his arm grazing her bodice and she shivers, shutting her eyes as he bids her. “Only taste.”

And thus he presses bite-sized pieces of toast smothered in sweet apricot preserve to her mouth, and because her husband is an impossible, insufferable man, he kisses and nibbles the sugary drops from her lips, making her giggle and laugh and smile, as was his aim, she knows, and her heart aches and bursts with love for him. She loves him like this, playful and tender. She loves him for his passion in all things, but mostly she loves him for the way he makes her laugh.

She manages five small bites of the toast before she turns her head into the cushion, nuzzling her
cheek into his shoulder, but he only laughs, that rich, wonderful, husky laugh that makes her melt, and says it means more for him, before sobering and telling her not to worry, that in about an hour or so he will coax her to eat a few more bites, and again and again until she is eating normally once more, however many days that will take, and she can only reply with a stuttered, aching declaration of love that somehow does not feel adequate to convey all that she feels, glowing in her breast. Her hands twist in the cushions. She can barely believe she is alive, not after walking those shadowed lands for three days. She does not want to be apart from her husband for a single instant.

A commotion at the doors of their apartments jolts her from her contemplation, and she groans wearily. She cannot, not now - she wants to curl up in her husband’s arms and not have to think. The noise makes her head hurt and she clings to the fabric of her husband’s shirt. He is vibrating with fury under her palms at the intrusion, and the sounds, loud, harsh, angry crashes, a snarl from one of the sigils, and above it a voice lances through the air, cutting through like a knife or a whip flaying flesh from skin: “Why have these not been signed off?”

Then footsteps, loud and brash upon the stone, getting closer, and the familiar voice again, though she cannot think enough to discern to whom it belongs, rages with righteous dismay, “You haven’t looked at these yet, why not? You should have looked at them by now!”

Jaime finds his voice at last, gathers Sansa to him, their legs tangling comfortably together and roars at the intruder. “Get out!”

Sansa feels something falling through the air next to her - a fan, she thinks at first, but no, lighter than that. Sheaves of parchment. Despatches. Paperwork. Again the voice, as nauseously loud as before, “It is my responsibility to tell you that you are neglecting your duties. These came to your desk yesterday morning, and you have not signed them. You should do so instead of all this ridiculous… lounging about.”

Sansa fights through the fog in her mind. She knows that voice. And Jaime is tense and - and - wrong, like this, and so as much as she would like to burrow her face into her husband’s chest and give in to the heavy, seductive lure of sleep, a respite from the headache pounding behind her eyes, she turns towards the voice, blinking open heavy eyelids.

It takes a moment for her to comprehend what she is seeing. “Brienne?” She murmurs, confused. But it is not Brienne as Sansa is used to seeing her. She has never seen her sworn shield’s face so mottled and blotched with red patches, never heard her voice so accusing and strident.

Sansa looks back at her husband. Apart from his leonine order to leave the two of them alone he has not said a word, and looking at him she understands why. The line of his shoulders is tense and unhappy and weighed down, his jaw is set in defensive defiance, and his eyes are wide with incomprehension and stunned disbelief at the interruption. He looks as though he has been slapped
Whilst the interruption is highly embarrassing and unwelcome, in Sansa’s opinion, what truly stuns her is Brienne’s manner of address. She has never heard such vehement disapproval and remonstration directed at her husband, much less from someone who purports to be a friend of her husband’s, and it strikes her suddenly that she has never seen the two of them speak to one another outside the setting of formal conclave. She knows they often spar together but she cannot imagine they spend much of that time conversing. The whole situation is one Sansa finds terribly confusing and *not right.*

Sansa frowns, piecing the words together in her mind, rolling the syllables around her mouth. “Brienne,” she begins evenly, “would you care to explain the meaning of this… outburst?”

Her Commander of her Wolfsguard answers Sansa in clipped, short sentences, chin jutting forwards, her whole posture belligerent. “These papers haven’t been signed off. They should have been.”

“Young man,” Sansa begins, voice calm, “I understand this may not be the best time, but your presence now is most unwelcome. I have been interrupted.”

