Aithed
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Summary

AU, Jonsa, Dicksa, Jaimsa. Forced marriage, heavily Outlander-inspired. ["I thought you vowed to never marry," Davos reminded him cautiously, conscious of how his temper had raged earlier. Jon faced the fire, avoiding the older man's eyes. "She needs me," he finally said.] They had stolen Sansa Stark for the ransom they could get for her, but when Dickon wants her back, Jon finds he can't quite let her go.

Notes

This takes place in Westeros, but is heavily influenced by the politics surrounding the Outlander series, and by much of the Outlander storyline (though without time travel). I was really inspired by the Outlander Jonsa vid (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7TMRSbZif0). Apologies if anyone else has already done this!
Chapter One

"She's the key to the north," Dany had told the men earlier that evening, as they had prepared to set out on their mission. "The Tarlys will pay any price to get her back, Varys told us that. It's the only way we'll get the gold that we need."

Dany wasn't wrong, according to Tyrion. Daario and Jorah were becoming too notorious among the clans; their faces were too known now and there were prices on their heads. They couldn't just keep stealing from the great houses forever. Their luck would run out soon; moreover, as Tyrion had pointed out, the great houses' coffers would run out, soon, too.

Some of the great houses supported their cause, but in turbulent times like these, there was little gold to spare. Wars demanded money that most of the North simply did not have. Now Jon found himself riding by moonlight across the moors to Winterfell, with Jorah and Davos on either side of him. Their horses were swift, and they did not make conversation.

For this, Jon was glad. They had spent nearly a fortnight in their latest holdfast, listening to Tyrion drink and start petty arguments between Daario and Jorah for his own amusement, with Dany stepping in only occasionally. Having the two men pitted against each other was strategically beneficial to a certain point, but not if they actually killed each other.

Jon had been glad for the chance to be in the open air, doing something of value to their cause. He'd spent most of his life out of doors, and being inside for so long felt unnatural to him. He knew Davos was the same.

It felt good to be doing something, though the honor of it was in question. Dany, sensing Jon and Davos' misgivings, had been quick to point out what Varys had told them: the Stark girl was technically a prisoner in her own home, having been sold like a broodmare to the Tarlys. She would merely be trading one prison for another. No harm would come to her, Dany had reasoned, and she had reminded them all that she too had once been forced into a marriage. Any respite from her captors would be welcome. They'd take the girl, scare the Tarlys into giving them the funds they so sorely needed, and then promptly return the girl unharmed.

If this truly would be a respite from captivity, then in a way, it seemed even crueler to Jon. The Stark girl would have a taste of freedom, only to have it snatched away. Then again, he doubted she would see the abduction as freedom. Dany seemed to think she'd welcome kidnapping with open arms—Jon was not so sure. After all, he knew what it was to be taken, even from a home to which you did not truly belong.

All in all, he'd be glad when this business was done and they had their gold and could continue on their path to putting Dany on the throne as the rightful heir. Once they had the gold, they wouldn't need to hide out in holdfasts, trapped amongst each other, whiling away the hours with wine and empty strategizing.

"Not far now," Davos said, his voice nearly lost on the wind. "Look at the frost."

They were well north now. The moors were frosty and the wind was howling louder.

Up ahead, the dark silhouette of Winterfell loomed. A chill ran down Jon's spine. He was the blood of Winterfell, and that was half of why Dany had sent him. He'd been fostered there when it had
belonged to Lord Eddard Stark; his mother, Lyanna, was buried in its crypts. He knew the place, knew how to slip in unnoticed.

He barely recalled the Stark girl, though. With his mother dead and his father marked a traitor to the kingdom, Jon hadn't been allowed to play with the Stark children, and had grown up watching them from afar.

That was the other half of why Dany had sent him.

Convinced of the bad blood between Jon and the Starks, she wanted to give him the chance for vengeance. But Jon felt no ill will towards Sansa Stark. She had never been kind to him, but she'd never been unkind, either. She'd merely been a child raised to believe she was special—and did their mission not prove that fact? They were risking everything to steal her.

Eddard Stark, his uncle, had always been kind to him whenever he could. Had his mother not married a traitor to the realm, he might have grown up alongside the other Stark children, beloved and cherished. But as it had been, Eddard could hardly be seen showing affection to the son of a traitor.

"Lead the way, Snow," Jorah said, his voice wry with irony as they neared the walls of Winterfell. Jon reflexively touched his sword at his belt, and slowed his black destrier. He could almost make out the torches through the mist.

"We go around, toward the wood," Jon said, guiding them west. "We'll tie the horses there and go on foot the rest of the way."

Being the son of a traitor and an unloved boy had had its advantages: Jon had gotten to know Winterfell better than anyone else. How many hours had been chased away by walking the battlements, by exploring the crypts by torchlight? He knew every weakness in Winterfell's walls.

Daario might have blundered in through the front gate or tried to scale the walls. The man was skilled and fierce but blunt and temperamental. Grey Worm might have been a solid choice, but Davos had convinced Jon to pick Jorah instead.

"If we leave Mormont and the Tyroshi together any longer, we'll not have a holdfast to come back to," Davos had said under his breath, as they'd stood in the corner, surveying the men in the room and making their strategy. Jon had to agree. Besides, Jorah was cleverer than Grey Worm, and far more experienced.

They tied their horses at the edge of the wood, and silently made their way to the west gate of Winterfell. They were mere shadows in the mist. Bypassing the gate, they went north towards the glass garden.

There had been a crack in the stones of the wall behind the glass garden. It was unlikely to have been repaired, as no one had known of it when Jon had lived at Winterfell. If by some stroke of fate it had been blocked in, they'd scale the broken tower.

It was past midnight now. Jon walked along the wall, his bare hand grazing the stones as he walked. It had been near fifteen years since he had been here last, before the Targaryens had stolen him back. No one would have paid a ransom for him, and Dany had always fiercely told him that no price could have bought him back once she had him.

Jon wondered if this was true. He had been so happy to be taken to people that had wanted him, to people who had not cringed and looked the other way whenever they saw him, that it wasn't until
he was older than he thought much of the fact that he was technically a prisoner as well.

"Here," he breathed, as they came to the gash in the wall. It was barely enough for a man to fit through, but they were all slender men, though Davos and Jorah weren't young anymore. Jon peered through the gash into the glass gardens. The vegetation was thicker than ever and it would give them enough cover. One by one, they crept in.

A low wall separated the glass gardens from the rest of Winterfell. On the other side, they could hear one of the Tarly men loosely keeping watch. In the old days of knights and maidens, two guards would have been positioned at each gate, prepared to take down any intruders, with more guards patrolling the grounds, but these were different times. The Tarlys were well off but they were from the south, where things were easier, where men worked in poison and treason and alliances—not with dirks and swords and shadow.

They melded with the shadows as they moved through the godswood, the stand of ancient trees where Jon had prayed as a boy. Raucous laughter was coming from the armory and each man held his breath and froze in place. A serving girl was giggling as a man led her toward the godswood, their breaths clouding in the air.

Distantly, music could be heard, coming from the Great Hall. The Tarlys had to celebrate the acquisition of Winterfell, after all. In two weeks’ time when the Stark girl married Dickon Tarly, Winterfell would officially be Tarly lands. They would likely even rename it, to something more southron.

It was late now; the Stark girl would be in her rooms, as it would be improper for her to witness what a Tarly party looked like after midnight. “You know the southron lords,” Varys had tittered. “They don’t have quite the same definition of honor that the northerners do. One look at Lady Sansa Stark and she'll be spoiled goods before Dickon can marry her. She's as beautiful as her mother...perhaps even more beautiful," Varys had gossiped, his gaze lingering a little too knowingly on Dany's face.

Dany had spent the last fifteen years being the most beautiful woman in the room, accustomed to being adored by every man who crossed paths with her. At Varys' words she'd sat a little straighter, Jon noticed.

The Great Hall was still lit up with the party, with a few guests spilling out drunkenly.

Jorah went first. He'd shed his riding clothes, revealing a fine waistcoat. He had the look of a lord, and blended in well. No one took notice of him as he made his way across the courtyard to the entrance of the Great Keep.

Jon and Davos had dressed for utility, all in black. They soon followed, once they got Jorah's signal that the coast was clear and that he'd got what they needed for the next part of the plan. Inside the Great Keep, Jorah was waiting with stolen servant's garb and a cup full of wine. Jon slipped on the roughspun waistcoat over his own clothing and took the cup.

More likely than not the Stark girl had kept the same bedroom she'd had as a child. He walked swiftly along the hall, the cup gripped tightly in his clammy hands. He couldn't believe they'd encountered no trouble yet. This should have been harder. Had Varys betrayed them?

At the end of the hall, a man was positioned outside the Stark girl's door.

"Wine from Lord Tarly," Jon informed the guard as he reached him. The guard was tall and broad—probably a lesser Tarly, judging by his stature—and dressed in a fine brocade waistcoat. "To
"thank you for your service."

"I’ve never seen you before," the man observed, narrowing his eyes at Jon and puffing up his chest.

There was no one else in the corridor. His dirk was inside his waistcoat, for Jorah and Davos had taken his sword.

"I’m new," Jon told him. "Brought in special for the party."

"I know all of Lord Tarly’s men,” the man said, abruptly unsheathing his sword.

The cup clattered against the stone floor, the wine splashing everywhere. The man was fast, but Jon was faster. It would have been quieter to slit his throat but the man was too big and too tall; Jon wouldn't have been able to get behind him fast enough. His dirk sank into the guard's belly, as the guard started shouting. "INTRUDER!"

Footsteps were coming fast enough. Jon braced himself and launched against the locked door, barreling it down. His shoulder throbbed as he exploded into the room, keenly aware of the approaching shouts and footfalls. The dirk in his hand was bloody.

And there she was.

Sansa shed her pale pink silk dress, her cheeks as pink as the silk in the candlelight, her heart still fluttering.

Dickon had escorted her to her room just moments ago, after his father had decided that the party was growing too rowdy and wild for her presence to be proper.

They’d not been alone yet before tonight, not properly. Walking in the frosty night, arm in arm, she had felt his heat, and scented his skin. He had been nervous, stammering in a way that she would not have expected from him.

“Y-you look so lovely tonight, Sansa,” he had finally said as they had reached the shadow of the Great Keep. Pausing, she had turned to him. There was no moon tonight, and his warm brown eyes had looked darker than ever.

As a little girl, she had loved the tales of knights and maidens, and in his fine red waistcoat, with his strong jaw and broad shoulders and lean waist, Dickon could have easily been a knight in one of her picture books that Father had given her. And he was so gallant, always so polite... “That is, you always look lovely,” he hastily added in her silence. She couldn’t help but smile at him. He was so sweet, so gentle.

“Thank you,” she had demurred, looking down at the ground shyly. They were all alone in the courtyard, she realized, and her heart was pounding now. When she looked up, the sweetness had melted away and he was looking down at her with desire unmistakably darkening his eyes.

“I cannot wait until we are wed,” he confessed breathlessly, taking her hands in his.

Until a month ago, she had thought she’d never be married for love, but there was no question in her mind that Dickon had fallen for her the moment he had set his warm brown eyes on her. It had been a whirlwind fairy tale since that moment they had locked eyes in court. “I want to kiss you terribly,” he admitted suddenly. “It’s all I can think about. I wish we could marry now, tonight.”
Her heart had soared as a strange heat spread through her. After all the years, all of the pain, it almost seemed too good to be true: that she should get to marry a man as lovely and kind as Dickon, that she should get to return to her home, to live as husband and wife in the home she had thought she’d never see again. She squeezed his hands in hers, her eyes burning with the threat of tears, a lump rising in her throat. “What’s wrong?” he asked softly, releasing her hands to cup her cheek. Sansa swallowed, feeling his thumb caress her cheek. His hands were smooth and warm.

“I’m happy,” she replied, with a teary laugh. “I never thought…” she couldn’t finish. Dickon’s brow furrowed.

“May I kiss you?” he breathed, leaning in close, and she had wordlessly nodded, her blood pounding in her ears like a drum.

He had pressed his lips to hers, his hands on her shoulders, clutching her tightly; his desire for her barely restrained. She had curled her fingers into his waistcoat, felt the thick silk under her fingers, and the hard chest underneath. He was strong, and gentle, and kind, and he was kissing her tenderly, gently, even though she could feel that he wanted to do so much more. She wanted to know what he wanted to do.

They’d heard the sound of laughter, and broken apart abruptly, breathless and flushed. A few of Lord Tarly’s men stumbled out of the Great Hall, clutching goblets of wine and making loud, inappropriate jokes. Dickon’s blush had been visible even in the darkness.

“Come, this is no place for a lady, it seems,” he had said sweetly, and with a gentle hand had guided her into the Great Keep. At her door, one of Lord Tarly’s men had been waiting, stopping them from one last kiss. Breathlessly Dickon had bid her goodnight, and Sansa had all but swooned backward into her room.

Her maid had unlaced her corset for her, and then Sansa sent the woman away, wanting to be alone. She wanted to be alone to cherish that kiss, to see it again and again in her mind’s eye, to feel his grip on her arms, his soft lips against hers, and to imagine what it might feel like to have him be the one to unlace her corset.

She donned a nightdress and sat at her vanity table, brushing her hair out of its elaborate style, the jeweled pins scattered on her table. She dabbed on some of the perfume that Dickon had brought as a gift for her, on the inside of her wrists and on her neck, and in a fresh burst of ecstasy imagined his lips pressed against her neck, taking in the scent of the perfume he had bought for her on her skin.

And then, in an explosion of noise, her door burst open.

The Stark girl was by her vanity table, in a dangerously sheer nightdress. She rose from her chair shakily, paling, her unbound copper hair gleaming in the firelight.

Varys had been right. She was lovely. Jon wondered if she would recognize him. It had been fifteen years, after all, and he had a beard and a man’s face now.

"Get away from me. My husband’s guards will be here soon," she told him, moving backwards.

"You should come quietly. Take a cloak, it's cold," he told her. The Stark girl slammed back into her vanity table, feeling behind her wildly for something. Jon ignored her and went to her wardrobe, and found a thick traveling cloak. When he turned, she was holding a knife with shaking hands.
"Stay back," she whispered. Her bright blue eyes, bright as the center of a flame, took in the bloody dirk in his hand.

"Take the cloak," he said, ignoring her threat, tossing the heavy fabric to her. She didn't catch it, didn't move.

"Y-you killed him," she realized. "You killed the guard."

"We don't have time for talk," Jon told her calmly. He approached her. "Put down that knife; it won't help you."

The door banged open again, but it was Davos and Jorah, each holding bloody swords.

"We'll have some trouble," Davos said matter-of-factly as he turned around and locked the door again. Jorah was already sliding the wardrobe along the floor to block the door. A loud bang sounded on the door.

"OPEN UP," a rough man's voice called. Davos rolled his eyes, muttering, "Does he really think that'll do anything?" and helped Jorah block the door; the Stark girl backed up to her bed, still holding out the knife.

"What is it you want?" she demanded. "Is it money? My husband will pay."

"We know he will. That’s the point of all this. And he's not your husband yet," Jon told her. "Put the knife down, now."

He went to her, and she ducked behind a bedpost. She was in tears.

"Don't touch me!"

He'd have to attack her; he'd thought she might come quietly. She'd always been the delicate one of the Starks, always flouncing around in pretty dresses and swooning over romantic stories of knights and princesses. He doubted she knew how to use that knife, but it was still a blade pointed at him and she could very easily get lucky.

And then her eyes widened.

"Wait," she breathed. "Jon Snow?"

His mouth went dry at the look of horror and betrayal in her eyes. In that moment, as they both froze, Jorah swept in from behind and hit her over the head with the butt of his blade, knocking her out.

"This is no time to be a gentleman, Snow," he said irritably as the girl collapsed into his arms. "Here, take her."

The Stark girl moaned as Jorah handed her to Jon. Annoyed, Jon hoisted her over his shoulder. Davos had dropped the rope ladder they'd brought out the window and secured it; the wardrobe in front of the door shook and trembled as the men tried to break down the door.

Jorah went first down the ladder with his blade ready, then Davos. The Stark girl was limp but she'd come to soon. He had to move quickly.

The rope ladder felt flimsy, especially under their combined weight. It wasn't a long drop but it'd hurt if they fell. There were shouts on the other side of the courtyard. They had mere seconds to
They ran to the north gate. Jorah made quick work of the guard there, putting the body count at two. They'd wanted to do this without blood, as it would have made Tarly sweeter to the idea of paying a high price, but it was too late now. Fire and blood, Jon thought. I'm a Targaryen after all.

Jorah and Davos sprinted ahead to the horses to untie them and bring them to Jon. He looked over his shoulder, back at Winterfell, to see if they were close. The Stark girl was growing heavy and he could feel her shifting. Should've tied her hands, he thought unhappily as he saw the torches at the north gate.

They were coming after them.

Jorah and Davos brought the horses and helped Jon mount with the Stark girl. She slumped in the saddle in front of him, her soft body against his chest, and then they were riding into the woods.

Sansa woke with a gasp on horseback, her wrists tied, her face damp and cold, and her fingers numb. She felt a man's strong chest against her back.

The last thing she remembered was seeing Jon Snow holding a bloody dirk and advancing on her.

She hadn't seen him since her childhood, but it had been unmistakably him. He had the Stark face and Stark eyes. He had grown into a beautiful, terrible man.

Her head throbbed; she supposed one of the men had knocked her out.

Strong, scarred hands held the reins, arms effectively imprisoning her.

"Where are we going?" Her voice was nearly lost in the wind.

"South," came Jon Snow's soft voice.

"Why?"

"You're a hostage of Princess Daenerys Targaryen."

They want Tarly to pay for me, she thought dully. Just as Randyll Tarly wanted me for my name.

She was gold, nothing more. Only Dickon wanted her for her, not for her name or her status.

She was property to be purchased, to be stolen, and to be bought back. Even Jon Snow, her cousin, her own kin, would steal her for coin.

"You are dishonorable." She knew he had heard her, because she felt him flinch. "You're no true Stark. Father never would have done something like this. It's just like mother always said: there's too much Targaryen in you to trust."

"Half the country would put a Targaryen on the throne," she heard him counter. There was pain in his voice; she had wounded him. Good.

"Then why do you need to steal me?" she asked softly. He had no retort for that, it seemed.

He would not name her Sansa in his head. Calling her the Stark girl distanced her, made it easier to do this. Her long hair smelled sweet, and brushed against his skin as they rode into the wind. It
irritated him.

It would be another hour to the holdfast; they'd had to go through the wood and around it to lose Tarly’s men. Now that she was awake, she sat straight on the horse, attempting to put as much distance between them as possible. But she was shaking with cold; he could feel her trembling finely against him.

He might have offered her his own cloak, but her words burned. *You're no true Stark.*

Jon would not soon forget the memory of Catelyn Stark pointing at him, shielding Sansa from him as they passed. She had turned to look back at him, her copper hair fanning around her, her eyes filled with curiosity. The other Stark children had been warmer, but she had always taken after her mother.

"I suppose you volunteered to take me. As revenge," the Stark girl said, after a long while.

That burned, too.

"Don't speak," he ordered brusquely. "When we get to Princess Daenerys, you'll only speak when spoken to, and do as you're told. No harm will come to you, so long as you make no trouble."

"Aside from being brutally ripped from my home, and freezing to death, yes, I'm sure."

"No more speaking," he said through grit teeth.

She didn't speak again, but she still sat up straight as a rod, cringing whenever the horse jostled them enough to brush against each other. But her shaking was growing more violent, and they still had many miles to go. Ahead, Jorah and Davos rode in silence, keeping a swift pace even as they zigzagged and detoured. They'd outrun Tarly's men, to be sure, but they couldn't be too careful.

She wouldn't ask for a cloak, of course. Besides, he'd told her not to speak. He heard her teeth chattering, and he couldn't stand it anymore. With the reins in one hand, he shrugged off his cloak with the other, and clumsily draped it over her shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"You're shaking," he said shortly. The cloth settled over her, and he did his best to smooth it out. He felt her shrink from his touch as his hand lingered on her shoulder.

He opened and closed his mouth. He wanted to tell her that he didn't want revenge, wanted to tell her that he wished her no harm, but the words wouldn't come out. They would be hollow words; after all, as she had said, he had killed to kidnap her.

For the rest of the journey, they did not speak, but the tension was thick, and her hatred for him palpable.

The holdfast was an old stone house in a boggy area, guarded by high stone walls and set behind woods as tangled and bristled as a wild dog’s fur. Grey Worm was waiting for them at the gate, the soldier’s posture stiff as a board.

"We were followed at first, but I think we lost them," Davos said in greeting as Grey Worm unlocked the gate. His dark eyes went to Sansa Stark.

"Princess Daenerys is awake and ready to receive the Stark girl," Grey Worm replied. The gate
rattled as he dragged it open. Tyrion was coming out the front entrance, still fully dressed in an embroidered navy waistcoat, carrying a cup of wine, as usual.

"Lady Sansa Stark, soon to be Lady Tarly," he greeted. "You are lovelier every time I see you."

"Lord Lannister," she greeted coolly. Tyrion's mismatched eyes flicked to Jon so briefly, and there was something in his gaze that Jon did not like, though he could not say why.

Davos and Jorah dismounted and Grey Worm took the horses to the stable; the two men helped the Stark girl dismount as well. She stumbled a bit. Her legs were clearly stiff from riding.

"Come, Lady Stark. We have food and wine, and a hot bath and change of clothes for you before you meet with Princess Daenerys," Tyrion said, leading her—though he did not untie her wrists—into the house. Jon watched her for a moment, before abruptly jerking the reins and leading his horse to the stables.

Though it was cold, his blood ran strangely hot. He supposed that he was still angry from her words. He was glad to be free of her. His waistcoat smelled like her perfume, he realized as he stabled his horse. He'd change once he got inside.

_You are dishonorable._

Furiously, he slammed the gate to the stables closed. Grey Worm glanced at him with vague curiosity, but then went back to his task, and Jon exploded into the courtyard. A light snow was falling, and the window to the parlor was visible from here, casting a square of warm golden light before him. Jon stood outside of its light, and looked into the window. The Stark girl was inside, still wrapped in his cloak, being served hot wine and a warm supper, though she would not eat it. He watched her shake her head, her cheeks still flushed from the cold.

He let out a long breath, watched it cloud in the air before him.

The Stark girl was worth money, and Dany's cause was worth everything to him. Dany had _saved_ him from a life of ostracism, of always being the traitor's son. She saved people. He would do anything for her in return.

_You are no true Stark_, Sansa Stark had said.

_I never was_, he thought as he stared hard at Sansa Stark through the window. _You and your mother made certain of that._

Perhaps Dany was right: perhaps some part of him wanted revenge after all…

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There was a hot bath and a warm fire waiting in her room for her. A dark-skinned girl with a foreign accent led her to the room, with Tyrion Lannister's warning still ringing in her head.

_You are a guest here, but make no mistake, you will only go home when we see fit. Take care to remember that, Lady Stark._

The door locked behind her. She was once again locked in a splendid cage. Sansa went to the windows. She could have jumped, but men with swords were stationed on the ground.

In the corner was a tub of steaming water, scented with rose oil. The furnishings were a bit dusty and worn but the wardrobe had a few silk dresses inside, clearly well made though they were well worn too. The Beggar Princess, they called Daenerys Targaryen.
She was still frozen, so she slipped out of Jon Snow's heavy cloak and her nightgown, in order to bathe. His cloak smelled of his skin, and the scent clung to her. She was eager to be rid of his scent; just the thought of his face filled her with rage. She tossed the nightgown aside and clambered into the hot tub. The water was scalding hot but felt icy cold at first; the skin of her wrists, still chafed from the rope, seared with pain as the hot water touched it.

After bathing, she changed into the underpinnings provided. She needed to call in the girl, Missandei, to help her into the corset. She then selected a pale blue silk dress. She looked best in blue. But the gown was too short.

"It is one of Princess Daenerys' old dresses," Missandei explained as she led her down the stairs. Princess Daenerys was waiting in the parlor now. Eyes gazed at her through open doors. The house was packed with people; she wondered whom they all were. Her hair was still wet and she felt self-conscious in her too-short dress, but she held her back straight. She would not show any weakness. "Presenting Princess Daenerys Targaryen, true heir to the Iron Throne," Missandei said as she opened the door to the parlor.

Daenerys was beautiful; with blonde hair so pale it looked silver, and striking violet eyes. She was reclining in a chair by the fire. The two men who had helped Jon Snow to abduct her were positioned across the room, and another man, wearing a powdered grey wig with a blue tint, was by Princess Daenerys' side.

Jon Snow stood in the corner, staring out the window. He was clad in a somewhat finer waistcoat now than before, though it was dark and nondescript. His hair was wet from a bath as well, curling against his neck and jaw, most of it pulled back in a low knot at the base of his neck. He did not turn to look at her, his gaze fiercely fixed outside at the darkness.

"Lady Sansa Stark," Daenerys said, regarding Sansa. Sansa gave a perfunctory curtsey. A lady's courtesy was her armor, after all. "Varys did not lie—she is lovely," Daenerys remarked to Tyrion, who sat beside her.

"I told you, Princess," he insisted. "Please, have a seat, Lady Stark. You must be exhausted."

Sansa did as told and took a seat in a slender chair across from the princess. "We have left word with your fiance on the amount we request. Should he comply, we will determine a suitable meeting point and return you at once," Tyrion explained.

"How much are you asking?" Sansa asked. She might as well learn her worth.

"Three thousand gold dragons," Daenerys spoke now.

"What will you do with the money, Princess?"

"That is unnecessary for you to know," Daenerys replied. Out of the corner of her eye, Sansa saw Jon look briefly, then quickly turn back to look out the window. "While you are here, you will be my honored guest. You will be given fine clothes and fine food and treated with utmost respect and courtesy. We wish you no harm."