“Let me see.” Sansa extends her hand for the parchments. She squints, gritting her teeth as the spikes in her temples intensify. She cannot make out the words, but she does notice that all the ink is black, not underlined here and there with red as is hers and Jaime’s habit for urgent tasks. Routine. Their breakfast has been interrupted about *routine* paperwork. “Brienne, this is all routine paperwork.” She tries hard not to snap at the Commander of her Wolfsguard, but visibly fails, because Brienne stiffens with affront. “Our normal timeframe for these papers is seven days, and never more than two weeks at the absolute latest.” Sansa explains, attempting a more even, impassive cadence, and places the sheaf of papers beside her; she cannot bear to look at the writing for one more single instant.

“Still,” Brienne persists. “They should have been signed by now.”

Sansa swallows her frustration, trying to keep her replies as short and as concise as possible. She finds the whole situation utterly ridiculous. The two of them should not have been interrupted, much less in such a manner, and certainly not for routine paperwork. She has no desire to dwell on this in the slightest, but she will defend her husband. She will always defend him. “Jaime and I have a system that is well honed. We both understand logistics, we have both been educated on the subject since we were children.”

“Just go, Brienne,” Jaime groans.

“Not until I have your word that you will not neglect your duties as King.”
Sansa’s jaw slackens in shock at the accusation. Nothing could be more untrue. When he has not been declaring a Blood Feud or teaching the Targaryens a much-needed lesson upon the battlefield, her husband has been holding vigil for her, whilst still listening to reports being made. He has proven himself these past days an exemplary King and husband, not that Sansa ever had anything less than the most complete faith in him on that score.

“I have not been neglecting them.” Jaime spits the words, his tones rising with hurt and affront.

“You have!” Brienne bursts out. “You have… laying at your wife’s side for three days, making a fool of yourself over her, shouting if for a single moment you were asked to take your eyes off her, and now I find you here feeding her by hand surrounded by this… ridiculousness. Pull yourself together. You are better than this… laziness. It seems returning to your ancestral home has made you return to your old ways.” Sansa feels her husband stiffen beside her, and she curls her hands into fists. What is between the two of them is pure and good, and Sansa does not either appreciate being spoken of as though she is not there.

“I love her,” Jaime growls, pushed beyond endurance, and Sansa reaches out to place her hand on his thigh in support. “I love my wife, and it is my honour to care for her.”

“It is your duty to make a legitimate heir,” Brienne replies, with the air of a septa correcting a wayward child, and Sansa abruptly feels ill to the bone. Is that truly how Brienne sees things? But then, Sansa thinks, Brienne did not have, as she and Jaime did as children, the example of parents who genuinely loved one another. Has Brienne encountered a love match before? Before Sansa and Jaime? “By your own account you have been successful. Now is the time to turn your attention back to your realm, so she can also rule her own lands, instead of spending all your time fawning over each other. It is unseemly and wanton, the way both of you are behaving.”

Sansa cannot take another instant. “Brienne, either get out or hand me an empty bowl, or I’m going to vomit all over your boots.”

“I - you - what - ”

Too late, Sansa thinks vaguely, her stomach twisting painfully, and she retches up the remnants of the toast onto the other woman’s boots. Brienne’s yelp of surprised disgust threatens to pierce her eardrums but then Jaime is there, his left hand upon her forehead, his right arm wrapped comfortably around her waist, and his voice, rich and warm and reassuring as she sputters and coughs. She groans, slumping back into her husband’s embrace. She wants another bath, to clean the grime of Brienne’s words from her skin and her heart. How could she? Sansa doesn’t understand.
Jaime lets go of her forehead to reach for a napkin, and she takes it shakily from him and wipes her mouth and then burrows into her husband’s embrace, hiding her face, wishing her hair were down so she could duck her head and hide behind the fall of it. She is humiliated and embarrassed and feels raw and vulnerable and more than that, she is concerned about her husband. He is holding her possessively, as though he fears Brienne might rip her from him, and it shatters something tender and quiet in her heart that he is so afraid of someone sworn to her, someone whom he considers a friend.

“Get out, Brienne,” Jaime snarls. She does not move, remaining as a statue, cold-eyed, the features of her face haughty and stern.

Sansa’s patience has frayed entirely. “Never go looking through the King of the West’s and my desks again, Brienne, or there will be consequences,” Sansa warns coldly. “Now leave us,” she continues, eyes flashing, and this time Brienne hurriedly obeys, bowing stiffly.