"You are very generous, Princess," Sansa said innocently. Daenerys' violet eyes narrowed, sensing a cut, though she did not remark on it.

"You must be tired. Jon Snow will escort you back to your room. Should you have need of anything, he will be stationed outside of your room. You need only ask, and if possible, we will provide it."
Jon turned sharply. A part of Sansa delighted in his obvious shock; he clearly had not been made aware of this plan.

"Thank you, your highness," Sansa said, and rose to her feet. Jon Snow crossed the room, and led her out into the hall silently.

No eyes stared her down now; it was well after three in the morning, she saw from a clock on the wall. At the stairs, Jon paused, and gestured for her to climb ahead of him. Their eyes met briefly, and he quickly averted his gaze. He was not shy, she thought; he was enraged, his anger barely kept beneath the surface. She hoped her words had hurt him.

With a long, lingering look, she turned, gathered her skirts, and climbed up the stairs, back to her new gilded cage.

She should have been like Arya, and learned to wield a sword. Maybe that would have gotten her freedom, she thought numbly as she walked down the hall, Jon Snow's light footsteps behind her. Arya had been the closest to Jon, and had sneaked off to play with him when they were younger. He had taught her to wield a sword, to aim an arrow, to slit a throat with a dagger.

The rumor had always been that the Targaryens had kidnapped him, but she had always wondered if he had simply run away. Perhaps both were true in their own way.

Without looking back at him, she went into her room, and closed the door in his face.

At dawn, Daario finally came to relieve him of his watch. Daario had removed his powdered wig, revealing unruly dark hair beneath it, and was dressed in leathers. When he wasn't attempting to seduce Dany, he was practicing with his sword, which he must have been doing just now. Jon wasn't sure when the man slept.

"Your cousin is a beauty, Jon Snow," Daario remarked as he approached him in the hall. "You never mentioned it." His voice was sly, teasing.

"I hardly remembered her," Jon countered. He shifted away from the wall where he had been leaning. Daario arched his brows. "She was but a little girl when I left," he added defensively. *When I was taken.*

Daario's gaze lingered on the closed door. Sansa was asleep behind that door.

"She is no little girl now," he decided after a moment. "Even Princess Daenerys was bewitched by her."

"She is to be married to Lord Dickon Tarly. Half her value comes from that marriage contract," Jon reminded him. He did not like Daario's tone, and Daario, after all, had quite a reputation. "See that you remember that."

"You don't think Tarly has had a taste yet? I wouldn't be able to stop myself."

Jon wondered if Sansa was awake and could hear them. *You are dishonorable.*

"It doesn't matter," he said bluntly. "Stay out of her room and do your job."

He brushed past Daario before the Tyroshi could speak any more distasteful words and went to his own quarters. Being Daenerys' blood, he had been given his own room, unlike the others. Even Tyrion was forced to share. The house was just barely big enough for their group. It made it hard to
remember that Dany really didn't have as many followers as they needed, when they were so overcrowded like this.

He shed his waistcoat and dropped it on his writing desk. The last of a fire was burning, embers barely glowing. At the window, he looked out at the misty dawn. Fatigue hit suddenly, leaving him breathless, and he leaned his forehead against the cold glass, closing his eyes.

He should never have gone back to Winterfell.

The door opened and shut quietly. He didn't have to look back to know who it was.

"Your cousin is beautiful." Dany's voice was softer than usual. He felt her stand behind him and wrap her arms around his waist. "You never said."

"Daario said the same," Jon remarked, feeling her hands trace downward. He reflexively reached down and gripped her wrist, stopping her progress. She liked when he was rough with her.

"He also said I am more beautiful than her."

Jon kept his eyes closed and his grip tight on her wrist. He felt her struggle to wrench out of his grip, and when that didn't work, she rubbed her body against his, her soft breasts pushing against his back.

None of the men who followed Dany were married. Davos had once been married, though he had lost his wife. All of them—perhaps even Davos; Jon could not be sure—would have died for the chance to feel Dany writhe against them. But she never entered their rooms. She only sneaked into his. Jon wondered if respect for his bloodline was really the reason he had his own room.

It was wrong, in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of god, but he wasn't sure why anymore. It had been so many years since she had first touched him. She kissed his back, and he felt it through his shirt. His grip on her wrist loosened and she flattened her hand against him and traced downward, and the blood rushed south, between his legs, as her hand found his hardness. He bit his lip. "You never say such flattering things to me."

"You have enough flatterers," he ground out as she stroked him.

It was wrong. He was dishonorable, the Stark girl was right. And the Targaryens had wed each other, fucked each other, for hundreds of years, so perhaps he really was no true Stark. His father had been Dany's brother. Jon braced a hand on the cold window. "Stop," he said suddenly. Dany abruptly halted her touches.

"What's the matter?" She sounded hurt.

"I'm tired," he lied. "I won't be of much use."

"I don't want to use you," she balked. He turned to face her; she was in her nightdress, and he could see her nipples through the sheer fabric. Her silvery blonde hair tumbled about her shoulders.

If she really wanted the throne, she'd have to marry. But would anyone suitable ever marry her, if word of their actions ever got out?

Maybe they wouldn't lose the throne because of guns or soldiers or supporters. Maybe what they did in bed would lose Dany the throne.

"It was just an expression," he said finally, Dany's violet eyes searching his face. "You should
She never slept in his bed. They couldn't risk being discovered. Even her being here, at dawn, was a risk.

He wondered if everyone knew anyway.

He wondered what the Stark girl would think, if she knew just how dishonorable he really was.
Chapter Two

Sansa slept fitfully. The hot wine had made her mouth dry, and her body still hurt from everything she had been through, and the featherbed was lumpy and uneven. When she could take it no longer, she slipped out of bed. Jon Snow's cloak still lay discarded on a chair, and for want of a dressing gown, she pulled that on for modesty, before knocking on the door.

"Jon Snow?" she called through the wood.

The door unlocked and opened, revealing the handsome man who had been wearing the powdered wig. He wasn't wearing the wig now, and without it he looked more of a rogue warrior, like Jon Snow, and less like the slightly ridiculous courtier who had been standing in the parlor. He was dressed for riding and had a sword sheathed at his hip.

"Jon Snow's shift ended, my lady," he said. "He's sleeping. But I can serve your needs. My name is Daario." There was something insinuating in his voice that made her skin crawl.

"I wanted some water," she said. His deep blue eyes lingered on Jon Snow's cloak that she clutched around her shoulders.

"Of course, my lady. I will send for some."

He left, locking the door, and Sansa ripped off Jon Snow’s cloak and cast it on a light blue velvet chaise, where it seemed to taunt her. She went to the window, staring out at the unfamiliar land. She could not even pick out what direction was north, with all this rain and snow.

She squared her shoulders. There was no need to panic. She would likely be gone by this evening. Surely the Tarlys would not stand for this.

Never mind the tiny, creeping voice in her head: just like you thought Father would not stand for your captivity. Just like you thought Robb would not stand for it. You kept the faith for years...and no one ever came.

The knock came and the door opened. Sansa hastily snatched up Jon Snow’s cloak once more to cover herself as Daario entered, bearing a cup of water.

"My lady, your water," he said with a flourish, his blue eyes lingering a little too long on her form. She held the cloak tighter and took the cup from him.

"Has there been word from my husband?"

"You have no husband…yet," Daario teased. “And I doubt we’ll hear anything from Lord Tarly for a week at least. You would do best to settle in, my lady.”

"Of course," she said lightly, and she turned away from him. A week.

"You seem rather carefree for a woman who has just been abducted."

"Lord Tarly and his son fought hard for my hand," she said, still facing away from Daario, her back burning with his gaze. “They won’t be so quick to give me up.”

"Three thousand gold dragons is quite a lot of money. I wonder if the Tarlys have so much as that.”
“They will find a way.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” He paused. “Is that Snow’s cloak?” There was a creeping interest in his voice.

“I-I am not sure.” Sansa turned back to him. “It was given to me on the way here.”

“It is Snow’s cloak,” Daario realized. “What a complicated man he is. He’d give you the cloak off his back even as he steals you from your beloved fiancé.”

A memory surfaced, of Jon Snow handing the fish he’d caught to her little brother Bran, as Bran cried over the empty hook on the end of his own fishing line. Sansa felt a stab of rage, but she did not know where it had come from. What did it matter that he had once given her little brother a fish? That hardly canceled out abducting her on behalf of a pretender to the throne.

“Yes, he is very thoughtful and generous,” she said, her tone polite, though she felt nothing but anger and acid. Daario’s brows arched in amusement.

“Careful now, Lady Stark. You’ll find more of a kind heart in Snow than in the rest of us—even in sweet Princess Daenerys. And who knows—you might be here long enough that you’ll find need of a kind heart after all.”

Sansa held her chin up. She would not be cowed by this ridiculous man.

“My Lord husband will come for me.”

“Or perhaps we’ll have to come for him.”

Daario left her there, with Snow’s cloak and the silver goblet of water. Sansa drank from it with a shaking hand and trembling lips.

What if…

No. She couldn’t think like that. This wasn’t like King’s Landing, where she had been an unwilling captive for so many years. Things were different now, and Dickon loved her. He would move mountains to save her.

But why should he love me? We barely know each other.

“No,” she breathed, shaking her head, pacing once more. She couldn’t doubt him, couldn’t doubt his love for her.

If she didn’t have his love, then she had nothing else.

You actually are as stupid as you seem, Cersei’s voice echoed in her head. You stupid girl, Joffrey had shrieked, laughing at her.

Three thousand gold dragons was quite a lot of money.

And what if Dickon didn’t even know where she was? Jon Snow and his men had lost them all too easily. How could he storm the holdfast, if he didn't know where it was?

A week.

Perhaps Daario was simply trying to upset her. She’d seen such tactics before. Perhaps he was simply trying to break her spirit, to guarantee she would not attempt escape. Cersei had done it to
She had always been a daydreamer, a naïve and sweet little girl. Jon shook his head.
“He might.” Clang. The first clash of swords. Daario was a good opponent, though Jorah was probably the best at dueling. Grey Worm was talented at fighting to kill, not fighting for sport. “The Tarlys are proud. He’ll be insulted that we took her.” He was just repeating Tyrion's reasoning, bleating helplessly like a sheep. He swung harder.

Jon and Daario had been the only ones to be skeptical of Tyrion and Dany’s plan to take Sansa Stark hostage—Jon because he knew the ways of lords, and Daario because he knew the ways of men.

“Is it hard, having a Stark in the house?” Clang. Jon’s steps were careful, methodical, as he remembered his training. They were moving through the forms easily enough.

“No.” Clang. He spun in place, and hit Daario’s blade with the flat of his.

“Do you think the Lannisters will come looking for us?” Clang.

“Yes.” Clang. They were moving faster now. Clang. Clang.

“I wonder who will find us first: Jaime Lannister, or Dickon Tarly.”

“Couldn’t say.” Clang. “We’re well hidden here. They might never find us.” Clang.

“I hope they both find us at once. I’d love a good fight.” Clang. “And barring that, a good fuck.” Clang. “It’s been weeks.”

Hands tracing down his body, a wet mouth on his skin. Jon screwed up his face and hit harder. He felt sick to his stomach. Clang. Clang.

“We’ll be south soon enough,” Jon said.

“I’ve never fucked a northern lady.” Clang. “Have you?”

“No.” Clang.

“Ah. I would’ve liked to hear a comparison. Pity.”

They didn’t speak as their forms sped up and the clangs turned into wild clashes, a storm of noise filling the courtyard. His muscles burned and his lungs ached, but it felt good. Jon thought he might lose his mind, cooped up in this bloody holdfast.

_I hope they find us too_, he realized. It was a darker impulse. They’d spent so many years on the run, just barely dodging danger. _Let the worst happen. Let the other shoe drop, finally._

“Snow.”

They dropped their swords, both men’s chests heaving, breaths clouding, as they looked at the door leading to the courtyard. Rainwater blurred Jon’s vision and he wiped at his eyes. It was Davos. “It’s your shift,” he said. “I need some food and a nap.” The older man went back inside, and Jon looked up to the window on the second story. The Stark girl’s window. A pale shadow moved away from the window.

She’d been watching them.

“I think you’re afraid of her, Snow,” Daario remarked. “I wonder why.”

“I think you talk too much.” Jon sheathed Longclaw and wiped his forehead, and went inside,
leaving Daario standing in the rain.

There were low voices outside her door, and Sansa crept to the door, pressing her ear against it to listen.

“…Until supper. I wonder if we should tell the girl?” That was Davos.

“It’s unnecessary,” Jon Snow replied shortly. “It doesn’t change anything.”

Davos’ heavier footfalls disappeared down the hall, and the floor creaked with a man's weight. Jon Snow was stationed outside her door again.

She’d watched him in the courtyard. Sansa had spent her life watching men with swords, men with dirks, men with guns. She knew what a good killer looked like. Even when they had been children, her father had often spoken of Jon Snow’s skill with a sword. Watching him earlier had filled her with dread. *He wears no fine waistcoats and has no manners but he knows how to kill.* She was not sure that Dickon knew how to kill.

A soft knock startled her. Sansa hastily combed at her hair and straightened her dress.

“Come in,” she said as levelly, and with as much dignity as she could muster. The knob turned, revealing Jon Snow in riding leathers, still soaked from training outside.

“Princess Daenerys will dine with you tonight.” His expression was stony.

*Oh, will she?* Another stab of fury. Sansa turned away quickly, before he could see her feelings on her face. She could not seem to draw a full breath. He might as well have said that Queen Cersei would dine with her.

“Shall I receive her here?” Sarcasm leaked from her voice, and she felt her face grow hot. She heard a soft scoff, and she looked back at him.

“I will escort you to her rooms when it is time.”

“Thank you,” she said stiffly. A sudden madness seized her. She ought to have kept quiet. “…What did Davos wish to tell me?”

She swallowed over a lump in her throat, and turned to fully face him. His eyes were cast down, and she watched his fist tighten, briefly. When he looked at her again, however, his eyes were soft. He pitied her.

“He ...wanted to tell you that we’ll be meeting with Lord Tarly in six nights’ time. To negotiate your release.”

There was a funny swooping sensation in her belly, and she gripped the edge of the table next to the window. Her legs had gone weak, silly things.

“S-six days?”

A week, nearly.

Daario hadn't been lying.

She hated the pity in his eyes. “Why six days?” she blurted desperately, her eyes stinging. Six days in captivity, with nowhere to go, nothing to do but wait…
“I couldn’t say. I have little experience with ransoms.”

There was some ice in his voice. Perhaps the Targaryens offered a ransom, and Father never paid it? She wondered, studying him. She wondered how long he’d waited for the Starks to rescue him, wondered when he’d given up hope and let himself become a Targaryen.

“Well,” she blustered, smoothing her skirts, “I’m sure it must take time to amass so much gold.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Jon Snow rested his hands on his belt, and looked down again, biting his soft lower lip. It was easier, in this light, to see the scars on his face. How had he gotten them? He’d been such a green, gentle boy when he’d left them. Or rather, taken, she mentally corrected. He wouldn’t look at her now. Her legs felt numb again. He doesn’t think they’ll pay, she realized, the knowledge ringing clear as a bell.

“Please leave me,” she demanded, turning away quickly. She felt like she could not breathe. “I—I must be alone.”

“Yes, Lady Stark.”

He didn’t move right away. She felt his presence like a fire at her back, and she gripped the windowsill, willing herself not to cry. Courtesy is a lady’s armor. Dignity is her sword.

At long last she heard the door click shut, and she was left alone, as she had requested. She couldn’t breathe. Six days. Her wedding was in thirteen days. Would it even happen, now? Even if they did indeed return her in six days, the Tarlys would be out three thousand gold dragons. Weddings were costly, of course. She didn’t know if they even had three thousand gold dragons.

The Tarlys were rich. But how rich? Were they rich enough to buy her back?

No.

...No.

She had not suffered for so many years, biding her time, only to trade one captor for another. She had waited too long. Perhaps the Tarlys had bought her for her name and for the lands that came with her, but she knew Dickon could love her.

Even if he didn't yet, he could come to love her.

If she didn't have that, then she'd have nothing.

She would not let this ridiculous Beggar Princess take love, a wedding, her happiness, away from her.

A strange calm settled over her, and she stood straight once again, still staring into the rain. The rage melted away.

They were mere hours of riding from Winterfell. Even if she didn't know precisely where she was, she knew enough of the land to be able to find her way to someone who could help her. She needed to leave, and what was more, she needed to leave soon...just in case Dickon was planning to storm the holdfast; just in case they really were trying to amass the gold. She needed to get back to Dickon before he tried to save her, through steel or through gold.

And if she could do that, perhaps he'd love her even more.
But beside all of that, she could not help but think of the swordsmanship she had seen in the courtyard just now.

It wouldn't take so many disciplined men to storm this holdfast. But it would take only one man to kill Dickon.

And she had just witnessed one man who clearly knew how to kill.

“But if only it had been more difficult to track them. I would have liked a challenge,” Lord Baelish sighed, rolling up the map of the north. “I’ve informed Lord Tarly, and he is doing his part as we speak.” Varys sighed behind him, shaking his head.

“Your brother was supposed to be the clever one, too,” the eunuch said sorrowfully. He turned to Jaime with a questioning, curious look. “I wonder, will it be hard to march on your beloved brother’s holdfast and tear down his dreams of a Targaryen restoration?”

Jaime didn’t bother to respond to Varys’ question. The eunuch reeked of lavender and it made his head spin.

“I’ll be glad when this is over,” he finally said.

He had forbid them from inviting Cersei to this little chat. As far as most knew, Tyrion had died years ago. It was best for Cersei if she believed Tyrion dead.

“You’ll want to attack in five days’ time, at dawn. They’re low on food, and they won’t go hunting or sneak into town until Friday, on Winter Town’s market day. They’ll be hungry and weak. A sellsword named Daario does the dawn watch, and he’s usually drunk or asleep,” Varys informed them.

“Bloody sellswords,” Bronn said with heavy irony, but Jaime couldn’t bring himself to laugh.

“We’ll have to leave in two days,” Jaime said, thinking of the map. It would take more than a day and a half of fast riding to get to the holdfast, and he’d need to bring a large force to ensure they took the holdfast quickly and efficiently. If he wanted to be ready to leave by Monday, he’d have to begin making preparations at once. “Brons, let’s go.”

“You seem tense. I’ve never known you to dread a battle,” Bronn remarked, following Jaime out of Lord Baelish’s study. One of Baelish’s maids, a pretty dark-eyed thing, handed them their cloaks and hats, and then they were on the street. The palace loomed large ahead of them, a glittering thing in the sun. The streets around them shimmered and stank with heat and rot. It was too hot for their cloaks, but Bronn had told him it would be prudent to hide their fine silk waistcoats, to dress plainly and anonymously, when visiting Lord Baelish.

“This will be no battle.” They fell into step together, walking back towards the palace. Around them, the ruin of King’s Landing was only too evident. Jaime felt the vitriol of the people all too well, and he was grateful that his Lannister hair and silks were hidden from view.

“Rather handy that it's the Stark girl being held captive,” Bronn said lightly. “Can’t help but wonder how that happened.” He had given voice to Jaime’s exact thoughts. “Can’t help but think that’s all rather convenient for Littlefinger. Wasn’t he the one who sold her to Tarly in the first place?”

If he were as clever as Tyrion, he’d devise a way to find out Baelish and Varys’ real motives. And if he were as ruthless as his father, he’d find a way to double-cross them and seize it all for himself.
Alas, he might be ruthless, but he had no plans. Daenerys Targaryen had been a problem for too long, and it was his task to solve that problem before it threatened the king’s life.

As long as Cersei and Tywin didn’t know about Tyrion, he could still handle it on his own, the way he wanted to.

Sansa took care to make herself lovely as she could for her supper with the Beggar Princess. She had to keep up appearances. She wore the blue gown, and pinched her cheeks to bring out the color. She needed to look innocent.

She needed to be able to extract information from them tonight, during this meal.

It would be easier if Tyrion did not dine with them. The man was too clever by half; she had learned as much during her captivity in King’s Landing. Even the wrong word, the wrong tone, might alert him to her plans, and then she’d be watched even more closely.

The knock came, and Jon Snow appeared to escort her to supper.

"Is it still raining? I couldn't tell; it’s so dark,” she said by way of greeting as she rose from the little vanity table, pretending she had merely been brushing her hair. Jon Snow was clad in his dark waistcoat, looking more like a man and less like a warrior, and for some reason, it irritated her. You're no lord, she thought furiously.

"I've been standing here for hours, Lady Stark. I can see outside no better than you can," he reminded her, as she shut the door behind herself and joined him in the hall. The house was filled with the scent of roast capon, and she could hear men's voices downstairs.

"Of course. I wonder if it will turn back to snow again," she replied lightly. They fell into step as they walked down the hall. Silver tapers had been lit, casting the hall in a ghostly glow. In the dim light it was harder to see just how shabby this place was. Sansa covertly peered around. She could find no house banners or heraldry in sight, save for the Targaryen dragons. Who had this place belonged to?

Jon Snow said nothing. He'd never been much of a conversationalist. "So, how long have you been in this...house?" she tried again politely.

"A fortnight."

He gestured for her to descend the stairs ahead of him.

"And where were you before that?"

"South."

Downstairs the scent of roast capon and mushrooms was stronger, and her stomach growled. A few men clad in shabby uniforms came from the kitchens and peered at her with interest. Their skin was dark, which meant they were from across the Narrow Sea. The rumor was that Daenerys had stolen an army, but she had yet to see enough men for an army. They must all sleep in the stables, she decided.

That would make things harder for her. If they were all in the stables, it'd be that much harder to get a horse, and without a horse she’d never make it back to Winterfell.

They paused outside of the dining room, with Jon Snow's hand on the doorknob. For the moment,
they were alone in the hall. He faced Sansa, studying her carefully. She saw him swallow, watched his Adam's apple move above the silk of his collar. He looked about to speak, but the door opened, shoving him back. Daario appeared, in his ridiculous light blue wig and a splendid blue jacquard waistcoat.

"Why, are you intending to make Lady Stark starve out here, Snow?" Daario stepped aside and gestured for Sansa to enter. "Come, dine with us. The wine is already flowing."

The dining room was just as dimly lit. Princess Daenerys was seated at the head of the table, in an opulent silver dress that was a year or two out of fashion. Tyrion sat at her right, Jorah Mormont at the other end of the table next to Daavos, and Missandei next to Tyrion.

"Lady Stark," Daenerys said. "Please, have a seat and dine with me and my bloodriders."

Bloodriders. That was a Dothraki term, Sansa knew. She gave a curtsey—Jorah, Daario, Davos, and Tyrion all rose from their seats and, all looking rather amused by this show of manners, bowed back to her. Missandei gave a smooth curtsey.

"I forgot what it was like to be around a true lady," Tyrion said wryly when they had all seated themselves again. Jon Snow took his time to sit. Sansa did not miss how Daenerys’ lovely violet eyes followed his movements hungrily...the way a lady's eyes might follow her husband's form. She had heard the rumors of the Targaryens, but part of her hadn't wanted to believe such horrific tales. To bed one's own blood...

"Is your Princess not the finest example of a lady?" Sansa asked him as Tyrion poured her wine. Jon Snow sat next to her. She wished she could move her chair. Daario snorted into his glass of wine.

"Yes, no lady quite like the princess," he sniggered, looking to Daenerys with twinkling eyes. The princess flushed with pleasure.

"I’m rather too rough and wild to be a lady in the traditional sense, I’m afraid. I’ve always been rather bored by needlework and dancing," she said. "But I am told you are the consummate lady."

It wasn’t a compliment. Sansa smoothed her features into a mask. *Perhaps you should not dismiss consummate ladies so quickly, Princess.* Cersei had always been filled with contempt for other women, too.

"I aim to be, your highness." She took a sip of the wine to buy herself an excuse not to speak. She couldn’t help but notice that Jon Snow drank no wine. As a boy he’d hated dancing, hated parties. He had never been good at fitting in. "And as any lady, I take an interest in politics," she continued carefully, when she set her goblet down again. All eyes were on her. "I have...heard rumors that you plan to ascend the Iron Throne."

"As is my birthright," Daenerys shot back immediately. "The Usurper must answer for his theft. When I have--" she halted quickly, at a sharp look from Tyrion. Clearing her throat, she continued. "—When I arrive at King’s Landing, I will offer him the chance to surrender."

Daenerys had clearly never met Joffrey. Sansa, however, knew him rather well. Too well. She smiled, enjoying the suspicion that clouded those lovely violet eyes.

"I’m sure he will relent at once, your highness."

"...The Lady Stark was once betrothed to the Usurper, if I recall," Daario remarked. "You must have gotten to know him quite well."
"Why did your betrothal break?" Daenerys cut in, looking to her sharply.

Just the memory made her sick. She did not want to speak of it.

"I—"

"Where is Grey Worm?" Jon Snow cut in suddenly, effectively saving her from answering. She wondered if it had been intentional or not, but such a motion of sensitivity and empathy seemed unlike him, to her.

"On watch duty. You know how he hates a good capon," Tyrion snorted, before taking a bite of his own.

"Watch duty?" Sansa queried, politely cutting into her capon.

"We are, technically, on the run," explained Tyrion, gesturing with his wine. "As you may have gathered, we’ve made just a few enemies in our quest."

"But more than half the great houses support my claim," Daenerys said feverishly. She’d barely touched her food. "They raise their goblets and toast in secret to the restoration of the Targaryen dynasty. I know it."

Sansa looked between the men at the table. Jorah was a Mormont, Tyrion a Lannister, and Jon technically a Stark. Daenerys might have had some of the great houses at her table tonight, but they were all liars, Sansa decided. No one talked of a Targaryen restoration—at least not that she had ever heard. The Targaryen reign had been madness, and no one wished its resurrection. The men at this table were either fools or liars…or, perhaps, prisoners, just like her, for she also did not speak up to contradict Daenerys’ certainty.

"How did you come upon this holdfast?" Sansa asked, changing the subject before Daenerys could return to the topic of her prior betrothal to Joffrey.

"It was…donated," Tyrion interjected with a sly grin.

"It is a most generous donation." Damn. Tyrion would make sure they gave no clues as to how far from Winterfell they were, or which direction they’d ridden. He also, she noticed, would not let Daenerys speak for herself.

"And what is your plan for the Targaryen restoration?" She smiled at Daenerys. "In general terms, I mean. How do you occupy your time?"

"We've been at a standstill," Daenerys said rather stiffly. "Without more gold, we can hardly make any political moves. Even crossing the Narrow Sea was difficult. We're trying to raise supporters, and we have many who support my claim, but without an army..."

"It must be difficult," Sansa sympathized. She took a long swig of her wine. She could feel everyone studying her—particularly Tyrion and Jon Snow. "Do you travel around the country much?"

"It is unsafe for me to show my face much yet," Daenerys admitted, shooting a scowl at Jorah. This was, evidently, a rather sore point. "My bloodriders have been seeking out supporters each day."

So then Daenerys herself was here at the holdfast often, but it seemed that the others might leave during the day. She doubted Tyrion would leave—most of the country thought him dead, and besides, he had been hated by so many, and was so easily recognized—but the others, particularly
Jorah and Daario, would be likely to lead such searches. Jon Snow might as well, as he had Northern blood and looked strikingly like a Stark. The Northern houses might welcome a face so like that of Eddard Stark.

"Every day? All of you go from house to house?" Sansa feigned shock. "That sounds exhausting."

"Yes, but it will be worth it when we have enough gold for our army," Jorah said now. Sansa took another long swig of her wine. Thank you, Jorah Mormont, she thought. Now I know that you all leave the house for long hours during the day.

"I've heard you already have an army. Rumors do circulate in the capital."

"I have the Unsullied, from my time across the Narrow Sea, but we've lost so many men," Daenerys confessed. "Many fell ill on the voyage across the Narrow Sea."

"Do they all stay here?"

"You're a curious little bird, aren't you?" Tyrion interjected, marveling at her over his goblet of wine, his mismatched eyes glittering. "I would suggest caution, my princess. Lady Sansa Stark is far cleverer than she lets on."

"Clever?" Sansa laughed. "Lord Lannister, I have spent the past fifteen years doing little more than needlework and dancing. I would sooner call your horses clever before I would describe myself with such a flattering term."

"You fooled my sister," Tyrion mused, still studying her. "For a time, at least."

She was moving into dangerous waters. She needed to tread far more carefully.

"I would never dream of attempting to fool Cersei Lannister," she said quietly, setting down her fork and looking down miserably at her plate. All eyes were on her.

She had learned enough from her time in King's Landing to know that often you dug your own grave when you spoke too much. Better to keep silent.

"I see you are traumatized, as anyone would be, from spending so many years with my sweet sister," Tyrion said. Sansa flicked her gaze up to him, then quickly back down. "I apologize; I am sure I have stirred unpleasant memories." Tyrion poured her more wine. "Let us ignore politics for a while, Lady Stark. It has truly been far too long since we had a real lady in our midst; we might as well enjoy it while you're here."

The rest of the supper passed innocently enough. Daenerys was far more talkative when talk of horses came up, and Sansa was able to learn that the other men didn't sleep in the stables, as she had originally guessed, but rather in an old granary behind the house. The stables were packed with horses, she learned, and Daenerys went riding whenever they thought it safe enough--often early in the mornings, near dawn.

Jon Snow hardly spoke a word, but Sansa saw that Daenerys' gaze was constantly drawn back helplessly to him, enraptured by him.

The passion, she also saw, seemed to only flow in one direction. Jon Snow hardly looked at her; in fact, he hardly looked up from his food, though he ate little.

At last, near midnight, with her head buzzing with all of the wine, he escorted her back to her room. The halls were silent; as they walked, Sansa tried to memorize the layout of the house from what
she could glean. She would likely have to leave through the window, but if she had the opportunity, leaving through the house might be safer.

The tapers had all blown out; the only light was the thin slats of moonlight coming in from the window at the end of the hall adjacent to her room.

"Your princess is very kind," Sansa said politely in the dark as they paused outside of her door. "And quite beautiful."

Jon Snow did not react to her words.

"Davos will be taking the watch tonight," he said instead. He opened the door for her. "Good night, Lady Stark."

"Good night, Jon Snow," she replied politely.

She waited for hours, until her eyes burned with exhaustion and she knew that Davos was relaxed—perhaps even nodding off outside her door.

And then she set to work.

Dany was waiting in his room when he opened the door, and he had to quickly shut the door and lock it. She was waiting on his bed, naked.

"You did not have much to say tonight," she remarked. Jon ignored her and went to his wardrobe, where he shrugged off his waistcoat and hung it on a hook inside. It was the only item of clothing not meant for fighting or riding that he owned.

"I thought we agreed you would come here less often," he said quietly. He sat on the edge of the bed to remove his boots and breeches. The mattress shifted as Dany sat up behind him, and kissed his back, along his spine.

"Are you questioning my choices?" she bristled. Jon stared out the window into the night. He thought of Sansa locked in her room.

"If anyone found out..."

"...When I am queen it will not matter," Dany said against his neck. "A man can bed whomever he wants. Why can't I?"

They had had this argument before. Jon was weary of it.

"It could cost you everything. Everything that we've worked for."

"It won't. No one knows."

Dany had only just slipped out of his room, near dawn, when there was a pounding on his door. Jon was washing himself, and startled at the noise. He immediately began to panic—Dany would wake the whole house at this point—but then his door flew open, and it was Davos and Jorah, not Dany.

"Sorry, Snow," Jorah said as they entered his room quickly, shutting the door behind them. Jon snatched his shirt and covered himself with it.

"Er--I wasn't expecting a visitor," he confessed. Jorah's gaze took in the mussed sheets, Jon's naked
state, and his wild hair, but he said nothing.

"We have a problem that the princess can't know about," Davos said in a low voice. "The Stark girl is gone."

As was always the case in crisis, Jon's heart seemed to slow, and his panic ceased. That curious calm overtook him, the same calm that he got when fighting.

"When?" He moved backward, still covering himself with his shirt, and pawed through his wardrobe for his riding leathers. He would need to leave to follow her at once.

"We think she's been gone a half hour. There was a commotion in the stables, and Daario left his post at the front gate and went to check. When he returned, there were tracks from a horse, one of the horses was missing, and the gate was left open. He noticed the Stark girl's window was open, so he came to check. I heard nothing," Daavos explained, baffled.

"We need to fetch the girl without letting the Princess know," Jorah said. "You and Grey Worm--"

"--I'll go alone. It will be faster, and easier to catch her. Less noise," Jon said, pulling on his breeches.

For some reason he felt responsible for the Stark girl, like she belonged to him, like this was his fault.

Sansa had carefully led the horse round to the other side of the house, away from the stables, and tied the horse to a post in the kitchen garden with shaking hands.

She had never done anything like this before.

She'd always done as told, never rebelled, always acted the great lady. This was Arya-like behavior. This wasn't Sansa behavior.

Clad in Jon Snow's traveling cloak, she had crept back to the stables, trying to soak in the damp heat as much as possible--for the air smelled like impending snow and if she got lost she had every chance of freezing to death.

The horses kicked and whickered as she sneaked to a stack of buckets at one end of the stables, against which leaned a few pitchforks. It was this or nothing. She needed to draw Daario away from the front gate without making him raise the alarm. Just enough of a commotion to catch his attention, without catching his concern.

Her arms were still shaking from climbing down the rope-blanket she had fashioned, as she pushed the tower of buckets over. She darted out the back end of the stables. Heart pounding, she crouched around the corner behind the low wall, waiting for Daario to walk past.

And sure enough, he did. Holding a rifle, his dirk sheathed at his hip, Daario crossed the courtyard slowly, on silent feet. If she hadn't been watching for him, she would never have heard him, and she felt a prickle of fear. The odds were completely against her--she didn't even know how to ride these great big war horses.

But she couldn't think like that.

She'd spent so much of her life playing the lady. It had been how she had survived in King's Landing for so many years...playing dumb, playing innocent, playing the foolish, naive girl. It
might have kept her alive but it had also kept her stuck.

She needed to save herself this time.

Once Daario disappeared into the stable, she turned and fled. She was wearing slippers but had cut up the sheets to wrap around her feet for warmth, and they made for silent footsteps as she ran. They weren't nearly warm enough but as long as she made good time to Winterfell it wouldn't matter. She went to the front gate and slowly pushed it open, then vaulted herself onto the horse, which was mistrustful of her, and with a burst of speed, barreled through the front gate, clutching desperately to the horse, praying she didn't fall off.

Winterfell wasn't more than an hour and a half away. She just needed to make it to Winterfell, and then she would be free.
Sansa did not look back; she rode along the path as fiercely as she could, though the motion hurt and her thighs chafed quickly. The sky was growing lighter now, and the rain was beginning to turn to ice as the temperature unexpectedly dropped.

She was soaked and she couldn't stop shaking, but for a time she hardly noticed it. Her mind raced: she ought to be covering her tracks, but how? She ought to be taking a roundabout path, but she was barely even certain that she was going in the right direction.

She'd initially been confident, even when the path had disappeared, because everything had looked familiar. But when she looked round, it all looked the same, in all directions. Rolling, tangled moors stretched far as she could see, growing ever treacherous as the freezing rain came down harder. Soon she could barely see; she was riding blindly.

The shadow of looming woods approached, and her heart gave a great leap. They'd certainly come through woods...at some point... Sansa pulled to a stop beneath the thin cover of trees at the forest's edge, grateful for a moment of respite from the ice.

The woods were gnarled and tangled. She wasn't even sure she'd be able to lead the horse through these woods...

*I'll go on foot*, she decided. It would be harder to track her, wouldn't it? She wore no thick boots, and if she left the horse here at the forest's edge, it might leave a little mystery as to how and where she had continued...

She dismounted and sloppily tied the horse to the closest tree. The poor animal shouldn't have to suffer for her; her only comfort was that she knew they'd find the horse eventually. And so she ran into the black woods.

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The horse had left deep gashes in the loose gravel of the path leading away from the house. As far as Jon could tell, she'd gone due northeast.

Wrapped in a thick cloak and leathers, with a bow and arrow and his dirk, Jon set off on her trail. A rifle would make too much noise and would be too hard to aim; the arrows would let him take down the horse, if need be. He did not like the idea of maiming one of their own horses, but Sansa was worth—hopefully—three thousand gold dragons. They could easily sacrifice a horse for that.

The rain had turned to freezing rain at dawn, and was now steadily thickening into snow. It would cover the tracks; he had to be swift.

Sansa had evidently taken one of the farming horses that had come with the holdfast. They might be big and strong, but they were slow. Had she known anything about horses she might have made a different selection—she must have taken one look at the horse's size and stature and assumed that
the horse would have more endurance. One of the ponies would have been a better choice.

At a canter he took the moors. For a time he was able to follow her horse’s tracks, but soon they disappeared into the white. It did not matter. She was going in a straight line, heading toward the woods, which loomed in the distance, blurred by the snow.

One of the big horses was tied by its reins at the forest’s edge, and it reared and screamed when Jon approached. She must have thought she could lose him in the dark forest, but nothing could have been further from the truth. Jon dismounted and tied his own horse. He’d have a job of getting them back to the holdfast, especially with the Stark girl, but once he entered the forest this worry dissolved and his mind cleared. There was nothing before him but the tangled wood, and the tracks she had made in the mud.

He might be known as a dragon, but he'd always been a wolf, too. Jon filtered through the trees like the falling snow, just as silent.

Then he heard it: frantic gasping, twigs snapping, branches crackling like burning logs. And a flash of copper, vibrant as blood, between the trees, flashing like a spectre.

He had her.

_____________________________

She didn't know where she was, or where she had come from, or where she ought to go.

The wood was silent and unforgiving. For a time, she prayed to the Seven as she ran; her father had kept the old gods and frequented the godsdow in Winterfell, but Sansa had taken after her mother and worshipped the Seven. Through her captivity in King's Landing, the Sept had been her refuge. Perhaps they'd hear her now...even if this were the country of the old gods.

But her feet were numb, and the fabric she had tied round her slippers had fallen away, and she couldn't feel her fingers, and she did not know where to go, and so she gave up praying. No one was listening.

Like an animal's instinct, she suddenly felt it: a presence, a ghostly something or someone, somewhere in the wood. Sansa skidded to a stop and fell against a tree, clutching at its rough bark with numb fingers, gasping, and swung her gaze around. She stilled her breath, willing the quiet to come.

The silence was opaque. On shaking limbs she knelt down, slowly, slowly, and picked up a fallen branch, her gaze darting round in desperate search.

There: a shadow. Beyond a low ridge she saw a silent blur of dark, marring the grey wood. Tears sprang to her eyes. It was Jon Snow.

He had her.

It couldn't end like this. Not so soon. She peeled off, knowing that capture was inevitable, knowing that she had already failed. It was over before it had begun. She couldn't save herself.

But she could not quite let go of her hope just yet, so she ran, desperately, choking and gasping. "No," she seethed, stumbling through bramble. It snagged at the heavy traveling cloak—Jon Snow's traveling cloak—and burned her feet with its thorns, and then she was stuck. Furiously she ripped off the cloak, but it did little help: her dress was caught, too many layers of silk and lace. The silk of her dress was soaked with snow and sweat, her hair plastered to her cheeks and neck.
When she got through the bramble, she fell to the ground, still clutching the branch. She rolled onto her back, kicking, to see how far he was.

He had gained on her. He was making his way through the bramble so easily; his cloak was short enough to evade it and the thorns could not catch on his riding leathers. He had a bow and a dirk, and his arrows rattled in their quiver as he moved. His handsome face was mournful; she hated his pity.

"No." She flung herself to her feet once more and turned, swinging the stick. Jon Snow ducked and dodged with ease. He reached out a hand to grab the branch.

"It's over," he told her, sadly, and his gloved hand closed around the end of the branch.

"No!" She was sobbing and she despised herself for it. She wasn't a little girl anymore...and yet, wasn't she? She couldn't even save herself. With a hiss of effort she forced the branch forward, and it smacked him in the face, hard enough that he let go and let out a sharp oath.

She ran again, not looking back. There was a curious whistling sound, and just as she realized it was an arrow, she was suddenly taken down, smacking her cheek on the hard ground.

An arrow pinned her long skirts to the mud. Without a second thought she ripped the silk, but it was too late. Jon Snow lunged. He knocked her back to the ground, impossibly heavy on top of her, and in a blind panic she grappled for the branch and hit his back as hard as she could.

"You can't win this," he growled through his teeth, as she kicked out from under him and scrambled backwards, clutching the branch, gasping for breath as her lungs burned and her head swam.

"I won't be your prisoner!" she sobbed. "I won't. I won't be anyone's prisoner."

"You're Tarly's prisoner, you fool."

"I was going to get my home back. I was going to have someone love me," she despaired. Jon Snow was crouching before her and she clumsily got to her feet, still holding the branch out as though it were a sword. She swung it wildly, and he dodged again.

"If you would just wait a few days' time--"

"—They're never going to save me. No one ever does," she hissed, swinging the branch with another sob. "They are never going to come. They can't pay three thousand gold dragons. You know they can't."

"That's why it's called a negotiation--"

"—They don't need me anymore!" she screamed. Jon froze in place. "They have Winterfell, I know that was all they wanted. But I could have pretended—don't look at me like that! I know you find me pathetic, I know you despise me."

She swung the branch, and this time his grip was true: he caught it and pulled it from her hands, even as he gazed upon her with profound sadness.

"I don't--"

"—You do. I know you do. But you're a prisoner too. Daenerys has no supporters; she will never win the throne. You're just as lost, just as helpless, as I am."
Jon watched her back away from him. Her hands were bleeding and she was shaking violently. "You've taken everything from me. They will never pay my ransom, it's far too much. I was so close to finally having something good."

"We can't keep you forever--"

"--No? Then what? You'll just give me back?" Her laugh was so callous. Jon could only stare helplessly.

He remembered sunlit mornings in the godswood, hearing Sansa singing across Winterfell in the Sept. He remembered her spinning round and round in her pretty dresses, racing through the godswood, breathless and flushed; dancing endlessly at parties with her friend Jeyne. It did not seem possible that that little girl, so innocent and happy and selfish, had grown into this woman before him: bleeding, her soul ripped in half, cornered and desperate as a wild animal. "I can't be a captive again," she began wildly. "I'll kill myself before I am a prisoner again, do you hear me?"

And then she lunged for him. Jon raised his arms to block, but she wasn't attacking him: she ripped his dirk from his belt and then stumbled backwards, unsheathing it.

Panic seized him.

"Sansa," he began carefully, holding out a hand. She shook her head, biting her lip.

"I was a prisoner of the Lannisters for ten years," she said in a low, tight voice that shook with the effort of repressing her sobs. "I was trapped and helpless, and I spent every single day terrified for my life. I was beaten and humiliated, isolated and tormented. I told myself that Father would save me, but they k-killed him."

She was sobbing in earnest now, even as her teeth chattered. Jon couldn't breathe. Eddard Stark's death still haunted him. "Then I t-told myself Robb would save me. But they killed him too. And then all I had left was the hope that s-someone kind would marry me. I spent years waiting, hoping, shunned by nearly everyone for things that had nothing to do with me. And two weeks ago I was given my escape. Dickon Tarly was going to marry me for Winterfell. That was the best I could possibly hope for. But now? They don't need me, and we both know they won't pay more money for me. I know you think I'm stupid. Everyone does. But even I know that they don't need me anymore." She choked out another sob. "Your princess plays her stupid game of thrones, but this stupid game has cost me my last chance at anything remotely resembling happiness. I have nothing left."

There was nothing he could say. She was still holding the dirk, unsheathed, its blade far too close to the soft, vulnerable skin of her wrist. She was shaking violently, her chest heaving, as she swayed in place.

You are dishonorable.

She was right. There was no honor in this. And Dany and Tyrion might fool themselves into thinking the Tarlys would pay, but Jon knew better. He had known better from the beginning, but he had gone along with the plan. Why had he done it?

You're just as lost, just as helpless, as I am.

He held out his hand.

"Come back with me. I swear that by Sunday you will no longer be our prisoner, one way or the other."
"Why in the name of the S-seven should I ever believe you?" she despaired, gasping at the cold. "You are false coin, the falsest coin of all. You stole a man's wife from his own home; you bloodied your hands and thought nothing of it. How could I ever believe--"

"Because we have no use for you without the ransom you are worth," he interrupted furiously. "You obviously cannot ride, you cannot fight, you cannot hunt. You are another mouth to feed, another liability. And we have made you despise us, so there is always the risk that you will murder us all in our sleep," he continued, his voice growing hoarse. "You may not believe in Daenerys' cause; that is your choice. But I will do whatever I must to support Daenerys. I took a vow."

“A B-bloodrider’s vow,” Sansa shuddered. “Why would you give your own life to an empty cause?"

“Why would you take your own life for a man who bought you?"

The hand holding the dirk dropped. The swinging blade glinted at her side as she silently cried, shaking her head. She swayed dangerously. *If she is out here much longer, she will die.*

“It’s all useless, stupid hope.” Her voice broke. “Even now, I’m so stupid, I still h-hope—“

“—You’re not stupid.” He was standing closer now, and his gloved hand closed round her wrist. His other hand freed the dirk from her fingers. “Lord Tarly is sending a man to meet with us at Moat Cailin on Saturday evening,” he said, softer now. “Come back and wait until Saturday.”

“I can’t go back.”

“You can’t go forward. You’ll freeze before you make it to Winterfell.”

She scrunched her eyes shut in pain. She felt weak, lightheaded. Her lips were numb. Something soft and warm brushed her skin, and Sansa opened her eyes; Jon Snow had covered her in his cloak once more. The scent of his skin was heady.

“I’ll go back on one condition. You will change the terms of the ransom and you will show me proof.”

“You don’t have much leverage,” he pointed out. Sansa forced a smile with trembling, pale lips.

“There is always the risk that I will murder you all in your sleep.”

Jon looked away, biting his soft lower lip. “And,” she continued. This was her last bargaining chip, the only card she had left up her sleeve, and she was not even sure it was a true card. “I know… your s-secret. I know what you do… with her.”

She tried to look him directly in the eyes. She swallowed as she watched those dark grey eyes widen slightly, watched his breath catch. She had his attention now. Horror dulled by cold rushed through her. *I was right.* “If you do not prove you’ve changed the t-terms, I will make sure everyone knows. And if, in a w-week, I am s-still your prisoner…”

Something flashed in his eyes. His hand went to his dirk, but he did not draw it. His breathing was quick, low.

“You speak of honor,” he began in disgusted fury, “and yet—“

“I have not told yet,” she reminded him, her heart pounding in her ears like a war drum. And yet
there was a weight settling upon her...she felt curiously sleepy. “Oh no,” she breathed. She had grown up in the north. She knew what this was. She stumbled forward, and strong hands gripped her upper arms.

“You must come back now,” he said in exasperation. The world blurred; he had lifted her, slinging her legs over his arm. *He carries me like a bride,* she thought dazedly, and pressed her face into his shoulder.

So she had been right. Perhaps she was not so stupid after all. Daenerys’ lovely violet eyes, hungry with lust, seemed to swim before her, surrounded by burning candles. The Targaryens had bedded each other for hundreds of years, and everyone said that was what had led to their downfall. Their lust burned, legendary as dragonfire.

Jon felt her slump into him as he walked fast as he could. She wasn’t shaking anymore, wasn’t speaking. His pace quickened, but his mind was filled with fog.

How had she known?

He thought of those Tully eyes sweeping about the room, measuring them all with devastating precision. She knew, because she had spent years honing the ability to cut a person up and reveal everything inside of them. She knew that Dany had no supporters, knew that their cause was empty...she knew what he and Dany did. She had opened him up as easily as if she had sliced open a pomegranate, and every tiny, jewel-like secret had spilled forth, hers to take and crush as she wished, the juice like blood. He’d hardly felt the blade.

Jaime woke to bitter smoke filling his lungs and burning his eyes. He shot up, looking round for the fire, but there was none.

It had been a warm, humid night, and in desperation he’d left the window open. The acrid scent of smoke was coming in through the window. Furiously rubbing his stinging eyes, he went to the window and pushed aside the silk curtains.

His room overlooked the tiny godswood, a remnant from when kings had kept the old gods. It had become little more than decoration, though he could distinctly recall spotting Sansa Stark there from his window every now and then. In the morning sun, he shaded his eyes, able to see smoke billowing from the heart trees.

The godswood was on fire.

It had been burning for a while. A maester and a few soldiers were rushing out with buckets of water, slopping over the rims as they carried them, but these bucketfuls did nothing. It was too late; the fire was too great. A crowd of royal staff had gathered, some attempting to help, but most simply staring. Some were crying as they watched the ancient wood burn.

“Idiots,” he breathed. It was like watching a knocked vase fall to the floor, waiting for the inevitability of the shatter, splatter of water, the ruined porcelain.

Jaime himself kept no gods, neither old nor new. But most of the north kept the old gods.

Minutes later saw him fully dressed. His soldiers rushed around him, not to put out the fire—it was far too late for that—but to obtain a headcount of every last person who knew the godswood had burned.

“No one will say who did it,” Bronn said after sidling up to him. The two men stared at the
smoking wood. “And I believe we all know what that means.”

“The poor thing, her hands are all bloodied.”

A soft, accented voice came from somewhere above. Sansa groaned in pain.

Everything burned and itched. Someone was holding her down, making soothing noises. She was wrapped so tightly she could hardly move.

Her vision cleared. Missandei was hovering over her, tightening the blankets wrapped around her. Beyond her stood Daenerys, clad in plain riding clothes, her hair mussed and damp. Jon Snow was nowhere to be found. “Please do not move, my lady. Your blood needs to warm.”

A steaming tub was next to the bed; Missandei took a hot rag from the water, rung it out carefully, and placed it under her neck.

Daenerys stepped forward, and sat on the edge of the bed. To Sansa’s shock, her eyes were sad.

“Missandei, I will take it from here,” she said. Missandei bowed to Daenerys and left the room, and now they were alone.

Daenerys adjusted the damp rag beneath Sansa’s neck with gentle hands. “I have wronged you,” she said. “I did not know you had been a captive in King’s Landing. I’m sorry.”

Sansa blinked rapidly, feeling her eyes burn. It was ridiculous, to be so affected by such simple words—and such empty words they were, yet they were words she had never heard. *I’m sorry.*

“It was foolish of me to run,” she said finally.

“Yes, it was,” Daenerys conceded. “Though I would have done the same. I *have* done the same, in the past. And worse.”

She stared down at her hands. “I want to rule so that I can change the world.” Now she looked at Sansa again, her expression almost pleading. “I want to create a world where little girls can’t be sold, where men like Jon Snow are not exiled for the actions of their fathers. I want to make a *better* world. But changing the world, taking back the throne—it takes gold. I’ve tried getting gold the honorable way, but it hasn’t worked. I never wanted to hurt you, but I understand that I have.”

Sansa could not find her words. Daenerys smiled sadly at her, and shifted off of the bed. “I will leave you in peace. Jon will keep you company,” she added, and went to the door.

A moment later, Jon walked in. Sansa attempted to shift, but she was wrapped too tightly. Her face felt hot, and she was all too aware that she was naked underneath the blankets.

Across the room they regarded each other. She saw his Adam’s apple move as he swallowed. His eyes were hard. He might as well have been a thousand miles away.

Why did this hurt?

Jon approached the bed slowly. Sansa’s hair was wilder than he’d ever seen it, and she was so tightly wrapped in blankets that she couldn’t move. The torn, bloody, muddied dress lay draped over the chair, along with her corset and underpinnings.