Then, tightening his grip on her, her husband stands and carries her swiftly back to their bedroom. He lays her with his habitual care upon their bed, then stalks like his sigil Fortune to bolt the doors so they won’t be disturbed. His silence is an indication of his anger and hurt, she knows, and she can only watch him storm about the room, her heart heavy.

“You haven’t eaten, my liege,” she murmurs, sighing morosely when he shakes his head sharply in reply that he isn’t hungry, instead pouring her a thimbleful of *shadewine* over a few sprigs of mint and bright slivers of lemon, from the blown glass carafe on the table so she can rinse her mouth properly with it, ridding herself of the acid taste upon her tongue. She revels in his care and consideration of her, smiling gently at him in gratitude.

Feverishly, methodically, he all but rips his doublet and shirt off, indifferently kicking off his boots before joining her in their bed, still trembling with volatile fury. His eyes are sharp with rage and confusion and hurt, a wounded lion, utterly bewildered, and she cannot - she cannot -

She moves before she is aware of having done so, and she ends up draped over him in the manner they both enjoy after he has made love to her, fiercely, ardently, tenderly. She presses herself to him, relishing the way she feels the warmth of his skin even through the cloth of her gown, her legs either side of his, their torsos pressed flush together, her elbows resting upon the pillow beside his ears. He sighs, gutturally, as though being drained of lifeblood, the sound horrible enough to chill her heart, and she melts against him, rubbing her nose against his, kissing his forehead, his cheeks, his chin, his neck, anything and everything she can think of to make him come back to her, to comfort him. Only when she slides her fingers into his hair do his arms suddenly come around her, his left hand sliding down her spine heatedly to rest on her bottom. Only now does the vague light in his green eyes fade, and she sees the moment he is fully with her, because his expression
drifts to her mouth. His countenance twists with emotion, and he reaches for her and she reciprocates passionately, pouring all of her admiration and love for him into the kiss.

When he breaks the kiss, gasping, the green of his eyes deepening and darkening, she sees clearly that he is reeling, struggling to grasp what has happened, and so she gazes tenderly at him, pressing chaste, lingering kisses to his jaw, his neck, until she feels the tension at last leave his powerful body.

“Is it always so… combative, with her?” Sansa asks eventually. She does not know how else to ask, where else to begin.

“Yes,” her husband replies hoarsely, something like shards of glass glimmering in his eyes, and something cold and dreadful settles over her like a cold, unforgiving night at the resignation she hears in his voice. She trembles. This is not his natural state, she knows that. He is built for ardent lovemaking and insufferable, impossible, witty teasing and glorious movement, whether upon a destrier, with a blade in his hand, or leading her across the dance floor in full view of their conclave at a feast, not this shamed uncertainty which he now exhibits, and it eviscerates her to see him reduced to this, *at the hand of a friend*, no less. “Almost always. I cannot recall a single conversation where we have not argued.”

“But… you are friends, are you not?” Sansa frowns, confused. *She* would never dream of speaking to her friends, or indeed anyone, in such a manner, and she cannot imagine her friends ever treating her thus, for then they are not her friends. She cannot imagine arguing so constantly, ceaselessly with her friends. It sounds exhausting, and, if she is frank, it does not sound worth the effort.

“I - yes.”

“Then why does she speak to you like that?” She is determined to get to the bottom of this, and she ruthlessly pushes away the pain thundering in her head. “You have done nothing to deserve it,” she continues more gently, and swallows suddenly, painfully, at the way his eyes all at once shine with tears.

“You truly believe that,” he murmurs, amazed, incredulous.

“Of course,” she replies instantly. “Of course I do.”

He looks away, overcome, and her heart shatters. “It seems nothing I ever do is good enough for
her,” he admits quietly, unable to meet her gaze, his cadence thick with humiliation. It rips something from him to say it, rips something fundamental, something in his soul, she can see that clearly and she grits her teeth. “And it seems that all we ever do is argue about my failings.”