He was blinded by anger, it sang in his veins like fire. *I know your secret. I know what you do... with her.*
“I will do it tonight,” he said stiffly, looking away from her. “Dany—Princess Daenerys is sympathetic to you. It will be a good time to bring it up.”

She actually had the nerve to look sad. He watched her bite her chapped lip and look away. Her cheek was bruised from when she had fallen in the woods. An awful gnawing pain was burning in his chest. “You could have died,” he blurted out suddenly. Her gaze snapped back to him. He let out a slow, seething breath. “You weren’t even going in the right direction. You didn’t even have proper shoes. Did you honestly think—”

“—No. I honestly didn’t think.” The gaze she turned on him was searing. “We all do self-destructive things, sometimes. When we’re desperate.”

Hands fumbling at the waist of his breeches, a mouth on his back, fingers tangled in his hair. Jon cringed from the images; he turned away from Sansa. He was desperate, but for what? “Can you help me?”

She sounded ashamed. Jon turned to find her wriggling, struggling. “It’s too warm,” she explained uncomfortably. “I…can’t move.”

“I’m of a mind to leave you like that,” he confessed, but all the same he went to her and sat on the edge of the bed. His fingers felt clumsy, useless; he felt along her side for where the blanket was tucked against her form, and felt his face flush as he loosened it. He glimpsed a flash of bare shoulder and looked away hastily.

“Thank you,” she stammered, clumsily pulling the blankets up again. She wriggled into a sitting position and the damp cloth fell away from her neck.

He turned away from her and looked out the window. The snow had let up, and the sky was turned lilac as the sun set.

Sansa watched him stare out the window.

“How did you know?” he asked quietly. He didn’t look at her. There was no need to explain what he meant. She pulled the blanket tighter.

“I don’t know. I suppose the way she looks at you.” She looked down. “Do you ever wish you’d stayed at Winterfell?”

“They executed the traitors. I’d be dead.”

Daenerys had given him his life, she supposed. And he would spend the rest of it paying her back for that.

Jon closed his eyes. “I always wondered about you, after your father was murdered, and Robb, too.” His voice tightened; his knuckles bleached as he gripped the fabric of his breeches. “Tyrion said Lord Baelish protected you.”

“I suppose he protected me from being murdered too.”

“But you were beaten?” He was looking at her now, and the candlelight edged him in bright gold. The words were stuck in her throat.

“I shouldn’t have mentioned any of that,” she said. “Sorry. I was a bit…out of my mind.”

His lips twitched.
“You put up a good fight,” he said lightly. A rush of laughter found her; suddenly, they were both laughing, both trying not to and failing. “I thought my nose was broken,” he admitted, touching his nose tenderly. “I didn’t expect you to act so wild.”

“Neither did I.” She drew her knees up to her chest. “I’ve never done anything like that.”

“Really?” he teased.

“Very funny,” she snarked. They fell quiet again. “It’s so strange, to be around you again. I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I thought so too.”

“Did you miss Winterfell? Did you miss us?” She hadn’t meant to ask, but she’d always wondered. Jon opened his mouth to speak, but there was a soft knock on the door, and Missandei came in before he could answer.

Jon shed his coat and shirt, then wondered if he should have left them on. What would she prefer? She’d always been the one to cajole him, the one to knock on his door. He’d never had to wonder whether she preferred to undress him or not. He’d never wondered what she preferred at all.

The knock came, sure enough, just as he was washing his face. Dany was still wearing her riding leathers, and she looked weary.

“Jorah and Daario were chased out of Winter Town,” she confessed as she locked the door behind her. “We barely have enough food to last the week, but plenty of wine,” she continued sarcastically, dropped onto his bed.

“We’ll hunt tomorrow,” he said, and stood before her in his breeches. She looked up at him with suspicion.

“In the snow? There—” He cut her off with a fierce kiss, and pushed her down onto the featherbed. She sighed into the kiss, then broke away abruptly. “What—”

He kissed her again, biting down on her lip and pinning her wrists up by her head. I know what you do with her.

You are false coin.

You are dishonorable.

And yet…

He kissed along her neck, and unlaced the front of her riding outfit with rough, swift movements. She slung a leg around his hips, and he ground his hips into hers in response.

“We need gold,” he said into her skin as his hand found her breast and stroked along the tender skin below it. He kissed her again as he swept his thumb over her nipple, then pinched hard. She whimpered and rolled her hips.

False coin…”I don’t think Tarly will pay three thousand dragons,” he continued. “He doesn’t have it. No one has three thousand dragons right now.”

She slipped her hand beneath his breeches and pressed her palm against him.
“We can’t just give her back,” Dany countered, her other hand tangling in his hair.

“No, you’re right.” He pulled her hand away and lowered himself to kiss between her breasts. Her fingers tightened in his hair as he grazed his teeth over her skin, then trailed lower. For a long time, they did not speak, and her gasps filled the silence. She let out a sharp cry, and then was unlacing his breeches, and he felt dizzy with desire. He entered her, fast, and they moved against each other, desperate and clawing.

After it was done, they lay side-by-side, breathless, naked chests rising and falling, hair clinging to their skin with sweat.

“Perhaps we should lower the terms,” she panted.

Jon closed his eyes.

You are false coin.

“Perhaps we should.”
Really overwhelmed by the lovely comments I've been getting for this story. Thank you so much, everyone.

"Joff thought it might deter the northerners' rebellion," Cersei scoffed.

Baelish was stroking his pointed beard, looking between everyone in the small council. Jaime did not like that look.

Outside the window to the council chamber, the godswood still smoked. The smoke drifted upward, over the walls of the palace, and across King's Landing. _That secret will never stay with us; we can never contain it._ Jaime turned his gaze from the window.

He rarely bothered with these small council meetings. They bored him, all of the double-talk and inferences and back-stabbing and schemes and plots. But he could hardly avoid this one: Joffrey had just burned the palace’s godswood, a direct insult—perhaps the deepest cut he could have made—to the northerners.

And Jaime was about to launch an extremely targeted attack on a northern house, directly positioned between at least six of the greater northern clans. In other words, Joffrey had just earned them a new enemy whose territory he was about to enter.

"There is no telling how the northern clans might react when they learn," Maester Pycelle wheezed. "They have the savage blood, you know; they do not heed the laws of civilized men."

_Right—because burning godswoods is far more civilized,_ Jaime thought with a roll of his eyes. He shifted in his seat, looking at his pocketwatch, then studied his sister. Cersei's eyes had been wet with hot tears all morning, and she was gripping the edge of the table so hard her knuckles bleached. She was the picture of motherly concern.

He was clearly not father material, as he felt no empathy for his secret son's actions. In general he felt no connection to Joffrey. The boy might as well be someone else's son—and of course, much of the world thought he was, or at least pretended to think he was. This latest act of petty viciousness was merely another pearl on the horrid string, another domino tipped in a long line, a line that seemed inexorably headed for their ruin.

"Maester Pycelle is right. The northerners are getting rowdier lately, and so unpredictable," Varys remarked, touching his cheek. "And the Princess Daenerys' influence grows in the north with each passing day. While I cannot say his methods will bring us no trouble, I admit I understand the motive."

"She is a Beggar Princess. She has nothing of value," Cersei dismissed savagely, and Jaime avoided her eyes, pretending to toy incessantly with his watch in the way that she hated. He suspected that it irritated Pycelle and Littlefinger too. Good. "This supposed uprising will be nothing more than a short-lived upset. Jaime will simply go to her hideout and get rid of the little upstart."
Cersei did not know about Tyrion. She did not know about Sansa Stark.

He had never kept secrets from her before.

He couldn't remember when he had started, or why.

"Robert was once a rowdy upstart," he pointed out. Cersei scoffed.

"Robert was from one of the single greatest lineages in the Storm Lands and was backed by respectable families up and down the country."

"And the Starks," Jaime countered. A muscle in Cersei's lovely jaw leapt. "Don't forget, he worked with the northern clans, not against them."

"He was my dear husband. I could hardly forget his illustrious actions," she spat tartly. "Joffrey has merely made a mistake." She tossed her hair now, drawing in a deep breath. "As long as word does not reach any of the northerners—"

—But it will, Jaime thought, though he did not speak his mind. "—At any rate, most of the country has converted to the new gods," Cersei continued pragmatically. "And this is not a conflict of religion. Joffrey did not burn the godswood because he hates the old gods."

No, it wasn't a conflict of religion, she was right about that. It was a conflict of pride, and ownership. Just yesterday they had received intelligence that the Mormont, Umber, Bolton, and Karstark clans were intending on banding together and demanding their independence. No one else had been concerned about this; Pycelle had pointed out that there was far too much tension between the northern clans and always had been for them to ever effectively band together, Littlefinger said that any movement led by a woman was unlikely to succeed (clearly he had never met Maege Mormont...), and Varys said he had heard that the Boltons were planning on double-crossing everyone. Cersei had said that now that the Tarlys held Winterfell, they would have a stronger influence in the north, and rebellion would be less likely.

But without Sansa Stark—a symbol of the north—married to Dickon Tarly, Jaime was not so sure the Tarlys could really hold Winterfell. The northerners took blood more seriously, and they had not yet forgiven the crown for the deaths of the Starks. Their only saving grace was that Eddard Stark had hidden a Targaryen in their midst for so long, and this too still rankled the northerners.

"I must prepare my men," Jaime said abruptly, rising. "Do let me know if I should expect a full-scale northern attack or not." All eyes followed him as he stalked out. In the hall, footsteps followed him.

"I see our politics bore you," Littlefinger said quietly. Jaime halted and did not turn.

"I care not how you handle the King's actions," he dismissed.

"You're not very good at pretending you care not," Littlefinger pointed out.

"What does it matter?" Jaime scoffed, and finally turned round to face the shorter man. Littlefinger was, as ever, dressed more finely than even Cersei. His deep plum silk vest was embroidered with tiny golden mockingbirds, and his darker purple waistcoat was of a rich brocade. "I wonder who gave the King the idea to burn the godswood. Could it have been the man who gave Randyll Tarly the idea of buying and selling Sansa Stark? I do wonder," Jaime said scathingly, advancing on the little man.

Littlefinger's lips twitched, his eyes danced. It felt good to confront him; it would have felt better
yet with a sword in his hand but he would take this much. Sometimes he felt like he would forget how to use his own voice.

"An excellent question. I wonder as well," he mused. "I do wish you good fortune on your venture to the north. The northerners can be so ...unpredictable." He was smiling, and there was a twinge of concern that he ignored. "And all sorts of nasty rumors fly about in that country...you know the clansmen, they'll believe any nonsense they hear."

This old thing again. Jaime flashed Littlefinger a smile.

"They've been set straight before. A bullet between the brows or a blade in the gut usually helps sort out any confusion."

Oh, the rush he got. Jaime turned on his heel and left Littlefinger there. His heart was pounding; he felt he could have run a mile. In the barracks, he found Bronn, who was polishing his rifle.

"You look like you just got fucked," he remarked casually when Jaime entered.

"I miss honesty. Raw honesty. Don't you?"

"In the small council? I don't know," the former sellsword mused, focusing on a tiny scuff. "Depends on who you were honest with."

With whom, Tyrion would have corrected. Jaime's fingers stilled as he took his own rifle from its shelf. "For example, I'd never show raw honesty with Lord Baelish. Or Varys."

Jaime said nothing.

"How soon will the men be ready?"

"By dusk. We'll want to leave then. Word is that there's a fierce storm in the north."

"Snow?"

"Snow," confirmed Bronn. He left the office and went to the outer barracks, leaving Jaime alone.

Jaime had visited Winterfell, once, a long time ago—back when Robert was alive, back when the Stark men weren't yet in contempt of the crown. Eddard and Robert had once been best friends, and Jaime had been dragged along on his yearly visit to the north, with a thousand men as protection for the king. The journey had taken forever. When they'd finally arrived, it was a wet autumn day, and they had ridden into the courtyard of Winterfell. The whole Stark clan had been there, dressed in their dull woolen plaids, their faces hard and wind-chapped. Everything seemed grey there: the ground, the sky, the trees, their tartan, their faces. Jaime had hated it.

But like the red leaves of the heart trees, Lady Catelyn's fiery hair had stood out among all that grey, and her children's hair with it. Jaime had ridden past them on his war horse, feeling their awe. The oldest boy Robb looked a Tully, and so did Sansa. The younger children—he could not remember their names—had the red hair, too. One of the little girls had Eddard's long face and dark hair.

And then, off to the side, hidden from view, was a little boy that so resembled Eddard and Lyanna and Brandon that it took his breath away. He'd learn later that that boy—whose face could have been a model for every Stark statue in the crypts of Winterfell—was the Targaryen boy.

"Who is that boy?" Jaime had asked Catelyn later. "He looks more Stark than your lord husband."
Catelyn had bristled.

"That is Jon Snow," she had said stiffly. At the time, he'd thought the boy was a bastard of Eddard's, and the idea that the so very honorable Eddard Stark had fathered a bastard had kept him amused for the whole rest of the visit.

Why had Eddard not given him the Stark name? 'Snow' was such an odd choice. He'd thought Eddard must have done it to appease his wife, but now he was not so sure. It was almost like he had wanted the truth to come out, had wanted everyone to know who the boy really was.

The Targaryen wolf was gone, now. Some said he had been killed, others said he was somewhere in Essos. The Beggar Prince Viserys had stolen him, but Viserys was dead now. He'd be a man grown now, in his mid-twenties at least.

Jaime shook himself from his reverie. It was odd to think of snow—he had not seen it in so many years, being this far south—and it was odd to think of Jon Snow.

He had other Targaryens to kill.

Lady Stark's room still bore signs of the disturbance. The servants hadn't been able to get the bloodstains out of the ancient wooden floor from where Big Tom had been slain. Her wardrobe was little more than firewood, as they'd taken an axe to it to get through the door. The perfume that Dickon had bought her—Myrish, in a glass bottle, made from roses from Highgarden—was left uncapped, and the room smelled powerfully of roses.

Dickon had not slept since that night. Every time he closed his eyes, he thought of how her face must have looked when the Targaryen savages had broken in. It made his hands shake.

He had first laid eyes on her a mere few weeks ago, but the moment was as fresh in his mind's eye as though he were living it again. He had heard Father talk of the Starks, the rise and fall of their clan, and of the little Stark lady held at King's Landing.

At the masquerade ball he had finally seen her.

She had caught his eye, before he had known who she was. He had been discussing swords with Jaime Lannister—general of the royal army and perhaps the man he most admired—when a flash of copper had caught his eye.

She had been standing beneath a candelabra and her hair had seemed to glow. He forgot he had been speaking as he had taken in the willowy form, the girl dressed in grey silk, a silver mask of lace hiding her eyes. She had been standing in the corner, next to Lord Baelish. His father had told him that he would be meeting his fiancee that night, but he had not known her identity yet.

General Lannister had laughed suddenly, drawing him abruptly back to the present. His face had colored with shame. Gods, how he was embarrassing himself.

"S-sorry, General Lannister, I--"

"Oh, don't apologize. Lady Sansa Stark has been known to have such an effect on ...lesser men." Lannister's words had lingered in distaste as he had looked to Lord Baelish, whose pointed beard made him recognizable even with his golden mask. He watched Lord Baelish whisper something into Sansa Stark's lovely ear. They were both staring at him, and he was staring back like a fool.

"That is the Stark girl?" He had always heard the Starks were horse-faced, savage-mannered
clansmen who kept the old gods and never washed their hair. But she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen. His mouth had gone dry and his fingers twitched.

"Nothing like gawking at a woman like you've never seen one before to win her over," Lannister mused dryly. Dickon felt a strong hand on his shoulder, guiding him back to face him. "For gods' sake, don't swoon. You're not a bloody maiden."

"I—I--yes, of course," he stammered. His waistcoat felt unbearably heavy, suddenly, and he felt his mask clinging to his skin uncomfortably.

Everything had changed. The tales he had heard, of the Stark girl being held in captivity, isolated, her betrothal to the king destroyed—they seemed different, now that he knew she was no savage northerner. He had never thought much of it before. But now... How she must have suffered, he thought, sadly. He chanced another glance at her. She was no longer looking at him, and Lord Baelish's hand was on her arm, then on the small of her back.

"Lord Tarly. Looking well," came the general's voice suddenly, and Dickon's gaze snapped to his father, who had joined them. His mask sat upon his face like it had been ordered to do so. "I should warn you, your son is quite taken with Lady Stark. Hopefully this explains the drooling and poor conversation."

Dickon was beginning to think that, perhaps, the general was not so heroic as he had once thought. He really was shockingly rude. Lannister's words might have angered his father, but to his shock, his father merely snorted, looking Lannister full in the eyes. His pupils seemed wider as he gazed upon Lannister.

"What luck. Few men are taken with their future wives," he remarked. Lannister threw his magnificent golden head back and roared with laughter.

"Luck indeed! Or perhaps not. There must be some cautionary tale about falling for a woman at a masquerade, is there not?"

Dickon forced a smile at Lannister. "I wouldn't know," Lannister added with an innocent shrug. "I never was much for reading."

"Dickon neither," Father agreed. "Thank the Seven for it. Our family has had enough shame."

Dickon bristled, but he would not dare openly disagree with his father here, at a party, in front of General Lannister.

"Lady Sansa is quite well-read. Perhaps she can teach you," Lannister remarked. Father laughed, perhaps a little too hard. Dickon now noticed the wine sloshing in his cup. He had never even seen his father have more than one measured, reluctant sip of wine. Lannister motioned for one of the servants to refill Father's cup, and Father actually had accepted, slightly red-faced, laughing with Lannister.

Lannister and Father had gone off, leaving Dickon to continue to stare helplessly at Sansa Stark. She'd smiled at him, and his heart had begun to pound. Did she know they were to be wed? He would bed this lovely creature; he would save her from King's Landing and wed her and bed her. He had never lay with a woman before; the candelabra seemed to illuminate the impossibly soft skin above the neckline of her gown, which swelled slightly with her every breath. She was perfect.

And now the Targaryen savages had her.
He couldn't cry like some sort of girl. He would not. Dickon set to work picking the silk dresses from the floor that had spilled forth from the wardrobe. They smelled like her skin, the scent that had tantalized him just a few nights earlier as they had walked together in the night. She had been so radiant, so charming. He'd always felt so uncomfortable at parties and Sansa had seemed so natural, like a flower blooming in a garden that had been planted just for her. As they had met at the mouth of the Great Hall, he had been silenced by a fresh wave of admiration. She had torn herself away from speaking to one of the ladies and he had watched her approach him, resplendent in a rosy gown that was the same pink as her lips, the ghost of laughter around her eyes. She smoothed herself as she reached him, her eyes glimmering with something like a promise. He had been unable to think of anything witty or clever to say, and had felt how he so was lacking. He could only offer her his arm, helplessly, and hope that she did not think him a stupid fool.

Dickon picked up the silks and lay them on her bed. She must be so scared right now, he thought.

And Father would say nothing of the ransom note, of where it had come from, of how they would pay. "Worry not," he'd said gruffly, each time Dickon had asked. His father had always been so terrible at keeping secrets, and the gleam in his eyes told Dickon that there was so much he did not know.

"What in seven hells are you doing, boy?" His father's harsh voice broke him from his thoughts, and Dickon turned, still holding one of Sansa's dresses. His father cast his dark eyes about the room, seeing how the silks had been picked up and the broken wardrobe pushed to the side.

"I-I just thought," he sputtered, his face growing hot, and he hastily dropped the dresses. "What, are you some sort of girl?"

He swallowed over the lump in his throat. "I must do something," he finally said, finding his voice. "The waiting--"

"Forget the dresses. Come, we have a meeting with Lord Baelish," Father said gruffly, gesturing for Dickon to follow him.

Dickon hastened after his father, out of Sansa's room. When they came to the open air of one of the breezeways he realized just how heavily the room had smelled of the rose perfume, and now he smelled like it, too. Father would not like that.

In the old Maester's Tower, Lord Baelish was waiting, examining an old-fashioned Myrish lens. He turned when they entered, his long mulberry-colored cloak swirling elegantly. His eyes glittered when he saw Dickon.

"Lord Baelish," Dickon greeted. Why was Lord Baelish here? The man was known for his ability to produce gold out of seemingly nowhere—was he truly their only answer to retrieving Sansa?

"Have I ever told you just how handsome your boy is, Lord Tarly?" Baelish said in an unctuous voice. Father looked uncomfortable, and gestured for them all to take their seats around the small table.

"You've mentioned it," he said shortly. "Now, let us get to this business. The Beggar Princess has been informed that we will be meeting her at Moat Cailin on Saturday eve, to negotiate."

"We will?" Dickon asked, half-rising from his seat, but at the stony look of his father, he sat back down. His face grew warm. He'd not known...would it be enough time to prepare?

"We will not. There will be no need," said Baelish, his eyes glittering. "General Lannister is taking a small garrison to the Beggar Princess' hideout. The soldiers will execute the Beggar Princess and her Targaryen savages and take Lady Stark."
"It's the perfect opportunity. It's the first time we have been able to track them to a place where they can be attacked, and they have no plans of moving, because they intend to negotiate with us on Saturday," Father summarized.

"O-oh." Dickon stared at his hands. "Have you had any word of how they are treating Lady Stark? Will we alter the wedding date? We've put the preparations on hold for so long now. I admit, I do not know what goes into preparing for a ball, but--"

"--There won't be any wedding, boy. You're not marrying the Stark bitch," Father interrupted bluntly.

Baelish was smiling.

"Why not? We're engaged; we're living in her home," Dickon blurted. Father and Baelish exchanged a look, one that made him feel like a child.

Lady Stark had seemed so remote...had she known she would not be marrying him?

"It is not your concern. You'll wed a proper southron girl at some point," Father said, waving his hand.

"What will happen to Winterfell?" Dickon thought of the exhausting, sprawling journey north.

"We'll continue to live in it."

"And what of Lady Stark?"

"She will...go south, back to King's Landing."

"Worry not, my beautiful boy. I will take good care of your lovely northern princess," Baelish said softly, stroking his beard.

"Back to King's Landing? But she just got away." Dickon shot to his feet, and he heard the chair knock over behind him, but his face felt hot and the blood was pounding in his ears. "You saw with your own eyes how happy she was to leave, Father. You can't just—" his voice caught in his throat, and his eyes burned.

"Got away? The Stark bitch was very well kept by the Lannisters, even when her father and brother betrayed the crown," Father countered. "Did you not see her garbed in silks? Did she seem to be starving, or wanting for shelter?" His father's dark brown eyes, so like Samwell's and yet so unlike his, fixed on him. "Good gods, Dickon, use your head. You know the Starks have a penchant for those foul Targaryens. Who knows what the bitch has been up to since she was taken."

Dickon blinked rapidly, his vision blurring as his father's face became distorted and blurred before him. "Are you going to weep? You're as pathetic as your brother. Get out of my sight," he spat.

"Dickon is a sensitive man; it is an admirable qua—" Baelish began, but Father cut him off, his face turning red as raw meat.

"--He is not a sensitive man. He is acting like a fool, like a woman. Go, leave, get ahold of yourself, boy."

Dickon inhaled sharply.
"I am fine, Father," he insisted. "I don't think Lady Stark would ever--"

"--I don't care what you think. The matter is settled. And now Winterfell is ours, and soon we will be rid of that savage pretender to the throne," Father said, settling back in his chair. "Now, leave us. We have no more use for you."

Dickon left the Maester's Tower and went straight to the godswood. He did not keep the old gods, of course—that was for savages and brutes and smallfolk—but he had always liked sitting among the ancient trees, and besides, he wanted to be alone.

It had snowed all morning but the snow had let up. Covered in snow, the red leaves of the heart trees stood even more vividly, making him think of Sansa's hair. Dickon brushed the snow off the crude stone bench at the center of the godswood and sat upon it, though he felt a chill at once through his breeches. His clothes were ill-suited to this harsh northern weather.

Sansa had seemed to love it.

Was she befouling herself with one of the Targaryen savages at this very moment? He doubted it. Sansa was a lady, that much had been plain from the start. A lump was still forming in his throat, try as he might to swallow over it. He ought to have been practicing with his sword, or something; it was what his father had always encouraged him to do, and he had always been obedient. But it never made him feel better, if he were being honest. He wished his older brother Sam were here. Father despised Sam, but Sam had always known what to say to make him feel better. Even when Sam himself had been chastised and shamed, and ruthlessly compared to Dickon, he had always been so kind.

His eyes still burned and it made him angry. Maybe he was just as much of a girl as Sam was. He was being stupid. Sansa Stark should not have mattered to him. But he felt like an intruder in Winterfell, in the whole of the north, and he felt like he had taken something from her. And it wasn't what he'd wanted at all—he had been thinking constantly of that look on her face as they had rode away from King's Landing. She had remained twisted in the carriage, staring at its silhouette, for a long time. And then, when she'd finally turned to face forward once more, he had seen a relief so profound in her eyes. It had made him think of his brother, and the day he had finally been sent away from their home. He'd cried, of course, but as Dickon had walked with him to the front gate, helping him to carry one of his trunks, he had seen his brother's face—no, his whole being—transform. He had seemed lighter, brighter. Like he could feel hope again.

He had felt like he'd rescued her. It had felt good.

"I am sorry to take such a jewel away from you, Dickon."

Baelish was at the edge of the godswood, his heavy plum cloak trailing in the snow. "I did not know you kept the old gods," he continued as he advanced toward him. Baelish sat upon the bench beside him.

"I do not, Lord Baelish. I merely wanted some air."

They sat in silence. Dickon had never quite known what to say to Lord Baelish. He felt so uneasy around him. "Do you?" he finally spoke, desperate to break the silence. "Keep the old gods, I mean." Baelish smirked.

"No, I cannot say I do. I never understood the appeal."

"Neither have I, though it is a nice garden." Dickon fidgeted with his fingers, which were turning
red in the cold. "I am glad that it will be General Lannister to come to Lady Stark's rescue. He is the finest general that the army has ever seen. He's not lost a battle yet."

Baelish did not speak, though his mouth twitched. At last he turned that glittering gaze upon Dickon.

"He is fierce. Perhaps too fierce," he said almost mournfully. "A man so prone to violence...and for Lady Stark, it may not be such a relief."

"What do you mean? Do you think she really did—" he couldn't even say it. "You can't think she...lay with one of the Targaryens."

"No, she is a lady, and of her own volition she would never reduce herself in such a way. But there are rumors...but of course, only a fool puts stock in rumors."

"Rumors?" Dickon got to his feet, his breath clouding in the air. "Speak plainly, my lord."

"I would never want to speak ill of such a beloved general," Baelish said in a low voice. He too rose to his feet, and leaned close to Dickon. His breath smelled like mint. "And I know you have always admired the man. Your father admires him as well."

"What are these rumors?"

"Only whispers...and Lady Sansa seemed so very sad at court for so very long...she never could look the general in the eye, and of course, as he is the queen regent's brother, he was...forced...upon her so often. I do wonder if he was the sole reason that she wished so very much to leave King's Landing."

"You think he—"

"--Rumors, my dear boy. Whispers, and nothing more. I doubt them myself. Still, he is a man of profound violence...and he has no wife, and does that not seem strange? A man who looks like a god himself, of status lower than only the king...why has he not married? And, further, what must that do to a man?"

Baelish stepped back, a subtle smirk on his lips. "He must be so...frustrated. As I'm sure you can imagine." Baelish shivered. "Oh, I must be off. It is far too cold for me here, and too empty. I bid you goodbye here; I must apologize in advance, for I believe that when we meet next, I shall be a married man."

Baelish gave a low bow and turned, his cloak swirling about his slight form.

His mind seemed to turn dark. The godswood faded around him, briefly. Dickon clenched his fists and set his jaw and left the godswood. His father was still in the Maester's Tower, and when Dickon entered, he was pressing the seal into sealing wax.

"You embarrassed me today," he said without looking up.

"Baelish told me something disturbing about General Lannister," Dickon blurted. Father's gaze snapped up to him.

"You keep your mouth shut about the general, boy."

"Wh-what?" Dickon stammered. "Father, what Baelish said about the man—it's foul, it's disgusting—how could you--"
"--I did nothing, boy!" Out of nowhere, Father flung the metal seal at him; it hit his brow and Dickon stumbled back with a shout, into a table bearing a crystal decanter of whisky and glasses. The table toppled and the glass shattered; when he took his hand from his brow, it was covered in blood. Father was red-faced and breathless, his hands shaking and his eyes wide. "Do you hear me? Nothing. Now get out."

"We have sent word to Lord Tarly, to lower the amount of your ransom." Daenerys sat perfectly straight, like she had practiced at looking regal. Sansa tried not to look at Jon. There was a shadow of a bruise on Daenerys' neck, nearly hidden by her hair. "We understand that three thousand gold dragons is more money than he may be able to produce, and we want to be realistic in our request."

*Our request.* It sounded so polite, so lighthearted.

"Thank you, Princess."

Daenerys dismissed her, and Sansa followed Jon back to her room. There was no scent of roast capon, nor any signs of cooking, she noticed, though it was suppertime. Jon did not speak, and when they arrived at her door, he merely stood beside it, waiting for her to enter.

She paused before him. "Thank you. I don't know what this has cost you, but whatever it is, I thank you for it."

She met Jon's grey eyes. He looked away, licked his lips, then took her by the arm and pushed her into the room. He shut the door, and then in the frosty darkness—for her fire had died—he rounded on her, so close that his chest brushed against her, his hands gripping her arms.

"You will not speak of it," he whispered. Sansa reflexively tried to back away, but his grip was like a vice.

"The second part of the agreement is that I will no longer be a prisoner, no matter the outcome of the meeting with Lord Tarly," she hissed back. The room suddenly seemed too warm, and she tried to twist out of his grip, but he held fast. "Until you honor that—"

"—What the hell am I supposed to do?" In his fury, the old northern accent was becoming stronger. He sounded like Robb, like father. Out of nowhere she wanted to cry, but she would not cry before him anymore. "Seven hells, my hands are tied—"

"—not so tied, I think," she retorted in a whisper. "I saw her neck."

His cheeks became flushed. A muscle leapt in his jaw. "I did what was necessary to lower the ransom. You will not shame me—"

"—you shame yourself. I have done nothing!" She writhed against his grip again. "I have thanked you for lowering the ransom, but I will not release you until both conditions are met."

Jon's breathing was shallow; she could hear him grinding his teeth as he glowered at her. "Jon, what if she becomes with child?" she asked in a softer voice.

"It can't happen," he said. His grip did not loosen.

"But what of your soul?" she pressed. "Such a secret must make you miserable. How can you live in such a way?"

"Not every god thinks it a sin. Only the Seven," he said, but his voice was weak. Desperate.
Almost beseeching. "The Targaryens wed brother and sister for hundreds of years. You said yourself I am no Stark. If I am no Stark, then I am Targaryen."

"But you don't want this. I know you don't."

She couldn't say why she did it. She raised her hands, slowly, and felt Jon's grip loosen slightly. She placed her hands on his face. The roughness of his beard tickled her skin. With bated breath he waited as she touched his face. "It was unkind of me to say you were not a Stark," she admitted. "I think you're afraid."

He swallowed.

"What could I possibly fear?" He let go of her arms and stepped back, out of her reach. "The whole country is afraid of me, afraid that I live and breathe, afraid that I may land on King's Landing and try to claim the throne. There is nothing for me to be afraid of."

He stalked out of her room, and she heard him lock the door. She was alone, in the dark and cold, once more.

She crawled to the bed. The shorter cloak that Jon had covered her with was still strewn over the chair, with the tattered, bloody gown she had tried to run away in. She didn't know why, but she picked it up.

To be afraid, to live in fear...it was the worst thing, the very worst. She held the cloak against her, as though holding Jon. And then, disgusted with herself, she threw it down again.

She'd always been so weak. She could cry at anyone's pain. She had once cried for a Lannister man, when he had been humiliated at a party. She'd been unable to stop herself.

She needed to be stronger. She needed to stop feeling.

He needed to move, needed to ride, but he could go nowhere. He was trapped. Jon prowled the hall outside of Sansa's bedroom like a ghostly wolf, pacing to and fro relentlessly. Anger rushed through his veins, dizzying and acidic. Perhaps it was the hunger making things worse. He was hungry, so hungry he could not see straight. There always seemed to be wine, but never food. They'd have to kill one of the horses, soon, unless they could make it to Friday, when the market was raised in Winter Town.

But what of your soul?

His soul. A laughable thing. He had done so many wrongs he had lost count of them. All in service to Daenerys and her cause. He thought whatever was left of his soul must be ragged, burned, a thin rag flapping in the breeze.

You're just as lost, just as helpless as I am.
Part I: Chapter Five

Sansa had been unable to sleep again, for hunger and for cold. There was no firewood left to put in her fireplace, and when she had knocked on her door and asked Daario for some more, shivering as she had spoken, he had gleefully told her that this was not an inn and she was their prisoner, not their princess. That, and she had been furious all night about her conversation with Jon, though she was not sure why it had upset her so much.

At dawn when the sky lightened she saw that much of the snow had melted once more, giving way to rain. The courtyard was dotted with pools of icy muddy water formed in the loose gravel, and a thick fog lingered, blurring a black silhouette that approached the stables. With nothing else to do, Sansa watched as the silhouette disappeared into the stables and emerged soon after with a black horse. It was Jon, she belatedly realized, and the horse on which he had carried her from Winterfell.

He led the horse around the courtyard at a bit of a run, for a few laps, and the horse reared and jumped. It didn't seem like anyone was allowed to go outside of the holdfast's walls; he must have been trying to exercise the horse as best he could.

He'd always been gentle with animals, she remembered. The stray dogs that lingered in Winterfell's halls could always expect a mouthful of stolen food and an affectionate rub on the belly from him. She leaned her forehead against the freezing glass, watching as he rubbed the horse's neck, smiling, even as the rain poured. That anyone could feel love at all in a place like this, so stony and hopeless, seemed impossible, but Jon must have loved this animal, to be out in the rain like this.

He had once been a naive, innocent child, just like her. He had once been loving and kind. She thought of him giving Bran the fish, and then, to her own fury and shame, she felt tears tracking down her cheeks as she thought of Bran, now reduced to just another brother she had lost. She scrunched her eyes shut, willing the tears to stop. Being in the north had brought old memories of her brothers and sister back, memories she had tried to repress, because all they did was hurt her. These memories were lovely as roses but if she tried to hold them they would prick her just as well.

Everyone she had ever loved was gone now; it was just her left. She and Jon were all that remained of the Winterfell she had known and loved. She felt like she was slowly being erased from the world; sometimes, in her worst moments in King's Landing, she had wondered if she had simply imagined her whole childhood.

Did Jon feel the same way? As far as she knew he had been across the Narrow Sea from the time he had left Winterfell to only a few months ago. But to look at him in the pouring rain, he looked as much a part of the north as the snow itself. He'd ridden through the snow so easily, too, and had tracked her through the tangled woods with no effort at all. He belonged here. How had it felt, to be taken from a place to which he so clearly belonged—and how did it feel, she wondered, to come back to it, after all this time?

Out of nowhere she remembered her father's words: *the lone wolf dies but the pack survives*.

What would happen, she wondered, if she were kind to Jon?

*I never wanted to think it*, she mused as she watched him run with the horse, *but he is as much a wolf as I am*.

She was ashamed of her thoughts from the night before. She had spent ten years watching Cersei
try to run from love, and choking on the noose of her own bitterness every time. She had watched
the Lannisters respond to hatred with violence. It did not work. She had always known it. Every
time the people of King's Landing rioted, the Lannisters—Cersei especially—responded with just
more violence, harsher rules. Jon was hurting, living in fear. He did not need violence from her; he
needed kindness.

When the garrison had first set out in the humid evening, riding away from King's Landing, the
men had been jaunty and cheerful. In the towns outside of King's Landing, they had been
welcomed with cheers and admiration, and had taken up an entire inn and its stables the first night,
for free, with plenty of women warming the soldiers’ beds. It had seemed like some great romantic
adventure, and the morale had been high. Jaime was used to this. Every battle, every career, he had
observed how boisterous the energy was, in the beginning, especially if they were first-time
soldiers.

And how quickly it could dissolve! He'd laughed and drank (well, pretended to; he did not drink as
a personal rule) and jested with the rest of them, well into the wee hours of the morning, but when
it came time to turn into his own bed, in his private room at the inn, he had lay awake well into the
dawn, filled with a sense of dread. He could not name its source; there should have been nothing
for him to dread. They had contained the gross error of the godswood, and the land was peaceful.

He'd never been one to be overcome by fear, but as he got older, that had begun to change. He had
seen too much, he knew the ways of the world too well. For every battle he had won (and he'd won
many), so much had been lost. When he had been young, and things were still good between he and
Cersei, every jaunt off to battle had felt like another great game, like he was some sort of golden
knight.

He did not feel that way anymore, and it seemed a great loss.

He got no sleep at all; yet when they regrouped in the pale blue dawn to continue north, with all of
his men irritable and puffy-eyed, he still felt wide awake, and on edge. He was constantly looking
over his shoulder for an enemy he could not name.

They rode the whole day, at a fast clip. The men complained about the pace, but only briefly: they
knew better than to challenge him too much. The lush green of the land around King’s Landing
soon gave way to twisting hills and boggy drops, and the towns were fewer and farther between,
their houses not so high, their walls not so new. These people wore no silks and did not greet the
sight of redcoats on white horses with cheers and tossed flowers, but rather with hard, suspicious
stares and closed doors.

Something was wrong. He could feel it.

"We've got to stop soon," Bronn said, riding faster to ride apace with him as they passed yet
another village with thatched roofs and crumbling stone walls. He saw a man in tartan watching
them pass, a pitchfork over his shoulder. Grey tartan...it might have been the Stark tartan, but he'd
been too far away to tell. "We'll ride the horses into the ground if we don't."

"We're making bad time. At this rate it will be another day before we're even close," Jaime argued,
urging his horse faster, eager to put distance between himself and the man in the tartan.

"We have to stop tonight," Bronn insisted bluntly. He'd never been one to take positions of
authority or rank terribly seriously, and though normally Jaime appreciated that about the man, at
the moment it angered him, particularly as he knew he was right.
"We'll stop at the next big town," he finally said grudgingly, after looking back at the garrison behind them. The soldiers were sleepy on their horses, and at this level of exhaustion, the horses could easily be lamed by a poorly-placed rock.

Well after sunset they came to a town that looked civilized enough; at any rate, there was a large inn, with enough space to accommodate at least most of their garrison. The others could set up camp; it'd be good for them, he reasoned, to get a real taste of what war was actually like. It wasn't all prancing from inn to inn, sharing hay-filled mattresses with pretty whores. Most of the time it was sitting in cramped tents in the rain, sinking into the mud, sick with hunger yet afraid to eat, muscles tensed all the time.

As they rode into the town, doors were locked and shutters slammed. It was late, Jaime told himself; the villagers were merely getting ready for bed.

The inn was in a slanting wooden building with a roof in dire need of re-thatching. Jaime and Bronn went to the innkeeper, a thin, haggard man missing far too many teeth, dressed in tartan. If Jaime had ever paid attention to the northern clans he might've been able to identify which house the tartan belonged to, but he'd never been able to make himself give a damn about that nonsense. He knew the Stark tartan well enough, as Eddard and his daughter had been at court for so long, but he wasn't even sure he could have picked it out of a bunch at this time. They all looked the same to him. He thought of the man with the pitchfork, staring at him with such hatred. Didn't the Stark tartan have white in it? he wondered uneasily, studying the wool.

"We'll take all of your rooms. We're on the King's business," Jaime told the man, setting a leather pouch filled with gold dragons before him, probably more gold dragons than the man had ever seen in his life.

And yet the innkeeper took the pouch with suspicious hands, looking upon Jaime with the utmost disgust.

"Lannister gold," he mused. Jaime did not like his tone, and by the way Bronn's hand went lightly to the hilt of his sword, Bronn had noticed the tone as well. The innkeeper's plain eyes followed the movement of Bronn's hand.

"King's gold, in fact," Jaime corrected coldly. "I believe it should be more than enough to pay for all of your rooms for the evening. It's more than fair payment."

"Surprising that the general wants to pay his fair share," the innkeeper said. Jaime's hand went to his own sword now; not to mention his pistol was in clear view as well.

"I don't like your tone. We're the royal army, let me remind you. We don't have to pay you. This is a courtesy."

The man looked like he'd speak further, but his eyes took in the swords, the pistols. Working his jaw, he took the leather pouch all the same.

"That was odd," Bronn remarked later, after they had got all of the garrison in the inn. The inn was packed with men on crowded benches, eating and talking noisily. Just outside the window, their horses were stabled. Jaime and Bronn sat in the corner; Jaime did not feel very hungry, and Bronn never seemed to eat. The man only drank from a flask, and he was doing so now, as they watched the soldiers.

"Not everyone has much love for the royal army," Jaime agreed. "I don't expect they'll get much nicer, the further north we go."
"I don't know that it was the royal army he hated so much," Bronn said, before taking a long swig. He had, as usual, given voice to what Jaime had been thinking. No, it had been a personal matter. The innkeeper hated him. But why? Jaime had given many people cause to hate him in his life, but he had not even been north in years. Was it still the old story of Joffrey's parentage, still causing trouble? That ghost would haunt him until he died. But it's true, he thought uncomfortably. Where there's smoke, there's fire. Rumors only spread if they're easy to believe.

He was so exhausted, yet again that night he did not sleep. This night was colder than the last; even the distance they had traveled in the day had made much difference in the weather. As they got further north, as the elevation climbed, they'd feel it more. By tomorrow night they'd be in the middle of the autumn snow and ice.

He tossed and turned, and it was a relief when dawn came, though dawn was subtler here, greyer too. Jaime was the first one to the stables, where the innkeeper and his stable boy were helping to prepare their horses. The innkeeper's wife was watching from the door to the kitchens, dressed in tartan as well. Jaime felt another twinge of unease. Wasn't tartan meant for special gatherings and events? No one of the lower class should be dressed in tartan for a normal day.

"They have no love for you," Bronn observed when he joined him. "They've been courteous to the other men, and good enough to me. It's you they hate."

"Lucky for me, I'm not trying to get the popular vote," Jaime said acidly, mounting his horse and kicking the heels of his polished black boots into the animal's hide.

The mood of the garrison had soured; no one had wanted to leave the inn so early. He was making friends everywhere, he observed with black humor, though all the same he was glad to see the last of that innkeeper. They rode out of the village, and he felt eyes on him the whole way. It's you they hate.

People had hated him all his life. He wondered when he'd get used to it.

"Lord Tarly has requested that you dress and meet him in the Great Hall; the Bolton clan has come to visit," one of the servants called through Dickon's door.

Dickon rose and studied himself in his mirror. There was a nasty purple splotch over his brow, dented by rusted red, where the metal seal had hit him. His own hair wouldn't cover it, so he tried putting on his wig, which he'd not worn since he'd left the south. No one wore powdered wigs here, up north, and he'd felt silly in them. It didn't matter; the wig didn't hide the bruise any better. Perhaps they'd assume he'd acquired it in some impressive way.

He dressed in a dark green velvet waistcoat and vest, the Tarly green, and did his best to neaten his hair. He knew nothing of the Boltons, but he feared the northern clans, and was anxious about meeting the clans.

When he was satisfied with his appearance, he left his rooms and went to the Great Hall. It was pouring rain this morning and the snow that had fallen mere days earlier was mostly gone, leaving grey mud in its place. The only colour to be had was from the red leaves in the godswood.

The air in the Great Hall was damp; this was supposed to be the grandest place in all of Winterfell and yet it was not even as warm or welcoming as the kitchens at Horn Hill. A few tapers had been lit in the Great Hall but they did nothing but emphasize just how grim the place really was.

And standing there, before his father, were two of the grimmest-looking men Dickon had ever
seen. His velvet waistcoat felt positively celebratory compared to their dark grey tartans, threaded with bloody red.

The older man was shaven, and bald, and had watery, eerie blue eyes that looked like a mistake. The younger man next to him had thick, unruly dark hair and the same eerie blue eyes, and a mean, hungry look about him.

"Ah, this must be your son," said the older man in a voice barely above a whisper. It was a surprising voice: warm and smooth as butter, and just as soft. It was ill-matched to its owner.

"Dickon, this is Lord Roose Bolton and his son Ramsay, of the Bolton clan," Father said, not meeting Dickon's eyes. Dickon strode to them, standing as tall as he could, even as he saw Ramsay's eyes take in his velvet and white stockings with something like amusement dancing in his eyes. Next to them in their leathers he felt silly, like a woman, and he did not like it.

"I've not yet met a clansman, beside Sansa Stark, yet," Dickon said by way of greeting, after offering them a handshake. Roose Bolton's handshake was limp and clammy; Ramsay's was almost painful.

"Ah, Sansa Stark," Ramsay said. His voice was oddly high, and musical. "Poor little wolf."

"We have heard of her kidnapping," Roose said into the hush of the hall. "The girl has seen too much tragedy, to be sure."

Dickon clenched his fists, thinking of General Lannister.

"Yes, she has," he replied stiffly. Ramsay was looking at him with great interest that left him nettled and unsure.

"Enough of the Stark girl," Father said abruptly. "The Seven know I've heard enough about that matter to last me ten lives. Lord Bolton has come here on business; we may as well discuss it, as I've not got all day."

They sat at the high table and were brought some of Dickon's favorite dishes, though without the fresh fish or golden grain from the Reach, the dishes did not taste nearly as good. The bread was too hard, too sour.

"The Mormont, Umber, and Karstark clans are banding together," Roose said in that soft voice, that made them all still their forks, the better to hear him...save for Ramsay, who ate as vigorously and loudly as a wild dog. It was sickening. He'd always heard that the northern clansmen were savage; it seemed the stories had been true all along. "And Winterfell is a place of near holiness to the clans. Without Sansa Stark, you are unsafe here."

Father looked uncomfortable.

"We sold her to Lord Baelish; that was the deal," he replied tersely.

"It is a good plan, but it comes at an inopportune time. There are rumors that the godswood at King's Landing has been burned, and the north has taken that as an insult. We in clan Bolton do not keep the old gods, or the new ones," Roose continued dispassionately, "but the rest of the north is quite partial to their heart trees. And, speaking of the Stark girl, there has been talk of General Lannister having molested her more than once during her stay with the King."

"So?" Father arched his brows. Dickon's face flushed with anger and his hands shook as he cut into his fish; he felt Ramsay still staring at him.
"Sansa Stark is a symbol to the north. Her family has been one of the most prominent clans for generations. To rape her is to rape the north."

"And they're taking that as grounds for rebellion?" he asked in disbelief. "She's just a girl, nothing more."

"It is all convening at an inopportune time. But clan Bolton does not share such notions, I assure you, Lord Tarly. We are loyal to the crown and have always been."

"Make your point, Bolton," Father ordered, looking irritable.

"We can help you as the rebellion gains strength...you rule Winterfell, which is the seat of the north. Why not rule the north?" Roose asked. Father studied Roose with narrowed eyes.

"Go on," he finally encouraged.

"Excuse me," Dickon said suddenly, rising. "I will return shortly."

Father ignored him; Roose continued speaking in a low voice that Dickon could not hear as he walked quickly out of the Great Hall.

Out in the rain, he considered going to the godswood, but decided against it and veered sharply to the Sept. It was empty inside, and he sat on one of the benches. In the south, the sun was always shining, leaving brilliant patches of coloured light on the floor of the Sept, but here, the windows might as well have been plain glass, for all the colour they gave.

He didn't even hear the soft footsteps; suddenly Ramsay was sitting down on the bench beside him.

"You must be very sorry to have your betrothed taken from you," Ramsay remarked in a soft voice. "I'd be angry too."

"I'm not angry," Dickon said shortly. "As Father said, it was the deal."

"A deal made without your consent, I gather." Ramsay scoffed. "If my father had done that to me, I'd kill him."

Ramsay's words rang in the silence of the Sept.

"He did what he thought best," Dickon finally spoke, his voice raw.

"No man takes another man's woman," Ramsay went on, ignoring his words. "And to think she had already been used by the Lannister general. Now she'll be used by the Targaryen savages...then Baelish." Ramsay laughed softly. "You'll be the only man who hasn't gotten your hands on her, by the time this all is over."

"Do not speak such foul words about my—" he halted. She wasn't his fiancee anymore. "—About a lady," he corrected.

"I have nothing but respect for your lady, my lord," Ramsay said quickly, holding his hands up in innocence. "And she is your lady—you were to marry her, after all."

Dickon looked away and fixed his gaze on the seven-pointed star at the head of the room. "We northerners are harder, my sweet southron lord," Ramsay continued in a sweeter voice. "You'll never earn the northerner's respect until you show them you are not to be trifled with."
"It is my father who must earn their respect," Dickon countered. Ramsay laughed.

"Your father is an old man, Tarly. How many years has he got left? He'll die, and all they'll know of you is that you're the soft boy who let his papa take away his woman, and he didn't bat an eye as he did it. He let every man have his woman but himself."

"I didn't marry her. She's not—not my woman," Dickon said, still not looking at Ramsay. "She's to marry Lord Baelish now, and that's the end of it."

"But the Lannister man and the Targaryen savages will have their piece of her unpunished," Ramsay mused. They were silent for a time, and then he got to his feet. Dickon felt his hand rest on his shoulder, briefly. "A northman wouldn't let such acts go unpunished."

And he left Dickon there, alone in the Sept.

Jon could not sleep for hunger. He had sat down on the floor of the hall, leaning against the wall, hoping that crouching might make him forget the gnawing emptiness, but without the movement of pacing to keep him distracted, the hunger was all he could think of.

And the cold was becoming unbearable. The fire in Sansa's room had not been lit, nor had any fireplaces in the house, as far as he could tell. He couldn't stop shaking, and he doubted that Sansa was faring much better. Jon listened, but Sansa did not sound awake, and so he risked a chance and crept away, down the hall, to the room that Daario, Jorah, and Davos shared.

Daario and Davos were playing cards, drinking heavily, and Jorah was asleep in the corner.

"Getting lonely in your private room?" Daario asked without looking up, though his tone lacked the bite he had clearly intended. He slapped a hand of cards down on the floor, and Davos looked up. Both men were bundled up in what seemed to be all of the clothing they owned.

"Lady Sansa will freeze to death before we can get the ransom for her," Jon said in a low voice, shutting the door behind him. Davos snorted.

"You can thank the ever-paranoid Grey Worm for this freeze," Daario said with a flourish. "He's convinced that someone has been watching us, and has decided that we can't make any smoke."

Jon lingered by the door, studying Jorah's sleeping form. "Jorah agrees; he thinks you were followed by Tarly's men," Daario added sourly. Daario's temper did not fare well under strain, such as hunger or cold, and that ugliness was coming out now.

There was a dull throb at his temples, and he thought he might be sick. He'd saved the roast capon from nights ago for as long as he could but at midday he had lost his mind and eaten what was left of his serving. He was used to hunger, of course, but the cold made it so much worse.

"You alright, Snow?" Davos asked now, peering at Jon. "You look a bit green."

"He's hungry. Like everyone is," Daario complained. "Your move, old man."

"You're a real pleasure to be around, Naharis," Daavos said dryly. "Who's guarding the Stark girl?"

"I am," Jon replied. "She's going to freeze."