“That is ridiculous!” Sansa exclaims. “Jaime - you are - you are the best of men, the best of husbands. I could not ask for a better ally, a better friend, a better lover, a better husband. I could not ask for a better man at my side. She is being deeply unfair to you.” What has Brienne been saying to him that he is in this state? Surely not anything along the lines of what she heard when the sworn shield interrupted their breakfast? Surely Brienne does not make a habit of berating him thus? If Brienne has been saying such things, or worse, even, Sansa does not care that the other woman is her sworn shield and commander of the Wolfsguard, she will be made to understand that such conduct is utterly, wholly unacceptable and Sansa will not tolerate any of it, at all. Once is too much. And to do it in front of Sansa, no less… had Brienne thought Sansa would tolerate it? Condone it? And what does it say about Sansa herself, that Brienne could think such a thing of Sansa? She fights down another bitter, acrid, stinging wave of nausea.

“You don’t know what we talk about - have talked about,” he sputters, ashamed, shaking his head.

“Then what do you talk about?” She prompts gently, carding her fingers through his hair, patiently, the sudden swell of fury roiling in her chest tempering itself to a chilling, creeping, deceptively dangerous winter storm.

“How I am not doing enough to uphold my vows… Cersei… you,” he mumbles, still unable to look at her.

“Nothing else?” Sansa frowns, seeking to make absolutely certain.

He shakes his head again. “No.”

“Outside of conclave or sparring, do you spend time with her?”

Again, the same, quiet, frightened answer. His voice makes her shiver with despair. “No.”

“Do you… drink wine with her, put your feet up, tell a joke?” She tries to think of things she knows Jaime enjoys doing with his men, with Addam and Bronn and the lords of the conclave. Jaime dearly loves to laugh; though he has not been given much cause, necessarily, throughout his life. He is never more glorious - and she finds him glorious in most things - than when he is at
ease, roaring with laughter, grinning broadly, his green eyes twinkling in the candlelight. Surely, Sansa thinks, if Brienne is Jaime’s friend, the two of them would engage themselves thus? Laughing and japing together, enjoying each other’s company?

“If I dared...” he scoffs bitterly, “she would scold me for my laziness.” Is that what friendship means to Brienne, Sansa wonders: a man deeply afraid of the wounds she can inflict upon his soul? Does Brienne realise what she is doing to Jaime? Does she understand? Does she care? Sansa is beginning to fear that Brienne might consider it the right thing to do, all in the name of turning Jaime to the right path, and the notion terrifies her. To seek to control another person in that way, whether selfishly, or for a notion of the greater good, or because you believe you know what is best for another person - Sansa will never understand it. What makes Brienne think Jaime can be controlled? What makes Brienne think attempting to control him is the right thing to do?

Jaime has a heart and a mind and a conscience of his own. He can and has taken responsibility for his own actions, he does not need to be told to do so by another. Does Brienne not understand how demeaning it is, the way she treats him? Brienne might genuinely believe it to be the best course of action for Jaime, or for some nebulous notion of the greater good, whatever that might be, but that does not negate the consequences. Can Brienne not see that she is wearing him down? That the pressure and admonishments are the equivalent of holding his head underwater in the Blackwater on fire as he drowns? Sansa sees clearly in the rigid, hunched curled frame of her husband that Brienne is breaking him in the guise of doing right. And, Sansa thinks grimly, why does Brienne get to decide what is right? Tarth is part of the Stormlands, and its liege lord whilst he lived was Stannis Baratheon, not the younger brother, Renly. By swearing herself to him, Brienne not only condoned but also actively participated in a rebellion. Sansa certainly has not addressed the topic with Brienne before, too grateful for the Maid of Tarth’s presence and sword in her defence, but now Sansa thinks she should have done. She should have challenged Brienne on the subject. She should have asked how the current Commander of the Wolfsguard came in the first place to swear herself to Catelyn Stark.

Sansa strokes his cheekbone, the line of his nose, seeking to lighten the conversation, tries to think of one of the first things she learnt about Jaime. She wants to know if she is reading too much into the situation, though she does strongly doubt it. “Do you know her favourite colour? Does she know yours?”

“You cannot think she has any interest in such trivial, frivolous things.” His cadences turn darker, glacial with spite. “She reminds me of Ser Barristan in that, and that was not a compliment, believe me.”

Sansa winces, and she is afraid to know how deep the damage goes, but she knows she must learn the full extent of this. It is the only way she can properly defend and help her husband. “What’s Addam’s favourite colour?” She continues gently, tenderly.
“The pink of the coral you find in the reefs in the coves of the Sunset Sea,” Jaime replies automatically, a brief smile flitting across his face at the thought. “It’s a running joke that every year I send him something of that colour - a trinket, a belt, a saddle cloth - for his name-day.” They share a quick chuckle at that, the visual image in Sansa’s head quite something. And this is how Jaime should be when reminiscing upon things he does with his friends, Sansa thinks: laughing fondly at a memory, however sentimental or ridiculous it might seem to an outsider. Friends should be proud of one another, Sansa knows.