"Try some whiskey, or wine," Davos suggested with a shrug, holding up his own flask. He nodded to a dark bottle of whiskey on a shelf in the corner. "Won't keep you warm but it'll feel like it."
At a loss for what else to do, Jon took the bottle and left the men, shutting the door behind him. The hall felt even colder, and he clutched his heavy cloak round himself. The fear of being watched was not unlike the gnawing pain of hunger. He stalked to Sansa's door, his teeth chattering, and heard a soft voice.

"Jon?"

He unlocked the door with numb fingers. Sansa was bundled up in all of the blankets on her bed, and, he noticed with a strange quiver, the traveling cloak he had wrapped her in after he'd recaptured her in the woods. She was trembling finely. "There's no wood," she said. "I need to light a fire."

"We're not allowed. Grey Worm thinks there's someone looking for us," Jon replied in a low voice. Sansa studied him for a long moment, and he wanted to turn away from her incisive gaze but he couldn't.

"Is it always like this?"

" Comes and goes," he said shortly. "Get back to bed and close your door; it'll keep the warmth in."

She was silent for a time. Her fists clenched; she looked like she was trying to make some decision.

"You should come in too," she whispered at long last. "It's even worse out here in the hall. Come on, you can guard me just as well inside the room as out," she added in exasperation. It was hard to argue with that, especially when his head hurt so very much. Jon followed her inside in spite of his misgivings.

As though part of some agreement, they dropped onto the floor in front of the fireplace. It was like pretending they had a fire. They hunched there, across from each other, in the darkness. "What's that bottle?"

"Whiskey. Davos thought it might help," Jon explained, setting it down on the rug.

"I've never liked the taste of it," Sansa mused, taking the bottle and studying it. She cast about the room. "I have no glasses; we'll have to drink it straight from the bottle."

"You're going to drink it?" Jon asked in disbelief. "Isn't whiskey a man's liquor?"

"It's a northerner's liquor," she countered, tossing her hair in jest, and she uncapped the bottle and took a swig, and nearly choked. Her eyes teared and she coughed and sputtered. When she looked up, Jon was trying to hide his smirk.

"A northerner's liquor, is it?" he asked slyly, but he took the bottle from her all the same and took a swig as well, blinking rapidly as he swallowed. "Seven hells," he swore in a rough voice, coughing a bit.

"I suppose neither of us is a real northerner."

"Suppose not," Jon agreed, and he passed it back to her. She took another swig, and felt the liquor sliding into her belly like molten gold.

_The pack survives_, she thought again. She shut her eyes, thought of the man she had seen in the courtyard, thought of the boy who had been unable to stop himself from flinging his arms round every dog, overcome with the need to love something. When she opened her eyes again, his scars
seemed a little softer, his eyes a little warmer. *He's all that's left of my childhood.* Perhaps it was silly to hold onto the past but she couldn't let it go. She was clinging to the wrecked wood of a ship, drowning just to hold onto the memory of it, but she'd rather that then swim away and let it sink without her.

He'd been kind, he'd been good, once. He'd loved her brothers, had played with Bran, had ridden over the moors with Robb, had taught Arya how to wield a sword. He had loved and been loved.

Why had they never had any love for each other?

It was a secret shame she had always carried, but had forgotten about. He had loved everyone but her.

_And I had loved everyone but him_, she recalled sadly.

"My wedding's in ..." Sansa paused in thought, "...ten days," she realized with surprise. She passed the bottle back to Jon.

"Will it be at Winterfell?"

"Yes, in the Sept."

Sansa watched Jon study the bottle. "I hope Dickon doesn't insist on a public bedding ceremony," she blurted out the fear that she had been keeping close ever since their engagement had been settled. Jon's gaze snapped to her in surprise.

"People still do that?"

"...For an engagement like this one, yes. They will ...need proof that it was consummated," she explained. Perhaps if she hadn't just taken two gulps of whiskey, she would not have found the courage to speak so frankly. Jon looked away, embarrassed.

She thought again of the bite mark on Daenerys' neck, the mark that Jon had made. She had been thinking of it for hours, unable to relinquish the image. There was something so ...tantalizing, yet terrible, about it. "What do you think makes us want to kiss?" Jon looked at her again. "I mean, I know—I know why men and women lay together," she added. She looked down at the threadbare rug now, feeling Jon's gaze heavy on her. "It's to continue the species. But kissing serves no purpose. So why do we do it?"

"I couldn't say," Jon admitted. "I've never wondered."

"I-I've barely kissed anyone." There was a loose thread in the rug and she pulled on it. "I hope Dickon is not expecting much from me." She thought of Cersei, inexplicably. "They tell you what to do, but not how to do it. And the how is the confusing part."

"It's not."

She had not expected him to speak. She looked up to see Jon's eyes were kind. "You'll figure it out quick enough." He passed her the bottle again, and she took it gratefully and gulped another mouthful of the burning liquor.

"I don't mean kissing," she said, her tongue feeling a bit thick for her mouth. "I mean—"

"—I know what you mean, Sansa," Jon said gently with a slight smile.
"I shouldn't be talking to you about this. I don't know why I am," she admitted. "But I've just been sitting here for days at this point with not much else to think about and I suppose it's been on my mind. Mother...was gone...before I had the chance to ask her about it. And in King's Landing, it seemed like it was all anyone talked about, and yet half of it I didn't understand." She didn't know why she felt so desperate for Jon to understand this, to understand her confusion and her fear. "And now I'm expected to just...do it...in front of everyone. And what if..." She trailed off. She did not even know where to begin in naming her fears. Jon was still looking at her. "How do you know what to do?" she finally asked, meeting his eyes. His brows drew together as he considered her question.

"You just...do what you want to do. I guess."

"What if I don't know?"

"Dickon will know." Jon's lips twitched, and he took a mouthful of the whiskey, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I can promise you he's given it quite a lot of thought."

"He did imply he had," she admitted. A lump formed in her throat. That was the same night Jon had stolen her. "Did you want to bite Daenerys' neck?"

To his credit, Jon did not seem perturbed by her question, prying though it was. He slumped back against the base of the chaise. "I saw the lovebite," she added needlessly. "I know what it was."

"I did," he said at last.

"But how did you know to? And—" her face flushed, "—did she like it?"

"Sansa," Jon protested, looking uncomfortable.

The room seemed unsteady. Sansa mopped at her cheeks, which felt warm even in the cold air.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what's got into me."

"I think whiskey's got into you," Jon said with a slight laugh. Sansa bit her lip against a laugh.

"It does help with the cold," she observed. "I almost feel too warm already."

"Empty stomach," Jon mused, but he seemed more languid, too. His cheeks were a little flushed. She thought hers must be too; she'd always gotten pink when she'd had too much wine.

"I'm sorry," she repeated suddenly. "For what I said earlier. It was unkind."

Jon looked away with a scoff, his grey eyes glimmering. "What?" she pressed.

"I stole you for ransom, and you're apologizing to me for a comment you made," he said, shaking his head.

"Was it your idea? To ransom me, I mean," she asked, leaning forward to take the bottle from him. Their fingers brushed, but they both ignored it.

"No, I was against it. I didn't think Tarly would leave Winterfell so poorly guarded, and I didn't think he'd pay any amount." Jon was staring out the window into the darkness contemplatively. "It should have been harder to take you."

"You killed a man," Sansa countered. "That is difficulty on its own."
"I thought we'd have more trouble. We ought to have had more trouble. Winterfell was designed to be safe." He was frowning. "We should have had a harder time of it. Even if I had got you out of the Keep, it should not have been so easy to leave the bounds of Winterfell."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't know." He reached forward and took the bottle from her, and this time took the longest drink from it yet. "I don't drink, usually."

"I noticed," she said with a smile. She hugged her knees to her chest, resting her chin on them. She was wearing his traveling cloak out of desperation, on top of the blankets she had taken from the bed, and she wondered if he had noticed it or thought anything of it. Every time she moved she was met with a rush of his scent.

They sat in the quiet night for a long time, not speaking. The whiskey had warmed her, made her feel sleepy, and she had curled up against the feet of the armchair behind her. She watched Jon fidget with the whiskey bottle, capping it and uncapping it mindlessly with his scarred hands.

"Was it Varys? The eunuch?" she asked, suddenly remembering something Daenerys had said. *Varys did not lie—she is lovely*, the Targaryen princess had said.

"This is why Tyrion doesn't let Dany speak," Jon mused, his head lolling back as he looked to the ceiling. "Her mouth will kill us all."

"You shouldn't trust Varys," Sansa said softly, closing her eyes and huddling closer into the pillow. She inhaled deeply; the air was sweet. "He is the Spider. And he has lots of little birds."

"Birds? What do you mean?" Jon pressed, though she couldn't remember what he had asked. She sighed into the pillow, and sank into sleep.

Jon stared across the rug at Sansa, her copper hair spilling over the pillow, pooling on the rug. The room was spinning. *Damn Davos*. He had not the stomach for liquor, and it seemed Sansa did not, either.

He set the bottle down heavily, and lurched to his feet. With clumsy hands he picked Sansa up, her face lolling into his neck, her breath warm. It was too cold, and she was too hungry, and too drunk. If Dickon Tarly ever did get her back and find out the conditions she had been exposed to, he'd kill them, rightfully so.

Jon set her on the bed. There were no more blankets; she had wrapped them all around herself. He sat on the edge of the bed heavily. He didn't want to go back into the hall. It was even colder out there. But he couldn't stay on her bed. Distantly, like a voice calling across wind, he remembered she had talked of her fear about being bedded by Dickon. He pushed himself off the bed, and sat at the edge of the room, in front of her door. If she did try to leave, she'd have to push him out of her way. Then again, she'd left through the window, last time.

He stared at the red hair, bright and vivid even in the darkness. He thought of the godswood at Winterfell, of Robb and Arya and Bran and Rickon, and even Catelyn and Ned. He thought of the wolves howling at night as he slept in his room at Winterfell with the window open, the better to hear the wolves. He had not thought so much of Winterfell in so long...it was a wound being reopened; a wound he had thought had healed.

It had not been lost on him that Sansa had been trying to be kind to him, even in his drunken state. *I am a fool*, he thought vaguely, though he forgot why he thought it in the first place, and soon, he
too drifted off to sleep.
Part I: Chapter Six

"I see you were bonding with the Bolton boy," Father commented that night at dinner. They were eating in the Great Hall, just the two of them. Dickon felt silly, sitting there with the end of the table piled high with fancy dishes, the candles lit, when there was no one there but them. "You two are of an age. He could be like a brother to you."

"I already have a brother," Dickon replied.

"You don't," Father said in a clipped voice as he cut into the almond-crusted whitefish. It wasn't a northern dish, and it didn't taste right here. We northmen are harder, my sweet southron lord, Ramsay had said. Dickon stared numbly at the untouched fish. He wasn't hungry. He hadn't been hungry for days.

"I do." There was a clatter of silver against china; his father had dropped his fork.

"You do not. Samwell is gone."

"Is he dead?"

"Does it matter? He might as well be for all it matters to us. The Seven know he probably didn't starve, at least not for a few months," his father snorted, picking up his silver again.

"I did not want you to send him away," Dickon said. He still couldn't lift his gaze from the southron dish.

"Well, I don't recall asking what you wanted, so that does not matter either," Father said.

"I'm your heir," Dickon pointed out, finally looking at his father. "How can it not matter what I want?"

"Because you're a sweet, stupid boy who knows nothing of the ways of the world."

A new devil was crouching upon his back. Dickon stared Father down.

"What secret of General Lannister are you hiding?" he asked.

His father's eyes widened, ever so slightly, then narrowed.

"You have turned rotten, I think. Like fruit gone bad. Ever since we came to the north."

"You wanted to come north. I wanted to stay at home, with Mother."

"You were just whining about the Stark girl. You couldn't have got her 'at home, with Mother,' could you?" Father pointed out, imitating his words in a high-pitched, foolish voice. He rolled his eyes and drank his wine.

"Did you know the General raped Sansa Stark?" Dickon pressed quietly. Father slammed his cup down and the wine spilled onto the table, splashing. Some splashed in his eye.

"What the General Lannister does with his time is none of my concern, nor yours. The man's earned whatever he wants; he's served his kingdom his whole life. If he wants a pretty cunt, he
might as well take it."

"Did you know?"

"I know nothing about the General," he said shortly, nostrils flaring.

"Why does your face grow so red, and so sweaty, when I mention him?"

The blow hit nearly the same place where the metal seal had hit. The table shook, and Father sat back down slowly, breathing hard.

"You are rotting fruit, boy. Don't think I won't send you off just like I did with your stupid brother."

Dickon did not speak; he pressed his palm to his brow.

If my father had done that to me, I'd kill him.

The mist was thick, making their coats stick to their skin. Jaime was at once too warm and yet too chilled, his hands and face numb but his body overheated in the damp. He had always hated the weather of the north. If you weren't freezing your damn balls off, you were soaking wet—and if you weren't frozen or soaking wet, you were unexpectedly warm, or else so wind-chapped your face felt it might fall off. He thought he'd never be dry again.

"We're nearing Moat Cailin. We should be there soon," Bronn said, peering round them. "Within the hour. Varys said we'll see the smoke from the house."

"Might be they didn't light their fires," Jaime pointed out.

"It's an old stone house. Of course they lit their fires. It's the Dothraki, they're not used to the cold."

"They've been in the north long enough."

The lilac dawn silhouetted the trees on the ridge up ahead. The dawn was too quiet; they were close, he could feel it. Closer than they had planned.

"I'll take the Stark girl, she knows me," Jaime reasoned as they rode together.

"And leave all the fun for me? That's unlike you, my lord," Bronn snorted. "Just as well. I heard the Beggar Princess is beautiful."

"Beautiful or not, you'll bring her head back for the King," Jaime replied. "I suppose having a pretty head up on the pikes will be a pleasant change."

"Though the silver hair might clash with the Baratheon colours," Bronn mused. "What of your brother?"

"Unless he's lost his mind, he'll slip away," Jaime dismissed.

"Right, of course. ...But what if he doesn't?"

"Leave him to me," Jaime resolved, after a long pause. He had not seen Tyrion in ten years. Ten years Tyrion had been fighting for Daenerys Targaryen's claim to the throne, and it seemed a shame for it to all end here: in a pitiful house in the middle of a bog in the north. He wondered what had possessed Tyrion to fight for the losing side. It was not a Lannister move to make, and
Tyrion was supposedly the clever one.

"Horses have been here." Bronn pointed to gashes in the mud. Up ahead at the top of a ridge, an old stone wall rose up, of white stone turned nearly black with age. Beyond the old wall, there was a thin plume of smoke.

"We've found them," Jaime said.

Jon's head was throbbing in time with his heart, and his stomach squirmed uncomfortably when he woke. His mouth was dry, his chapped lips sticking together. With a groan he mopped at his face and sat up. He'd been asleep on a floor, but why?

Vague recollections of sitting with Sansa, talking with her about her fears about sex, came back to him. He blinked as her room came into focus around him, turned blue in the pre-dawn. Just when he spotted the bottle of whiskey across the room, his stomach gave another lurch, and he sank lower, curling onto his side.

He should not have done any of it: the whiskey, the talking...falling asleep in her room. If she ever told her future husband how she had been treated here, he really would kill him. He didn't know what had got into him. It had been the cold, and the hunger. Now he was still cold, fingers stiff with it, and his stomach was in so much pain half from hunger and half from drink, that he did not know if he even wanted to eat. He supposed that was for the best.

He heard a shout downstairs, but when there didn't seem to be any more trouble, he decided to ignore it. He did not feel very much like sitting up just yet. Soft footsteps padded over to him; he watched the many blankets drag across the floor. Sansa knelt before him, puffy-eyed and pale.

"You look awful," she whispered. Jon covered his face with his arm.

"Go back to bed," he groaned, his voice muffled by the fabric.

"I'm so hungry and cold I feel I might die." He heard her slump down on the floor. "How can you stand it?"

"It's worse if you think about it. Sleeping will help."

"I can't make myself sleep. I keep trying."

Sansa scooted next to him. "What's the longest you've gone without food?"

"Eighteen days." That had been a bad stretch after crossing the Narrow Sea. Too many of their force had died on that journey, and the rest of them had languished for a very long time, sick and starving, in Gulltown. That whole time had turned into a blur for him; they had disembarked and he had spent more than two weeks lying on the floor of some cramped inn, jumbled in with all of the other men, only moving to heave into a bucket across the floor.

"I went three days without food once, in King's Landing. It was my hunger strike," Sansa mused. "But then I fainted and one of the Maesters made me eat anyway."

"Three days is long enough."

There was another shout, and then, unmistakably, Daario's furious voice, followed by the lower, smoother rhythm of Grey Worm's voice. Jon pushed himself to sit up, his arm brushing against Sansa. He pulled his arm away hastily, the room spinning. He swallowed against nausea. "I'm
never drinking whiskey, ever again," he confessed in a raw voice, before getting to his feet unsteadily. "I think I hear shouting; I'd better go see what they've done," he explained in resignation. He held out his hand to Sansa to help her up. She was still wearing his cloak, and she looked deadly pale. He helped her to her feet, then snatched his hand back and left.

Daario's voice was rising in rage; Jon could tell even as he walked down the hall. He got to the top of the stairs and saw Davos and Jorah. Jorah looked up at Jon from the foot of the stairs and shook his head.

"What's happened?"

"I'm surprised you didn't come sooner. They've been at it for a while," Jorah murmured as Jon went to stand beside him. In the entrance to the house, the door hung open, letting even more cold air in, but no one seemed to notice. Daario and Grey Worm were facing each other, chests rising and falling rapidly. Dany was between them, wrapped in blankets from her bed, with Tyrion looking on, dressed only in his nightshirt.

"It does not matter, Grey Worm," she said in a hard voice. "If anyone were watching, they would have come by now."

"We are freezing in this fucking house! We are all going to die! Perhaps someone is watching; let them come! They'll come to find us all icicles!" Daario yelled, his face red.

"It was Davos' damn whiskey," Jon replied under his breath, and Jorah and Davos chuckled quietly.

"You have put us all in danger," Grey Worm said flatly. "We have too many enemies to be lighting fires."

"The Princess was going to freeze," Daario countered, gesturing to Dany hotly. "We are freezing and starving. You don't let us hunt, you don't let us light fires. How can we hope to fight for Princess Daenerys' cause if we're all starving and freezing?"

"If we are found by the wrong people, their guns will kill us faster than hunger or cold."

"You know, it must be because you haven't got balls," Daario started with a laugh. Davos let out a soft sigh.

"Not this again. He needs to find something new to add to his repertoire."

"Grey Worm doesn't exactly leave himself open to much. The balls are the only thing the Tyroshi has over him," Jorah mused. Davos conceded with a nod.

Jon was mid-laugh when the air was rent with a horrific crack.

The world seemed to go silent for one terrible moment as they all collectively realized that the worst had happened.

_Sansa_, was Jon's first and only thought.

They scattered in an explosion of noise. The disagreement forgotten, Daario and Jorah snatched Daenerys away from the door with Tyrion following them, whilst Davos and Grey Worm sprinted out the front door.

Jon should have gone with Davos and Grey Worm.
He ran upstairs instead.

The sickness, the headache, the gnawing hunger—he forgot all of it. He ripped open Sansa's door to find her already dressed and now tying her hair back in a thick plait.

"Redcoats," they said at the same moment.

If she wanted to escape, this was her moment to do it. Jon assumed she had some plan in mind and was feigning going along with him for now, but he didn't dwell on it. He grabbed her by her slender elbow and dragged her to his own room, where he snatched his sword, rifle, and bow and arrows.

"You'll stay with me," he told her at the top of the stairs, still gripping her arm. Sansa's eyes were wide. "You'll do what I say, exactly as I say it."

He did not wait for her reply; he was thundering down the stairs, still gripping her arm, his sword and arrows rattling with the movement. Instead of going out the front door, they went to the back of the house, and exploded out the back door into the kitchen garden. There was a narrow gate; it was useless for anyone on horseback, but it would be perfect for his purposes. There were gashes in the mud leading to the gate; they must have already taken Dany through this way.

Sansa thought she might vomit. Her stomach was filled with acid, and it only felt worse as they broke into a run after passing through the narrow gate. She heard more rifles fired, more shouts and screams, the shriek of horses and the clang of swords.

Jon had not loosened his grip on her arm. In the woods beyond the wall, he dragged her against a tree and covered her with his body, as he scanned the woods around them carefully, his breathing low and even.

In the distance, she saw two redcoats on bright white horses running down two of Daenerys' army; the men had arakhs that they turned on the horses. Blood redder than the soldiers' coats spurted from the horses as they screamed and fell, but the soldiers did not even seem to pause as they leapt off their horses and drew their swords. More rifles fired, the shots echoing through the woods, and the bark of a nearby tree splintered with a stray bullet.

Sansa let out a gasp that was cut off by Jon's gloved hand as he clapped it over her mouth. He was pressing her against the tree, so that she could not move. The bark hurt through her dress and cloak, and his body was hard against her.

What if this was her chance to escape? What if they had come to save her? It hardly seemed likely, and yet, the Tarlys were beloved by the Crown. Dickon might have been able to exert some influence... And yet...

Daenerys' men felled the redcoats, who lay slain alongside their horses, and they each circled round, looking for the next enemy.

Out of nowhere, a bright white horse dashed through the mud towards them. A tall figure sat erect atop the horse, and even in the mist his sword gleamed for one shining moment. The two men raised their arakhs, but before they could make another move, the redcoat swung his lovely sword, and in one clean stroke beheaded both men.

His horse skidded in the mud as he came to an abrupt stop; the men dropped behind him, their heads rolling away, sickening thumps in the mud, and the force of the movement swept his fine black hat right off his head.
Even in the mist, the thick golden hair was unmistakable. No other man sat like that upon his horse, no other man held a sword like that. He looked like a god, even blood- and mud-splattered as he was. She would know him anywhere.

Jaime Lannister paused, studying his surroundings critically. He had been born for war, bred to wear the red coat and sit upon the perfect white horse and swing a sword that glittered with rubies. He had been made for beautiful violence. Her heart was in her throat. She had not been prepared to see the general.

But then Jon yanked her forward, and they skidded in the mud down the hill, into a tangled ravine. The mist was so thick that they could no longer see more than an arm's length in front of them. They thrashed through boggy water, gasping. They were making too much noise, but it mattered not: they had to put as much distance between them and the redcoats as they could. Distance was best; it was their only hope.

She could scream. She willed herself to scream.

If she screamed, they would come, and they would save her.

If she screamed, they would come, and they would kill Jon.

There were hoofbeats; someone was coming for them. Jon still pulled her along relentlessly, glancing back with measured looks, in the direction of the hoofbeats. They were climbing upward out of the ravine, scrabbling against muddy rocks and bramble, panting and gasping. She was too weak for this; her legs would not move the way Jon wanted her legs to move. She was dizzy and sick and weak. As they crested the hill and came to a small grove, she fell to her knees, dry-heaving.

"Keep moving," Jon demanded in a low voice, attempting to pull her to her feet. He gripped her arms again and tried to drag her, and she stumbled, the world spinning, into Jon's arms, nearly toppling him over. "No," he growled, and for one last moment they ran together—and then heard a callous laugh.

"A Targaryen boy stealing a Stark girl. I suppose it runs in the family."

Jaime Lannister stood at the edge of the grove behind them, aiming his rifle at Jon. His golden hair was stuck in thick clumps against his temples and neck, his breeches stained with mud and other men's blood, but even so, he still looked like a god, terrible and golden.

"We're keeping her for ransom. Dickon Tarly is to meet us in a few days to negotiate her ransom," Jon called across the clearing. Jaime scoffed, lowering his rifle, his lovely eyes, so like the queen regent's, dancing with laughter.

"You're a bit behind the times, but I've heard the Targaryens don't read, so perhaps you've not picked up a paper. Sansa Stark is actually engaged to Lord Petyr Baelish—not better known to many of us as Littlefinger—not the Tarly brat. My orders are to kill the Targaryens and return Sansa Stark to King's Landing, to her newest fiancee." He glanced at Sansa. "You do go through rather a lot of them, don't you?"

"K-king's Landing? No," she breathed in horror, sinking to her knees. Everything seemed to disappear around her, though she felt Jon's hand as he tried to pull her back up. "No. I can't go back," she choked, bracing herself in the mud on shaking hands. She couldn't breathe. "Not to King's Landing."
She felt them looking at her; she wished they would look away. She did not want anyone to see her like this, to witness this private pain. Horror, hot and acidic, coursed through her. She couldn't go back to King's Landing. Not ever again. She would not.

"Well, let's see if the Targaryen will fight for you." Jaime tossed aside his rifle and drew his sword in a motion as fluid as a lady's dance. "Come on, Jon Snow...I've been dying to see if you've gotten any of your father's gifts. You certainly didn't get his looks...or his manners. Perhaps you got his singing voice!" Jaime mused brightly. "Oh, and he was always rather good with a harp."

Jon drew his own sword, in a much sharper, more deadly movement. "Last time I saw you, you were a snot-nosed brat. You didn't grow much, I have to say," Jaime continued as they circled each other.

"Last time I saw you, you weren't old," Jon countered pointedly. Jaime threw back his head and laughed.

"Point taken, blunt though it was," he conceded. "I'm older than you, but I can still out-fight every single man in my garrison." The distance between them shortened.

Sansa fell back against a tree, weak with terror.

*I can't go back,* she had said to Jon. *You can't go forward, either,* he had replied.

And here she was again. If Jaime won, she would be taken back to King's Landing...to Lord Baelish, no less. She would not go back.

Had Dickon planned to sell her to Littlefinger the whole time? She could not breathe. She tried, again and again, to draw in a breath, but her lungs were useless.

If Jon won...she did not know what might happen. She was worthless to him now. Could she go forward?

She did not know who she wanted to win, and she did not know who would win.

Jaime Lannister was considered one of the best swordsmen in the world...but she had seen Jon fight, even just as sport, as a way to pass the time.