“When is Brienne’s name-day?”

He sighs deeply, sounding more despondent with every reply he makes, and Sansa’s heart sinks. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want to know?” She asks, infinitely gently. He does not respond immediately, and lets the question hang heavily in the air between them.

“She is my friend,” he murmurs eventually, the tears thickening his voice. From spite and melancholy he now turns to defeat with which to lace his words like poison. “And I do not believe there should be rules that limit how friends speak to one another, for then it is not a friendship, really.”

“Would you let Addam berate you thus? Bronn?”

“Neither of them ever would!” Jaime exclaims in horror. “Never… there are some lines you do not cross.”

Sansa doesn’t understand. “Then why is it different with Brienne?”

“I do not know,” her husband replies quietly, before frowning, considering her question properly. “I was her prisoner, at first. Perhaps, even now… the remnants of those chains haunt my mind, and it makes us both more antagonistic. I hated her, resented her, wanted nothing more than to escape her, perhaps even steal her sword for good measure because I was not about to let myself be weaponless ever again. I had to bide my time. I wasn’t a model prisoner, not like you, lovely one.”

“You were a prisoner, Jaime, you were her prisoner, you owed Brienne nothing,” Sansa answers fiercely, kissing him. He responds immediately, growling desperately into her mouth. A prisoner owes the gaoler nothing, not ever, no matter the circumstance, Sansa knows that, and she re-states
her point against his lips. “Not silence, not respect, not compliance, nothing. You were her prisoner,” she says again.

He shivers, with memory, with confusion, with a dull, aching kind of agony, and she can only wrap herself more closely around him and hold him in an attempt to comfort him, nuzzling her cheek into his neck, chastely kissing his skin. “The Kingsguard…” he begins acidly, with all the bitterness of disillusion, “they try and make you an automaton, to cut out your heart with a rusty spoon and then pickle it, calcify it, freeze it until you have no more use for it. Ser Barristan wished me to be an unfeeling statue, my only thought the King is right, the King can do as he wishes, defend the King. It was not a case of the Kingsguard having any means of protecting the Targaryens against themselves.” He pauses, scoffing.

“Arthur tried it and look what that got him! Death in service to a family of crazed monsters, and he was more praised for his service than for his integrity, which despite all attempts by the more senior Kingsguard he never lost. And Brienne has a similar opinion of rulers, it would seem… a monarch is a statue,” he mocks acridly, putting on a haughty expression, “an automaton, unfeeling, without humanity, nothing more than an empty shell, a husk into which the people pour their hopes and dreams. I was a boy, and a Kingsguard, and now I am a man, and husband, and a King. If Aerys and Barristan and all the rest… if they could not take from me my conviction - ”

“Then Brienne will not succeed in that,” Sansa tries to reassure him.

Jaime laughs, a sound nothing more than an expression of the most acute despair, and she shivers to hear it, the sound like the cruelest of northern blizzards, merciless, ruthless with great, icy gusts of wind rattling the shutters. “On the contrary,” he says, “she is the only person who might be able to succeed where Aerys himself failed in the task of breaking me from boy to man without hope or desire or feeling, to remould Tywin Lannister’s heir as he saw fit.”

“Why?” Sansa frowns. She knows his resilience, but she also knows his tender heart, and she sees how deeply it bleeds.

He shakes his head, grasping for words, his explanation blooded like a dead animal with helplessness. “She has a talent for making me feel inadequate. And if I berate her as she berates me then I am only confirming every single horrible thing that has ever been said about me.” He looks at Sansa helplessly, and her blood crackles like ice in her veins. “Do you see, lovely one? I cannot win. If I say nothing, I have to listen to her list all the ways I am failing at being an honourable and good man, all the ways I am failing to be a just king. If I argue back, I am the monstrous Kingslayer, the Lannister who deserves to burn in the Seven Hells. I can’t win,” he repeats hollowly. “I can’t win.” Then, more quietly still: “she brings out the worst in me, I think. Cersei brought out my selfishness, my recklessness, but Brienne… I don’t much like the way she makes me feel, the person I am around her. Angry, bitter, defeated. Most of all Brienne makes me feel defeated, and I hate it.”
He swallows harshly, and cups her cheek with the gentlest, tenderest touch, and she leans wholeheartedly into his palm, holding his fingers to her skin, aching as she beholds the anguish in his green eyes, a forest set alight and burning. “But you, lovely one… more than anyone else you make me feel capable and whole again. With you I am a man. With you I am human. You don’t see the monster or the tool, or the stupid weapon without a conscience or thought of his own in his head.”