The first clash of swords was a blur that left the wood ringing. They were too fast; she could hardly judge what they did. This was not the elegant dance that she had watched in the armories at King's Landing, nor was it the desperate squabbling of bandits killing on the road. This was different, at an elemental level. It was too quick to be graceful but too fluid to be violent.

They were perfectly, evenly matched. At one moment, they were mere inches from each other, hands shaking as one sword blocked the other in place, and then, in a ringing of metal as musical as a bell, they were thrown back from each other, but neither stumbled. Jon spun in place and nearly landed a blow that would have cut Jaime's torso clean in half, but Jaime ducked back with ease, blond hair flying, green leonine eyes gleaming with something like lust.

And then Jaime started to gain the upper hand, after forces meeting so equally. Jon was losing ground, his parries and jabs becoming messier, more desperate. Sansa wondered if this would have been the case had he had a proper meal in the last few days; his loss of ground spoke of exhaustion coming too soon. Jon ducked as Jaime swung, and Jaime's blade slashed at his riding leathers, cutting a deep gash in the dark leather and spraying a fine line of red. Jon barely acknowledged the wound as he continued to block Jaime's blows which were becoming ever faster.
Jon's movements grew more ragged, more wild, as Jaime backed him closer and closer to where Sansa knelt. Jon ducked and parried, weaved and slashed, but he was losing.

And yet—out of nowhere—Jaime's sword flew out of his hand and landed a few feet away, its blade gleaming ruby red with Jon's blood. Both men were gasping, breaths clouding in the air, skin slick with sweat and mist. Jon's sword was pointed at Jaime.

"It seems you've bested me," Jaime observed, holding his hands up. "What a shame. Lord Baelish will be so disappointed when the garrison returns home empty-handed without his lovely fiancee...and he went to such trouble to get her, too."

He'd thrown his sword. Jon had not bested him. Yet Jon seemed to understand faster than Sansa, who could only stare numbly at Jaime.

"You should be wounded. I'll do it; you won't be able to do it at a believable angle," Jon said immediately, going to Jaime. Jaime braced himself as Jon lightly slashed his blade against Jaime's thigh; bright red bloomed along his breeches. Jaime grit his teeth.

"Wh-what?" Sansa asked helplessly. She met Jaime's green, catlike eyes.

"Go," he said, even as Jon was pulling her.

"I don't—"

"Go, you damned fool, go with Snow," Jaime snapped now. Jon grappled for her hand desperately, and she was yanked backwards. Jaime stood in the center of the grove, dripping blood, watching as they stumbled back into the woods, his shoulders rising and falling as he caught his breath. He became a blur of red and gold and white as tears filled Sansa's vision. Her debts to the Lannister general would never stop mounting, it seemed.

She wrenched her gaze from him and looked forward as they ran, breathless, through the wood. Dickon had sold her.

She would never go back to Winterfell now.

She would never get married, not unless she wanted to marry Lord Baelish.

Everything that she had thought her life would be—all of it had been blown to pieces. So she ran, because she could do nothing else. She ran, her lungs burning, tears streaming down her cheeks for a grief she could not name, tears that became one with the mist. Sansa Stark was disappearing—so who was the girl left in her place, running through the woods with Jon Snow?

"Tyrion and Jorah and Daario will have taken Dany to the Barrowlands," Jon panted as they paused, gasping, leaning against a tree, after a long time of running. It had begun to rain again. Sansa dropped to her knees, her whole body quivering with exhaustion. "That was always our plan."

"Will you go there?" she asked, between gasps. She angrily mopped her stupid hair out of her eyes and wished her stupid eyes would stop their stupid crying.

Jon dropped to his knees before her, taking her hands in his. His hair was wild and clinging wetly to his forehead and jawline; the sleeve of his leathers was shining with blood where Jaime had cut him.
"We will go there," he corrected her fiercely. Sansa closed her eyes, even as more stupid tears slipped out. She let out a choked sob.

"I—why would he—it makes no sense," she gasped, chest heaving. "None of it makes any sense. Why are you taking me? I am worthless to you now."

"You're not worthless." His grip on her hands was painfully tight, and she opened her eyes to meet his gaze once more. "You're not worthless," he said once more, softer this time. "Come with me to the Barrowlands."

"I was unkind to you," she said into the rain. She noticed how the rain made his dark lashes stick together in clumps. He really was painfully beautiful. "Why would you help me now?"

"You were a child, Sansa," he replied with gentle eyes. "But you are kind now, and brave, and gentle, and strong. You deserve your freedom." He released her hands, and braced her by her shoulders, pulling her up.

On shaking legs, with Jon's help, she got to her feet. The woods were alive with the rain, and she had never been so hungry nor so exhausted in her life. And she was sad, so sad, so filled with grief for everything that she had thought she had, though now she saw she had never had it to begin with.

They came to the edge of the woods, and sodden green land, dotted with translucent, melting mounds of snow and chalky white rock, stretched out before them. In the distance, the ridges were blue and grey, shifting and blurred in the rain. The wide world stretched out before her, and once again breathing was hard.

You deserve your freedom.

She clutched at the bark of a tree for strength as it all came crashing down on her. She had been defined by her worth in marriage for so long. Held as a captive in King's Landing because to marry her was to own Winterfell; traded between Cersei, Randyll Tarly, and Petyr Baelish as a mere pawn; captured by Jon for the ransom her betrothed would surely pay...her life could be segmented into periods bookended by which man she was supposed to marry.

She clapped a hand over her mouth, reeling. Jon paused in his walking to look back at her.

"Sorry," she breathed. "I just—I just need a moment."

Now the Tarlys owned Winterfell, and she had nothing of value left to offer anyone. The green sea of grass and snow seemed to go on forever. She had never before looked in front of her and wondered which way she might go.

"I—I am sorry. About Dickon Tarly," Jon said, stepping closer to her, misinterpreting her emotion. She shook her head mutely.

"Don't be," she finally said. "I think I'm happy, but I—I can't actually tell," she admitted with a rush of desperate laughter. Jon's lips twitched.

"I think you're relieved," he observed. "Come, we need to find a place to set up camp...and we need to hunt."

"With the arrows?" she asked, hastening to follow him.

"Yes; we'll need to save the bullets," Jon reasoned. "It'll be at least a day's journey. I don't know
what we'll encounter on the way."

There was a warning in his voice.

"We did just escape the greatest general that the army has ever seen," Sansa pointed out, as she came to walk alongside him. They broke free from the woods and were now in the open field, the rain soaking them anew, but it felt good. "I like our odds, I think."

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Men lay slain in the courtyard. Jaime watched his own garrison plundering through the house, hauling out trunks full of swords, dirks, and rifles. Some of the soldiers were leading the horses that had remained in the stables.

"We never even saw the Targaryen girl," Bronn observed as they watched the men. Jaime's leg throbbed lightly where Jon Snow had cut him.


"Huh." Bronn's swarthy eyes flicked to Jaime's wound. "Rhaegar all over again."

"Funny, that was what I thought, too."

"These Stark cunts must truly be special," Bronn remarked, his voice skeptical.

The wind blew the rain harder upon them. Jaime thought of that flaming copper hair flying out in a messy plait, those blue eyes widening in horror. Not King's Landing, Sansa Stark had whispered, sinking to her knees. He had never seen her look so defeated, and he had seen her in quite a lot of pain in his time. "He's not like Rhaegar," Jaime said now. He felt Bronn looking at him. "He's a better swordsman. A lot better." He thought of those grey eyes. He had once thought Jon Snow looked exactly like Eddard Stark, but now he realized he'd been wrong: Jon Snow looked like his mother.

"I can see that."

"He might be the best swordsman I've ever seen."

"Better than me? I doubt it," Bronn said with a smirk. "What will we do now?"

He dreaded going back to King's Landing, empty-handed, like this. He thought of Cersei and Tywin's faces. Cersei will know, he thought. If she looked him in the eye, she'd see through it all, and she would know he had let Sansa Stark get away.

"Go back. Tell them we failed," Jaime said carelessly. "Come on, the journey back will take forever, especially now we've got all these damn horses. A whole lot of horseshit, that's what Varys' word was worth, as it turns out." He kicked aside the corpse of a Dothraki, and Bronn followed.
"You'll want leathers, my sweet southernd lord. Velvet won't fare so well in these northern winds and rains." Ramsay tossed him riding clothing that was far rougher and less ornamented than Dickon's own riding clothes. Dickon held up the leathers to examine them. Ramsay was shorter than him, and leaner too, but they might still fit.

Outside the sky was still lightening as morning stretched over the land—if they rode fast, they'd catch up with the Lannister's garrison on their way back from the Targaryen holdfast, perhaps at the first village past Cerwyn.

"So we'll just sort of...scare him," Dickon confirmed, after they had dressed, as they walked to the Dreadfort's stables. The Dreadfort was a crude, primitive structure, hearkening back to the days of knights and perhaps even beyond that, and the courtyard surrounding the stables was little more than a square of packed earth. Carvings of stone white as bone held the braziers along the wall, and they looked oddly like human hands. In the wrong light, they could have been human skeleton hands. Dickon would be glad to leave the Dreadfort. It made Winterfell look positively cozy.

"It's your call." Ramsay tossed him a leather hood, then strapped his quiver and bow onto his back. "You're my lord now; I'll do as you say."

"I don't want to force you into anything," Dickon said uncertainly, taking the hood and examining it. It looked like an executioner's hood. He pulled it on over his head. Ramsay had mounted his own horse, a muddy grey pony. He pulled his own hood down over his face, so only those eerie blue eyes peered out, pale as a frozen pond.

"My lord," Ramsay began impatiently, "this is for you. We are avenging you. So tell me, what do you want? Forget me, forget your father—forget even Sansa Stark. What is it you want?"

Dickon mounted his own finer horse, the hood growing hot quickly. He pulled it at to let a bit of air in. The leather smelled odd. He remembered it was, technically, animal skin that he was wearing against his own face. *I'm becoming a savage*, he thought as he kicked his heel into his horse's side and they set off across the narrow bridge leading out of the Dreadfort. *A northern savage.*

What was it that he wanted? He immediately thought of Sam, of Mother, of the golden fields and blue skies and lush green of the Reach. But he could not have that—Sam was gone, probably dead, and their home was Winterfell now. So what did he want?

His brow throbbed where his father had hit him. Later he had tried not to cry as he hid in the armory and pounded a training sack—burlap stuffed with flour and tied crudely into the shape of a man—until the white stuff poofed out, getting everywhere, and still he punched and hit it, until the urge to cry had passed. *What are you a girl?* He had remembered all of the things Father had called Sam. He'd never called Dickon those things, before. Now he did. Ladyboy, cunt, and worse. *I'm not a girl,* he had thought, punching the bag over and over. *I'm not a girl, not a girl.*

"What would you do?" Dickon asked, riding faster to join with Ramsay.

"Me?" Ramsay sounded almost flattered. "My opinion is of no importance, my liege lord," he said obsequiously.

"Of course it is," Dickon insisted. "You're the only one helping me."
"I'm a northman, Lord Tarly. My father and I swear allegiance to you, and to the crown, but we are still the savage northerners you have been told the stories about," Ramsay reasoned. "My instinct is to take the Lannister general and flay him 'til he has no more skin, to torture him until he begs for mercy. But you are a sweet, civilized, educated southron man; you don't have such hard, vicious impulses. I'm sure you will do whatever is kind, and show the man the Mother's mercy."

"We are not so gentle in the south," Dickon argued, bristling. "King's Landing is a nest of vipers."

"I'm sure it is, my lord. I'm sure that in between all of the dancing and singing and powdered wigs you have just as much savagery."

Dickon rode faster, rode so hard into the driving rain that Ramsay had to struggle for his pony to keep up with him.

Even getting to the next village took the whole damn morning. They couldn't exactly leave without the horses and artillery—they had not got the Beggar Princess or the Stark girl after all; they had to come back with something—but lugging fifty horses and dozens of trunks full of weapons was slow work. They were about an hour's ride south of Cerwyn when they came to a village. Jaime's leg wouldn't stop bleeding, and he was feeling increasingly hassled. The Dothraki horses were weak, and they even lost a few of them on the short journey to the village.

"The lot was starving, I think," Bronn said as one of the soldiers shot a horse whose leg had been lamed by the uneven ground. It was pouring, of course, because that was what the North did. It was like a woman, crying endlessly, or else raging with wind and snow.

"We'll stop at the next village and feed them and rest," Jaime said through grit teeth. "This is probably folly to take them; most of them are probably past the point of help. And no one knows how to ride the damn things."

At this rate it would be spring before they got back to King's Landing. They stopped at the village, and again the northerners looked upon Jaime, and Jaime alone, with such loathing that it made his skin burn with awareness. They took up the only inn in the village, and the horses sprawled well beyond the stables, and into the fields beyond the village. It was all a mess, an unsolvable mess. He was unaccustomed to failure; he was learning that he liked it not.

The Targaryens were more organized than he had initially assumed: they had clearly had an escape plan ready and waiting in the event of attack. No one had even seen the Targaryen girl, nor Tyrion, and the men who had remained at the holdfast had been ready to fight to the death—and fight to the death many of them did. They were also far more disciplined fighters, and many of them—rather, most of them—not Dothraki at all.

And then, Jon Snow...Jaime could have killed him, skilled and talented though the Targaryen boy was, so why had he not? Why had he thrown his sword? He had known he would do it even as he had crested the ridge and seen the boy dragging the Stark girl. He could have shot him; he could have simply shot them both. Perhaps it would have been the kindest thing to do.

He had no idea of how many of the Targaryen force had escaped the holdfast, but if even a tenth of them remained, they were still far stronger than anyone had realized. And the rumor was that Jorah Mormont and Davos Seaworth had joined the cause. So Daenerys Targaryen now had a veteran soldier—Mormont—who had once been one of the royal army's best fighters, and a legendary smuggler—Seaworth—and Tyrion, a famed strategist, and, if the word of Bronn and the other men was to be believed, some of the most vicious and disciplined fighters they had ever seen. And she also had Jon Snow, the best swordsman Jaime had ever seen in his life. Rhaegar had been
somewhat talented but he had fallen easily. Jon Snow was his own breed.

And now Daenerys had Sansa Stark, too, thanks to him. And this was no small thing. Sansa Stark had been gifted with a fine mind, finer than too many realized. She was as clever as Tyrion, and her knowledge of both the Northern clans and Southron families was vast, extensive, nuanced. Not to mention she was as symbolic of the North as Winterfell itself. If Daenerys wanted to rally the Northern houses behind her, she now had been given the single most valuable tool to do so.

No wonder his father so often called him the stupid one.

Tense and irritable, Jaime took to his room, where Bronn helped him bandage the wound that Jon Snow had given him. They did not speak; Bronn seemed to sense Jaime's mood, and wisely did not test him.

"We'll need to find a place to camp, first," Jon said as they trudged through the sodden grass. "And we need food."

"Where are we going in the Barrowlands?"

"We've got a man there, acting as an outpost. He's a former member of the Kingsguard—"

"—Not Sir Barristan Selmy?" Sansa asked in surprise. Jon's gaze snapped to her.

"That's right, you must have known him."

"Of course. I remember the day Joff banished him. I wondered what had happened to him. I always thought Joff was a fool to banish him, and now I have proof," she said with some satisfaction. "He went to the other side after all."

Jon was trying not to smile at her smugness. There was a lightness, a brightness, about her that was infectious, even in the pouring rain. She seemed to float.

They came to another copse of trees, set into a smaller ridge dotted with stones. On the other side, the ridge hung over the ground, pinned by rock, to create a decent enough shelter from the wind. It was late afternoon now, and soon darkness would fall. They needed to set up camp now.

"We'll camp here for the night," Jon said as they huddled into the hole against the wind and rain. Already it was a relief just to be out of the downpour. "I'll see what I can hunt."

"What about me? What should I do?" Sansa pressed, as he dropped his weapons in a sodden heap.

"Get dry." Sansa was wringing her hands, looking so eager to help. Jon cast his gaze about the campsite in exasperation. "Try to build up the rocks, I guess, against the west wind. The rain'll be coming from that direction tonight, most like. But don't hurt yourself," he warned. "You've not eaten in days, don't forget."

"Neither have you," Sansa argued. Jon gave her a half-smile.

"I'm used to it," he pointed out. He turned and set back out into the rain with his bow and arrows. There was a run of trees that he thought might bring him some luck. When he glanced back, Sansa was struggling to lift a rock, her face set in determination.

Jon became a blur in the rain, and Sansa set to work gathering the rocks to build a wall, but it was harder than she might have guessed. The rocks wouldn't stop rolling, and all too quickly, she began
to feel dizzy and weak, and had to sit down, panting. When she looked at her progress, she became furious. It looked like she had done nothing, and it certainly wouldn't do anything to block out the rain.

After half an hour of struggling, she decided to give up. She had piled up all of the rocks she could lift, and they made a neat little wall that was pretty but useless.

She might be able to build a fire, though everything was so wet, and she'd never built one before. She wandered around the ridge, looking for sticks that might have been a bit sheltered from the rain. She found a decent number, and dumped them in the shelter of the wall of dirt, and then took some of the rocks from her little wall and built them up around the sticks, to protect them.

*There.* Feeling immensely pleased with herself, she looked around their little campsite, thinking of what else she might do, and quite suddenly, she realized they would be sleeping together.

Her whole body seemed to flush with embarrassment. They had no sleeping skins, no blankets, no beds—only the cloaks on their back.

*This is what the smallfolk do,* she told herself bravely. *I'm no lady anymore; I will do what I must to survive.*

But she had only a lady's skills. She knew only how to dance and sing and curtsey and weave. She could identify precisely the type of spoon necessary for every kind of soup, and she knew what colours were acceptable to wear to every kind of wedding, and she could name all of the important families in the kingdom and identify their heraldry—but she did not know how to start a fire, or hunt for her own food, or even how to set up a campsite.

She looked round at the tall reeds and the sparse trees. She couldn't even see Jon anymore. Was there any game to be had here? She didn't even know what sort of game they would find. Rabbits? Deer?

Jon walked back to the campsite with two rangy rabbits strung on his bow. Even from a distance he could see Sansa's bright hair. The campsite came into view, slowly in the rain. He'd built up a little structure in the middle, he could see. He was not looking forward to attempting to start a fire in this weather. If he could find any dry kindling, it would be a miracle.

When he reached the campsite, he almost wanted to laugh. Sansa had built a tiny little wall with a mason's accuracy, demarcating the edge of their shelter, and had used the rest of the rocks to make a little mound in the middle, just out of the rain, that was filled with sticks. She rose to her feet when she saw him.

"Did you find anything?"

"Not much. Rabbit," he said, swinging his bow down to show her. She flinched at the sight of the rabbits, but did not comment on them.

"I tried to find some dry wood, but there wasn't much," she rambled anxiously. "Hopefully the wood has dried; I tried to keep it out of the rain."

Jon studied the kindling she had collected.

"That's good," he said with a nod. "That should be enough to start a decent fire." She was still looking at him, biting her lip, waiting for him to tell her how she could help. "...We'll need three sticks, to make a spit. One longer one, to span the fire, and two to hold it up. About this high," he said, holding his hand above the campfire she had built. Sansa nodded and immediately ventured
into the rain once more.

She had made two little seats out of stone, out of the rain, before the campfire, and she’d dug out a bit of an alcove into the packed earth, big enough for a body to fit into. Jon settled onto one of the seats heavily, with his two rabbits in tow, and took out his dirk.

They’d have to share the cloaks. There was nothing else to be done about it. He told himself that it would be no different than sharing sleeping skins with Jorah or Davos or Daario or Grey Worm, as he had done so many times. Nothing unusual about it, nothing to be awkward about. Survival tactics, he reminded himself, his face flushing, as he stripped the furry skin off the rabbits.

Sansa soon returned, with about ten times as many sticks as they needed, and dumped the bundle in front of him.

"Will any of these work?" she asked breathlessly, kneeling beside him and spreading them out. He tried not to laugh at her sincerity.

"Those two," he pointed out with his dirk, "and that one there. Here, watch." He took the longer of the three and began hacking at either end, making it come to points. "This'll make it easier to turn. Give me the other two, now." Sansa quickly handed him the other sticks, and he cut into their ends, then made sharp points at the other ends.

Wordlessly, they built the spit over the firepit. She’d actually done a surprisingly good job of building the firepit and keeping the kindling dry. She watched him intently, biting her lip in concentration. "Now we have to start a fire," he continued. "It has to get pretty hot before we can start cooking."

She nodded fiercely, her gaze trained on his hands as he started the fire. It took a few tries, because the wind was blowing hard and wet, but soon the kindling caught flame, and they watched the pale yellow flame curl and lick about the leaves and twigs. The flame snapped and crackled, as they angled their bodies to protect it from the winds.

His first few months with Daenerys kept coming back to him, from watching Sansa. Viserys had still been alive, then, and Jon had been so anxious, so on edge, so determined to earn his place with them. He’d been so grateful to have a family, but so painfully homesick for Winterfell, and so fearful of the future. He’d been a boy, then, so accustomed to being ignored by Catelyn and her brood, and was ready to fight for any chance of acceptance, of warmth. He had lost all designs of status, of esteem, and would have done anything that Viserys or Dany asked of him.

"I’m so hungry," Sansa suddenly said in a rush. "I can’t even look at the rabbits. They make me want to cry, but I also want to eat them," she laughed.

"They weren’t particularly endearing," Jon consoled her. "Every animal stops looking like a sweet pet when you’re hungry enough."

The sky darkened as they tended to the fire, and for a brief time, the rains even let up. They sat in their shelter, poking at the fire, watching it grow hotter and brighter between them. Jon watched Sansa watch the fire, wondering what she might be thinking. She looked like she was somewhere far off, somewhere he could not go, as she stared at the flames.

And for the first time since that morning, he allowed himself to think of his duel with Jaime Lannister. He had never met a finer swordsman. Jaime Lannister could have killed him, would have killed him, with just a few more swings of his sword. Yet he had unmistakably cast his sword down.
Hell, he could have killed them as soon as he'd caught them on the ridge. He'd had his rifle aimed at Jon, and Jon would have bet his sword that Lannister was as sure a shot as he was with a sword.

So why had he let them go?

Something in the man's face had changed when they had each watched Sansa drop to her knees in cold horror, as she realized she would have to go back to King's Landing. The very tone of her voice had scalded him, but Jon was not ruthless. He was weak, he knew; he was soft-hearted. It was Lannister who was notoriously ruthless—after all, he had won the royal army more greatness than any that had come before him. He was a war machine, a weapon unto himself, and his deeds of greatness and terror were practically legend at this point. Before Jon had even learned to duel with a real sword, Jaime Lannister had swept nations, killed thousands. He was without mercy, without fear.

So why had he let them go?

It could not have merely been Sansa's whisper of horror as she had dropped to her knees, he was sure of it. Lannister had had too many opportunities to kill him before then; as they had been running back up the other side of the ravine, he could have easily shot Jon. Then as they had both come into the clearing, he had had a clear shot of Jon then, too. And certainly, the moment they had crossed swords, he could have ended his life.

No, he had never intended to kill him or take Sansa. Jon was sure of it.

Jon speared the two rabbits on the spit, showing Sansa as he worked. She went a bit pale at the sight of all of the blood, but she didn't mention it.

"Where will Daenerys go now?" she asked as Jon turned the spit slowly, watching the meat cook.

"We have supporters in some of the clans, but we're at a standstill," Jon said honestly. No point in hiding it. "She can't march, yet, and the Crown is too intent on getting rid of the threat she poses, so she can't walk freely."

"If she hides much longer, any spark she might have started will go out," Sansa reasoned, hugging her knees to her chest. "They laugh about her in King's Landing. We called her the Beggar Princess. No one ever called her by name, but it seemed that in every play, she was a character of folly. Even in the papers, they would make fun of her by reference."

"That was Tyrion's doing," Jon said. "When he was still part of the royal council, he started her smear campaign. He told us his strategies himself. Now he wants to use those same strategies against King Joffrey. It worked, in Essos."

"But Joff doesn't rule Essos," Sansa countered. "What does it matter?"

"It helped us get this far. We'd never have gotten the ships to cross the Narrow Sea without it."

"I don't think the North will pay attention to those strategies," Sansa said now. "They're not united the way they are in the south. There's no central place of culture, the way there is in the south, and even in Essos."

"Aye, the only way is if the Northern clans band together—"

"—Which they haven't done since Father stormed King's Landing with King Robert," Sansa finished for him. "They laugh about the northern clans in King's Landing, too, and they're not wrong. The clans are too busy fighting each other."
"Not all of them." Jon slid the cooked meat off the spit, and began cutting it with his dirk. "The Mormonts—"

"—Karstarks, Umbers, and Tallharts, yes, and even supposedly the Boltons," Sansa said in exasperation. "But Roose Bolton is not to be trusted, and the Karstarks are still bitter. And no one likes that Jeor Mormont passed clan leadership onto Maege Mormont. Not to mention the other clans that are fighting each other for petty things, as they've done for hundreds of years. There's nothing to unite them but religion, and even that is a weak point. No one cares about the old gods. Everyone is converting to worshipping the Seven. You saw for yourself: Mother raised us on the ways of the new gods. We grew up worshipping in the Sept, not in the godswood. Only father did that."

"You don't think they'd fight for their old gods?"

"They would, if their gods were threatened, if their ability to keep the old gods was taken away," Sansa conceded. She bit into the rabbit and screwed up her features. Jon couldn't stop his laughter from coming out.

"Freedom tastes good, doesn't it?" he teased, and Sansa laughed in spite of herself, covering her mouth.

Soon, they had finished their meat, and the fire began to die as it burned through the little kindling they had. "We might as well sleep," Jon said heavily, turning away from her to needlessly organize his bow, his arrows, his dirk and sword. He heard her clear her throat.

"Right, yes," she stammered.

There was nothing to do but get through it.