“Oh, my love,” Sansa weeps, “friendship is meant to make you happy.”

“If she thinks so lowly of me, why does she want my friendship? I don’t understand?” He is boyish in his earnest confusion, in his befuddlement, and his voice trails off with the throbbing ache of pain. “Addam and Bronn seem to think I have a few redeeming qualities, at least.”

She cannot stand to hear him so mournful, so insulting towards himself. The uncertainty in his voice, the hurt, the bewilderment… it sickens her. She wipes her eyes determinedly, and sits up so she is straddling him, ignoring the sudden spike of dizziness this causes her. He does not take his eyes from her, following attentively her every movement and gesture, his hands coming to rest on her thighs. She tangles his fingers firmly with hers, cupping his golden hand, and holds both in place. His nostrils flare as he inhales sharply, his eyes darken. Good, she thinks, he is with me.

She is meant to be on bedrest, and she does not think fully making love to him would be the cleverest idea she’s ever had, as much as she might ache for it, considering that she has been explicitly forbidden from such by the maesters until they are satisfied that her head wound is fully healed, but she can do this. “Jaime,” she begins vehemently, fiercely, ardently, “I trust you. I respect you. I admire you. I love you. You are impossible and insufferable and I love you for it. You make me laugh. There is no despite anything. I love you, all of you. You are proud, even arrogant, and I love you for it. You should be proud. You have survived things again and again that… anyone else would have crumbled to rubble beneath the weight of those events, long, long ago. I admire you so much, you magnificent, wonderful man,” she trembles with the violence of her emotion, with the way he is looking at her, with such wild, desperate hope. It is almost unbearable. Her small, mortal body is far too fragile and ephemeral to contain what she feels for him, far too mundane to hold her love, as ardent and consuming and great and overwhelming and sacred as it is to her. “You are gentle and kind and the way you love - I am so lucky to be loved by you, so, so lucky. There will never be another who loves as wonderfully as you do, Jaime Lannister.”

She lowers her palms to his stomach, a grin flickering briefly on her face as he shivers at her touch, and as she slides her hands aching slowly up his body, following her touch with her lips, reverently, tracing his muscles. Ever thine, she murmurs into his skin, dizzy now with the taste of him rather than her headache, and how much more pleasurable that is, ever thine, ever thine, ever thine, thine, thine, thine and then he is kissing her again, consumingly, ardently, as she drapes herself over him protectively. She will protect him, she promises herself that. She will. And then all
coherence flees her mind as she loses herself in the feel of his lips on hers, the way he growls and sighs into her mouth, devouring her, holding her, rolling them carefully so she is beneath him and she enjoys this because her head sinks into the pillow and she can map the muscles of his back with her palms and wrap her legs around his waist and hold him to her as he kisses her and kisses her and kisses her.

When at last they break apart, she makes a noise of protest in the back of her throat when he goes to disentangle himself from her. “Stay,” she mumbles into his ear, smiling when she hears his weary laugh in response. “I like you like this.” His weight on her, anchoring her to life. She never feels so safe as when they are like this.

“I know,” he drawls, and her heart soars to hear the return of such rich, wonderful, happy tones to his voice. It is still surreal to her, to think that she makes him happy. He lowers his voice to something deliciously gravelled. “And I like it too.”

She laughs and kisses him again, her fingertips playing idly with his ruffled hair. “What do you want to do about Brienne?” She asks tentatively, after a time enjoying the peace lying thus with him gives her.

He sighs roughly, his voice ragged. “I do not know. I never thought she would use what I feel for you which is good and true and the best thing I have ever felt or done in my life, against me in such a way as she has now done.”

“I know.” She kisses his ear, drifting soothing caresses down his neck, his shoulders, his back. “I would defend you. I will defend you. But I would do it in the manner you wish of me. The way she spoke to you this morning was unacceptable and I will not have it.”

“But she is your sworn shield,” he protests, brows wrinkling with confusion.

“All the more reason for me to speak to her, if you want me to. I want to defend you, Jaime, as you fight for me, love and defender of my life. But I will defer to your wishes on the matter, my love, my King.”

“I trust you, lovely one, in everything,” he replies ardently, solemnly, so much emotion in the way he beholds her that she wonders that she has not entirely melted yet.

“Then I will speak to her, my lord,” Sansa says, smoothing his hair back from his forehead. “And
know this, Jaime, I know, I know it hurts.” She smoothes her palms across his back, his shoulders, again and again, as he shakes, attempting to hold back tears, and her heart breaks and she swallows down another wave of rage. Her rage can wait; her husband is far more important. “But I also know this,” she continues soothingly, “because I know the man you are and I love you, my magnificent husband. When you are ready, you will get back up again. It may feel impossible now, but you will get there, at your own pace, I know it. And I am here, my love, my lord husband, my King. I am here, I am ever thine.”

And he slumps and sobs into her neck, finally giving himself permission to feel, fully, this hurt, this realisation that one of his friends is destroying him. She holds him, humming songs one after the other without particularly paying attention to the individual tune, only seeking to soothe and comfort him. “You are Man and King all at once,” she says into his ear, “and I know, I know for a fact that no-one else could meet such a challenge everyday with such energy and dedication and conviction and determination as you,” she continues, stroking his back, feeling him settle as he listens to her. She tries unsuccessfully to stop her voice from shaking. “You inspire me, my love, how you inspire me. You are the best and worthiest thing in my life. You are Jaime Lannister, man, husband, King, and in less than a year, father to our child. You are my husband, my friend, my ally, my love, my lover, you are Man and King, and how wonderfully glorious and magnificent you are!” How does she convey just how proud of him she is? How proud she is to be his wife and ally, to be his equal? “Your men and mine, our conclave,” she tries, “they all follow you because of precisely that reason. They have had their fill of demons and dragons, of gods and enchantresses, of statues. They follow you because you are human. Not in spite of that. Believe it.”

“Lovely one, you are the kindest, most wondrous creation,” he murmurs in reply, and she blushes, fiercely, at the awe in the rich timbre of his voice.

“I am not always kind,” Sansa demurs, and then she giggles and arches into him as he indulges his fascination with her bodice, placing heated, lingering kisses to her skin.

“Oh, but you are,” he drawls, disagreeing lightly. He kisses her skin above her heart. “And here is my proof, my incontrovertible proof: your heart is the tenderest and most generous of hearts.”

“Flatterer,” she sighs, smiling.

“Truth,” he replies solemnly, nuzzling at her breasts, and at last he is settled against her, the motif of those words repeated, righting something fundamental within them both, and Sansa can breathe again. He would not reply to her thus if he were still wracked with anguish, to a degree that is insupportable. He is still angry, truly, truly, furious, she knows, and hurt, more hurt than he ever thought he again would be - Sansa knows that, but nonetheless he is calmer, soothed by her presence and her words and gestures, and that is heartening.
“I love you,” she repeats, not just because she believes he needs to hear the words once more, but because she can say the words aloud, and the joy those three simple words bring her, the way they taste as euphoria on her tongue, will ever be undiminished. “I love you, Sire, and I am ever thine, whatever our endeavours.”

“My, my lovely one, my Sansa,” Jaime agrees with a growl and a kiss to her clavicle. “Mine,” he says again, fiercely enough to steal the breath from her. She will never understand what she has done to deserve such incredible devotion. “I love you, I adore you, I want you beyond the ending of the world.” His eyes are bright, ardent, his whole frame trembling with the force of his restraint, and she laughs gaily as he kisses her again.

“What do you wish to do today?” She asks quietly, when he is settled beside her, and she turns her head to look at him, to cup his jaw in her hand so he is not bereft of her touch.

“You are the first in a very, very long time to ask me that,” he sighs, leaning into her hand, kissing her palm, before bringing her hand back to his cheek, his gaze brightening as she drifts her thumb across his cheekbone.

“Nevertheless,” she says quietly, her heart breaking at his confession, “my question stands. What do you wish to do today?”

“I would…” he swallows, trailing off, and she strokes his cheekbone again with her thumb, seeking to reassure him and encourage him. “You may find this silly,” he continues eventually, “but I should like to introduce you to my old pony, Red.”

“That is not silly at all,” she replies tenderly. “On the contrary, I find it rather endearing. So, it is quite decided,” she grins impishly, “I shall accompany you to the stables to visit with your pony.”

“You are on bedrest,” he reminds her reluctantly.

She raises an eyebrow, half daring, half self-deprecating. “I think you’ll find one of my faults is my inability to be a good patient.”

He grins broadly at that. “I don’t believe you, lovely one.”

“Shall we find out?” She rebuts lightly, mischievously, and all of a sudden they are both laughing
hysterically, giggling like young children, playfully, and her heart soars to hear the sound of his laughter. “Alternatively,” she smirks, smiling radiantly, “you could find out if your castle’s coffers stretch to buying a palanquin.”

“A palanquin?” He smirks raffishly. “I am insulted, lovely one. I am a Lannister, born to a noble and ancient house known for decadence, and you think we only have one palanquin?”

“Ridiculous, insufferable, impossible man!”

“Now that I think of it,” he continues, drawling in those languid, heated tones she adores, a wicked, laughing glint in his green eyes, “I’m fairly sure we have an entire storage chamber full of palanquins, somewhere in the bowels of the castle. Didn’t you know, sweet wife, how it used to be the style, in the time of the Old Kings, for the members of my house, my fat old ancestors, to be carried about through the Rock and Lannisport on those things?”

She hums at that, and then she says, blandly, as though discussing the driest of memorandums, “So they didn’t have an arse like yours, then?”

“Sansa Stark!” He exclaims, pretending to be scandalised. He rakes her with his gaze from head to toe in a leisurely manner, and she flushes at the heat she can see in his eyes. His tongue darts out to wet his lips, and when he speaks again his voice is dark velvet, alluring enough to make her swoon. “Are you saying you like my arse?”

It takes all of her mental faculties to reply archly, “Do you want me not to like your arse, Sire?”

He blinks, utterly dumbfounded, the tips of his ears reddening in a manner she finds most endearing. “No - I - ”

She laughs, stroking his cheek when he looks put out. “I so rarely out-tease you that I would ask to be allowed to savour my victory, my love.”

He chuckles hoarsely, nudging her nose with his. “Of course, my lovely one.”

“So, visit your pony and put me on a palanquin,” she summarises, smiling. “Anything else you would like to do today?”
The shadows lengthen and deepen in his eyes, like the waning of the day. “It is not something I want particularly to do… but I know that I must.” He exhales, before elaborating, proud defiance written all over his countenance. “I have to speak to Tyrion. I do not trust him, not at all… but I know how best to provoke him.”

“You hope he might let something… slip,” she concludes, nodding slowly. She agrees with the principle of the idea, but she - “I do not want him to hurt you any more than he already has.” He is right that of all people, he will know best how precisely to provoke Tyrion into saying more than he ever intends, but she worries that it might hurt him, as his provocation of Jorah Mormont hurt Jaime, in the end. Indeed, she fears provoking Tyrion will hurt Jaime far more than goading the northern slaver ever could.

“Oh, lovely one…” he replies mournfully, a rueful smile upon his face, “what is a little provocation and hurt in the face of something that might, if we are lucky, help us fight a war against a tyrant?”

“I know, Sire,” she says heavily. She does not like it. Neither of them do. Dread hangs over him like a hangman’s cloak, thick and black and oppressive. She smooths his ruffled hair, caresses his cheek, and gathers her courage. “If you do this, there is something you should know.” She does not want to say this, but she knows she must. She cannot let Jaime walk into that cell when he is not in full possession of the facts.

His gaze snaps to hers, green eyes emerald-sharp as blades, and waits for her to elaborate, something of careful apprehension in his gaze, attuned as he is to her intonations. He has heard her reluctance, he can see it written all over the tense lines of her face, and correctly deduced that he is not going to like what he is about to hear.

“Tyrion,” she says. “It’s about Tyrion’s parentage.”
Thoughts? Predictions?

Next time: Jaime confronts Tyrion.

End Notes

Thoughts? Comments?

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