"We'll have to—"

"I suppose—"

They each faltered and looked away.

"We'll share cloaks," Jon said, clearing his throat and clenching his fists, as he stalked to the little divot she had dug out. "If we keep the fire going, that should be enough warmth."

"Yes, makes sense," Sansa said, rising and brushing off her dress and cloak needlessly. "Should I—"

"—You lay first, I'll just...go behind you," Jon said, not looking at her, gesturing to the divot. "If you face into the earth, you'll be warmer. Take off your cloak, and we can put it on top of mine."

She shed her cloak. Her dress was hopelessly muddy underneath, utterly ruined. He realized she had a corset on underneath—how in the hell had she run in a corset? He thought of her panting and gasping and felt a fresh stab of guilt. He was an idiot, truly. He watched her awkwardly lay in the dirt and turn onto her side, her copper hair pooling in the dirt.

"Is this—"

"Aye, that's fine," Jon interrupted, and he shed his own cloak. He set his weapons off to the side, near where his head would be, and then fidgeted for a moment, pacing and turning, before he lay down behind her, a mere inch from her. He cast both cloaks over them, and had to wriggle forward some to get underneath the cloak completely. They both stiffened when his chest brushed against
her back. Her hair tickled his face, and he pushed it away. "Are you—"

"—Yes, are you—"

"—Yes."

"Right. Well," Sansa began tremulously, "...sleep well, I suppose."

He laughed in spite of himself and watched her hair billow against his breath, revealing the soft skin of the nape of her neck for a flash, before it settled again.

"Sleep well," he said quietly.

The soldiers were singing, drunken and rowdy, as they ate supper. The inn had felt stifling, and the innkeeper, a fat woman with a shining, ruddy face, had stared at him with such open disgust that Jaime had been compelled to leave. Bronn, still clearly sensing his foul mood, had let him go outside alone, and Jaime was both annoyed and relieved.

The rain had let up, at long last, and the little garden on the side of the inn was quiet. The cool air was a blessing. His leg throbbed where Jon Snow had cut it, and his teeth ached. He'd been grinding them all day.

He paced for a bit, and heard crunching on the loose gravel path. He turned, and the innkeeper, the fat ugly cow, was staring at him. She too was clad in tartan.

"Is it some sort of northerner's holiday," he asked in greeting, gesturing to her tartan dress. "I've never seen so many people in tartan."

She swallowed, her jowls wobbling.

"It's the Stark tartan," she said now, raising her voice. "For Sansa Stark."

Jaime wished he were a drinking man. He felt that only alcohol could make this less shit, at this point. He smiled with all his teeth at the woman. Don't make me sing the Rains of Castamere, he thought, watching her take in his smile. I'm Tywin's son before I'm anything else.

"Ah, Sansa Stark. That's it. I thought I recognized it. A bit drab, isn't it? I don't think grey is most people's best colour," he remarked. Hatred gleamed in her eyes, and she blinked, tears streaking down her cheeks.

"This is for the Starks," she whispered, shutting the kitchen door.

A man came from the shadows, tall and impossibly broad, and clad in ugly, brutal-looking riding leathers and a poorly-sewn hood. He had an impressive sword sheathed at his hip. He pulled off the hood now, revealing a square jaw and mussed, sweaty brown hair. He had a foul purple and green bruise above his brow. It took Jaime a moment, but quite abruptly he realized who the man was.

"Dickon Tarly," he said in surprise. "I'd say you look well, but it would be a lie. Seven hells, did you lose a fight, man?"

Dickon approached him with a clenched jaw and angry eyes. The innkeeper had disappeared back into the kitchen, leaving them alone in the garden.

"You have no honor," he said in a low, shaking voice.
"So I've been told, by every man just before I cut his head off," Jaime retorted. "That doesn't bode well for you, I must say."

Dickon drew his sword, and just as fast, Jaime drew his own. "Are you really going to fight me?" he asked in disbelief. "I've seen you fight, sweet boy, and I can't say I was terribly impressed."

Dickon swung his sword; he was too big and broad to be a good swordsman. He'd've been better with an axe, but you couldn't tell Randyll Tarly, more of a climber than ivy itself, something like that. Jaime easily blocked the blow, feeling torn between laughter and confusion. "What in the name of the Seven is this all about—"

"—Sansa Stark, that's what it's about," Dickon yelled, dropping his sword for a moment. "We all know what you did, the whole north knows—"

"—Then you should be thanking me, you stupid brat," Jaime shot back incredulously. How could anyone know what he had done? It had only been he, Sansa Stark, and the Targaryen boy in that grove. "If it weren't for my actions, that snake Littlefinger would be getting ready to—"

It happened fast. Dickon let out a yell and swung his sword, and Jaime saw the opening and, almost instinctively, went for it. There was a curious whistling past his ear, and then blinding pain in his right hand, halting his progress.

In a clatter of noise, it was done. His sword lay on the ground, and Dickon's blade cut a long gash in his shoulder; he had been too surprised to step back far enough in time to completely avoid it. An arrow, painted black, with blood red feathers poking from its end, was lodged firmly in his right hand.

Even Dickon seemed shocked.

"Wh-what?" he breathed, and both men turned to look to the right. A slender figure emerged from the shadows, pulling down his own hood, his bow still drawn. In the light, Jaime could see the man's face better, though he did not know him. Pale eyes studied him as a clever, sharp mouth curved in delight. "Ramsay, I said—"

"—Oh, come on, my lord, did you not hear what Lannister just said? It wasn't enough for him to befoul your lady; he's taken her from Baelish, too. Will you really let this man continue to stand?"

Jaime knelt to snatch his sword, but even he was not fast enough. Another arrow hit him, seemingly out of nowhere, in the thigh, precisely where Jon Snow had cut him, and Jaime fell back in shock and pain. "Are you a man, or a sweet southerner boy?" was the last thing he heard the man say. Dickon Tarly stood over him, and grabbed him, and a hood was pulled over his eyes. He struggled, and then there was a sharp blow to the side of his head, and everything disappeared.

Sansa awoke at dawn's first light. Her whole body ached, and her stomach seemed to have folded it on itself from hunger. But there was something warm, and hard, pressed against her back.

It had taken hours to fall asleep. She had been self-conscious of every breath, every swallow, every urge to move, every growl of her stomach. She knew Jon hadn't fallen asleep for hours, either. They had simply lay there stiffly next to each other, not speaking, for hours. She didn't know when she had fallen asleep, but she knew it had been late.

Jon had not migrated much closer to her in his sleep, but she could feel his deep, even breathing tickling her neck.
She had never shared a bed with a man before.

She knew that men became hard in the morning—she had heard enough jokes about it—but her
dress and his riding leathers proved enough separation that she couldn't tell. The curiosity flitted
through her mind, then she felt guilty for it. She had imagined waking up next to Dickon so many
times even during their brief engagement that it had become almost a comforting ritual, imagining
waking up to his scent, his arm slung over her hip, holding her like she mattered.

She had never imagined anything like this.

Her hips ached from lying on the hard ground, and she longed to stretch her legs, but she held still,
her whole body tensed.

Did he and ever Daenerys sleep together, after they...? It was hard to imagine it. Oh, gods, and then
she found herself turning red as her mind wandered to what it might be like—oh, gods. She was
going to lose her mind. Most girls, she reasoned, lost their maidenhead so much sooner. She had
passed her twentieth name day years ago, and still was a virgin. Most girls lost that particular
innocence, one way or the other, by their seventeenth name day. Perhaps this was all just due to her
remaining innocent for far too long. Her mind was doing strange things to her, making her think
strange thoughts.

She did not even know if she really wanted to be bedded, beyond the satisfaction of having one
great mystery solved. It seemed such a complicated, confusing, embarrassing affair. It would be
best, she resolved, with someone gentle, and understanding; someone who could laugh at the
awkwardness with you. Someone who would guide you without making you too conscious of what
you didn't know.

And how could it even be fun? Everyone seemed to like it so much, and yet, to think through the
mechanics of it all, she thought it was such a strange and embarrassing activity. None of it made
any sense. It seemed so...messy, and complicated. Her mind kept trailing back to the image of
Daenerys' neck, the bruise upon it, like a locked door, behind which contained something
wonderful, if only she could find the key. Why, she wondered yet again, would anyone like having
their neck bit? Why would anyone want to do it? Why could she not stop thinking about it?

She felt Jon shift, sighing in his sleep, his breath along her neck, and every hair along her body
tingled with awareness. She knew he was waking up, and she both dreaded having to confront the
fact that they had slept so close together and wished they could simply get it over with.

He was awake, now. She felt him shift away, and cold rushed against her back, and she reflexively
curled in on herself. She waited a moment, and pretended to wake up, making a show of yawning.
Jon had got to his feet and was scanning their surroundings. There was blood red patterned with
pink in the east, beyond the black marks of trees, a riot of passionate colours. Everything else
seemed grey and lonely.

She sat up and watched Jon look around, his lean body all rigid lines to brace against the cold. He'd
left both cloaks over her.

"Good morning," she said into the wind. He looked over his shoulder but did not turn to face her.
There were imprints on the right side of his face from sleep, and his hair was wilder than ever.

"Morning," he said stiffly. "As soon as you're ready, we should start moving again." He would not
look at her, and his tone was harsh, gruff.

What had she done wrong? She felt ashamed, as though he could read her mind, could know her
traitorous thoughts. Flushed and embarrassed, she got to her feet, and shed one of the cloaks.

"Here," she said, not meeting his eyes, as she held the cloak out to him. He took it without looking at her and strapped on his bow and quiver.

They walked in silence for a long time. Her shoes had not been made for trekking along the moors, and she was conscious of every rock, every twig, but she could not bring herself to speak of it. The corset made it harder to walk quickly, to match Jon's strides, but her pride disallowed her from speaking. She could not say why she felt like some sort of ill-behaved, unruly child; she did not know how things had so swiftly turned sour since the evening. She had thought they were growing closer; now, it felt as though all of that had been undone.

It wasn't raining today, at least. For hours they trekked, in complete silence, and she simmered in agony. What had she done? Had he decided she was too much trouble? Was he regretting taking her along? She didn't see his face for hours, only his stiff shoulders as he relentlessly beat on ahead of her.

There were no signs of civilization for miles. Once they passed a mill, but Jon would not let them stop.

Tears began to burn in her eyes. She felt ridiculous. If he had decided that he did not want to drag her with him, he ought to simply say so. Why was he torturing her like this? Perhaps she had done something wrong; she had never intended it, though. If he would only tell her, she might be able to solve it.

But all day they did not speak, and at long last, the sky grew pink with the threat of sunset. They'd have to set up camp again. There was a lump in her throat; she dreaded having to face him, having to interact. He'd have to go hunt again, and she would simply sit there, useless, with nothing to do and no way of helping. She watched him scan the countryside with eyes narrowed.

"There's a stream," he said suddenly. "We should be near the Wolfswood."

"Oh," she said tentatively. "Is that...?"

"We've gone too far north," Jon explained unhappily, still not looking at her. He led them to the stream, whose banks were dotted with trees. Beyond the stream, flaking birches were tangled with pink thorny vines, the same pink as the sky.

She longed to be useful, to be worthwhile, so she tried scanning the area for a good place to camp, but nothing like their little ridge stood out to her, and besides, she didn't even know what made a good campsite or not, beyond having shelter. The lump in her throat grew.

"I don't know what would make a good place to camp," she confessed, trying to keep her voice even. Jon paused at the stream, looking up against the current, scowling.

"There's no good place to camp. We should have been there by now," he said shortly. "We'll stay here; at least there should be some game. Just stay there. I'll be back." And he leapt over the stream at a narrow place, and disappeared into the birch trees, leaving Sansa standing there helplessly on the bank.

She would not cry. She would not. Bracing herself, she hunted along the bank for rocks. He had seemed to like the camp fire she had built last night; she'd try that again.

She finished relatively quickly, for as it hadn't rained, there was far more kindling this time. She tried to mimic how he had started the fire last night, but she couldn't get it to work, and tears
blurred her vision. She was so, so hungry, and so tired, and so thirsty, and she did not know what she had done wrong. A wild thought, that this was no different than King's Landing, struck her. Here she was again, all at odds no matter what she did, unable to fix it, unable to know what it was she had done. Waiting to find out, desperately trying to make amends for crimes she did not know she had committed, desperately trying to make amends for nothing more than simply existing as she was. Furiously she tried harder to start the fire, but she got nothing, not even sparks.

She was in agony, so she desperately sought something to soothe her. Tall reeds grew around the stream, and she absentely tore at them in fistfuls, and began knotting them together, weaving them in and out. They were soft and pliant, and knotted well together. Her heart slowed and her eyes stopped burning as she worked methodically.

Jon missed two shots, and lost an arrow in a tree. Furiously he at last caught one rabbit, but it had taken nearly an hour, and it was already dark by the time he walked back to where he had left Sansa.

She had built a campsite again, though no fire was going. He saw her kneeling by the stream's edge, doing something with her hands, but it was too dark to see what. Jon stopped in his tracks, still shielded by the birch trees, and drew in a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

When he got to the campsite, she did not look up. She was wrapped tightly in her cloak, and a net of reeds was growing beneath her pale, chapped hands. The knotwork was precise, intricate.

"I only got one rabbit," he confessed. She still did not look up.

"Well, it is winter," she conceded in a low voice. "I...couldn't get a fire started."

He could see the scratches on the rocks where she had tried, and he felt another burst of rage. He turned away from her, and knelt before the campsite.

"You need the right type of rock."

"Oh. I didn't know."

Of course she didn't know. Jon started the fire with the flint he'd kept from last night, and they watched the kindling she had placed catch flame. She had built a spit, too, and he ground his teeth as he set it up, swearing under his breath when he pulled the wood too hard and the pointed end dug into his palm. In silence, he skinned the rabbit, while she continued to weave.

And then, out of nowhere: "What did I do?"

Her voice was thick, and Jon's gaze shot up. Her eyes were wet in the firelight.

"W-what?" he stammered. Sansa blinked and shot to her feet, unexpectedly.

"Y-you've been silent all day," she scoffed. "I clearly did something, but I can't figure out what it is, so just tell me!"

He could only stare at her, dumbfounded.

"What?"

"You're mad at me, and I don't know why!"

He might as well have been doused with cold water, and a creeping shame crept up his spine. He
had been sour and silent all day, but he'd not thought she'd noticed. "I cannot bear it, alright? I
cannot bear not knowing why you're upset with me. I know I'm difficult to travel with, and I don't
know how to hunt or start fires—"

"—I'm not upset with you," Jon interrupted, getting to his feet. Sansa stared at him.

"Then why have you acted like such a—such a—" she cast around helplessly, as though she could
not come up with a word to accurately describe him, "—a brat!" she finally settled on, her
shoulders rising and falling, chest heaving. "I didn't ask you to take me along. I'm not making you.
If you don't want—"

"—You did nothing," he said shortly, heat rising to his cheeks. "Just—just ignore it," he insisted,
turning and stalking away.

"Ignore it?" she scoffed in disbelief from behind him. "Ignore it?"

"It has got nothing to do with you," he snapped.

Well, that was a lie. It was hardly her fault, though. Jon rubbed the back of his neck. He turned
around, almost afraid to look at her. Her eyes were red, her chest heaving. "I...am sorry," he tried
this time. "What—what's that you're making?"

"You didn't speak the entire day, and you've obviously been in a foul mood," she insisted, tossing
aside the net she had been making, ignoring his admittedly pathetic attempt to sidestep the
problem. "You say it's not me, but how can I possibly believe you? Your mood changed overnight,
and it's just us here. The only possible cause is me. Can you just—can you just tell me what I did?
Don't—don't lie," she pleaded, her voice breaking. "Whatever it is I've done—" she cut off
abruptly and turned away.

Jon stood frozen, holding the half-skinned rabbit.

"Sansa," he said more gently, "I'm sorry. I really am. I—" he worked his jaw furiously. He had
never been good at this sort of thing. "—I realized this morning how...precarious our situation is.
And I don't know what to do. I don't even know if we're going in the right direction."

She was still turned away from him, arms folded tightly over her chest. "We don't have water, and
there's almost nothing to hunt here, and every house or dwelling we see, I wonder if they're
working for the Crown and will kill us on sight."

It was partly the truth, though not all of it. He swallowed. "I've led you into the wilderness, and ...I
can't even promise I can keep you alive."

"You are an idiot," she said tightly, still not turning to look at him. Her shoulders shook slightly.
His anger flared.

"I am an idiot," he agreed furiously. "You are right."

He wanted to stalk off, to get away from her, but he was still holding the bleeding, half-skinned
rabbit, and he was so hungry he couldn't see straight. Seething with an anger he secretly knew was
unreasonable, he sat down and skinned the rabbit so violently that he lost half the meat, swearing
under his breath the whole time. Sansa kept her back to him, and after a while, sat down and
resumed toying with her net. He kept waiting for her to speak, but she wouldn't.

Well, if he was such a bloody idiot, then he wouldn't bother her with his idiotic conversation. His
hands slowed as he held the meat. He did not want to have to speak, to tell her that he was going to
cook the meat, to offer her share to her, but he could not let her be hungry, either. He speared the meat on the spit over the fire, furious at how quickly the meat cooked. "The food's...almost ready," he finally said rather lamely. He saw her wipe at her face discretely, and he cleared his throat. "Um, I don't know if you heard me—"

"I heard," she said quietly.

The silence was awful, deafening and claustrophobic. He was at fault, he knew, but it was utterly unfair. He had done nothing wrong, except not make conversation. Was it such a crime to be silent? Why in seven hells was she weeping over this? He chanced another glance, but she was still faced away from him, her fingers clutching the net far too tightly. Words were stuck in his throat.

She had been kind to him, had shown him gentleness, when he had been hurting.

He moved the spit out of the fire's path and got to his feet, and walked to sit beside her. He dropped down next to her, not looking at her face.

"Davos tried to teach me knots, but I didn't listen," he admitted, picking up a corner of the quickly-growing net. He heard her let out a shuddering breath.

"It-it's not difficult," she said. "You just need to make sure you're keeping the right tension. It's a bit like making lace."

"I am well-known for my lace," he said wryly, and he heard her laugh, then stifle it quickly. She swallowed, and reached out, hands guiding his.

"Like this," she said, twisting his hand. He was grateful they were sitting away from the fire, in the dark, so that she could not see his face. "Over and under and around..."

He did as instructed, and realized he had inadvertently made a slipknot. He watched as she patiently undid the knot, her nimble fingers never breaking the reed, fragile as it was.

"Let me try again," he said, and he took the reeds from her. His fingers were clumsy from the cold, and it took him a few attempts, but he finally did the right knot. "It's a bit like a fishing net," he said as he took the next two reeds to knot.

"I'm worried the gaps are too big, though." She snapped another reed from the pile next to her, threading it in effortlessly among the others. Jon tested the gap with his hand.

"Depends on the kind of fish. Might be too big for the fish in this stream, but it would be good for most whitefish." He finished another knot, but it was unruly and messy compared to hers. "Why are you making it?"

"I don't know what else to do," she admitted. "I thought...well, I don't really know what I thought." Her hands stilled. "I'm sorry." Neither looked at the other. "I just...get upset if I think someone's angry with me."

He thought again of the horror on her face when Lannister had told her she would have to return to King's Landing. It was a horror that had stilled both men's swords, had made them both pause.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." He bit his lip, tying another knot. There were so many things he should have said, should have asked, but the words were lodged in his throat. Why was it so difficult?

After a time, they paused to observe their work. A long net stretched between them. Jon got to his
feet, holding it up in surprise, and tugged on it to test its strength. Its weight was unexpected. "It feels like a real net," he remarked, shaking it slightly. Sansa stood back, looking almost shy, her arms folded over her chest.

"Not like a make-believe one?" she teased, her voice wavering a bit, and he couldn't help but laugh. They lay it down next to the campfire, and sat on it together, as Jon moved the meat back over the fire to warm it again. They ate in silence, and then sat for a long time, watching the flames wither in the wind, with no kindling to keep it going. "We'll get there tomorrow," Sansa said quietly into the dark night.

"Aye," he replied softly.

Wordlessly they got up, after the last flame died, and Jon smoothed the net out once more. It would not stretch his full height, but long enough if they were curled up on it. Sansa shed his cloak, and he looked away hastily as he took it from her. *I am a fool,* he thought once more.

She lay down on the net, facing the campfire, and after a moment, he lay down behind her, and pulled both cloaks over them. "It's almost like a bed," he tried after a long moment.

"A make-believe one," Sansa said wryly, and for a moment they were laughing again, and then it died down once more.

His blood was singing in his veins. He clenched his fists. *I am a fool, I am a fool, I am a fool.*
There was probably nothing more disorienting than waking up with a hood over your face.

Jaime came to with a gasp and a horrific realization that he was about to slide off something, and he jolted to stop, but someone pinned him in place. Horseback, he was on horseback, but why? He struggled against the hand pinning him in place frantically.

"Settle down, General Lannister; you've a long journey ahead of you," came a sly voice in his ear.

His hands were bound behind his back, and every stride of the horse made what was evidently a bad wound in his right hand throb. There was a wound on his leg, too, that was bothered with every stride and bounce. "You were not as hard to take down as I would have thought, I must admit."

It all came rushing back. Dickon Tarly. The impish man with the arrows. The fat innkeeper, dressed in the Stark tartan. For Sansa Stark, she had said, before leaving him with these thuggish fools. Jaime swore he would never help Sansa Stark again, if possible. It was already proving to have been a terrible decision, and he could not see things improving very soon.

"Can anyone explain why I'm being kidnapped?" he asked through clenched teeth. There was wetness on his hands; his wound had reopened and was bleeding. He tried to wiggle the fingers of his right hand but they only throbbed and disobeyed him. He swayed and lurched, gasping.

No need to panic yet, he told himself. The muscles were in shock, was all; he'd get the feeling back in his fingers shortly, he was sure of it. It was probably just the angle, and the fact that he'd been tied for so long, and bleeding so much.

"You have the gall to pretend you don't know," seethed another voice, further away. Jaime rolled his eyes. That was Dickon Tarly, of course. He remembered being forced to converse with him at some masquerade back in King's Landing mere weeks ago...the idiot had not spoken so much as gawked at Sansa Stark gracelessly over his shoulder. Then his insufferable, pompous father had joined them, and while at first it had been amusing to see Randyll Tarly drunk--it was a bit like seeing a goat do magic tricks--it had grown tiresome quickly, not to mention what had happened after the masquerade.

"I'm no actor, brat; if I were pretending, you'd be able to tell, I promise," he sneered, and left Dickon in the silence to puzzle that one out.

"You know what you did to Sansa Stark," Dickon insisted over the wind.

"Yes, I know what I did, but I don't see how in seven hells you could possibly know," Jaime shot back.
"Everyone knows. The whole north knows what you've done."

"Shouldn't they be thanking me, then?"

"That's enough talking," Dickon Tarly said. Jaime rolled his eyes. *Oh, big man in charge,* he thought, but all the same, he decided to shut up. Dickon Tarly was no more talented of a conversationalist on horseback than he was at a masquerade, as it turned out. Why waste his breath?

He dearly hoped that the Stark girl appreciated her freedom, because the Seven knew he was paying for it. Would he not have let her go, had he known he'd be attacked by Dickon Tarly and his pale-eyed friend?

He did not know the answer. He kept seeing her drop to the ground in horror, kept remembering the scared little girl who had once, a long time ago, sobbed into his shirt, even as he had tried to pull away from her. He kept remembering Cersei's gaze flicking over Sansa so many times, her lovely green eyes taking in the way that men were starting to look at Sansa the way they had once looked at Cersei.

After hours of riding in the rain, Jaime was dizzy from pain, slumped forward in the saddle, but he heard the timbre of the horses' strides change: they were on stone now. He sat up despite the pain.

"Are we at Winterfell?" he wondered aloud, straining to remember what Winterfell had looked like. That was where Tarly lived now, wasn’t it? The Seven knew why they would move from the golden fields of the Reach to Winterfell, but he had never given a damn about others’ political machinations, so long as they did not interfere with his life in any way.

"No, my dear General," said Tarly's friend, his voice far too close for Jaime's liking. "Welcome to my humble abode."

"I'm sure it's absolutely lovely; however, as I cannot see, I can hardly give a believable compliment," Jaime said dryly, as the horse came to a stop. There was a sharp blow and he was pushed off the horse, and for one helpless moment he thought he might simply drop to the ground—and likely break his neck—but rough hands caught him, not gently.

“Careful, careful,” sang the friend. Another pair of hands righted him.

“What exactly is the purpose of this little venture?” Jaime wondered aloud as he was prodded sharply in the back and forced to move forward.

“We’re going to have a little chat is all.”

He was led inside; somehow, it was colder and damper inside than out. The hood was ripped off, and Jaime gasped, relieved to breathe freely. It was clearly some sort of northern dump that passed for an estate in these parts. Stone walls, stone floors, and almost no light. “Down we go.” The impish man prodded him once more in the back, in the direction of stone steps that led into darkness.

They were in the dungeons now. Jaime was pushed to the corner of the dungeon, where there was a large X-shaped wooden structure, decorated with chains. *Lovely.* Was he about to be flayed?

“You are aware that now that I’ve seen your faces, you will be hanged when all this is done, correct?” he asked dryly, as he was pushed to the wooden structure and chained round his waist.

“And what of your crimes against Sansa Stark?” Dickon asked hotly, watching as his friend—
clearly the leader of this dynamic duo—tied Jaime in place with a length of moulding rope. He dithered a moment, looking uncomfortable. Evidently he had never kidnapped and tortured anyone before; Jaime could have told him that it wasn’t meant to go quite like this.

“I have no crimes against Sansa Stark, you blithering idiot.”

“You raped her—“

“—No, I did not.”

“Can you prove it?” Dickon demanded. Jaime rolled his eyes.

“No, you’ve got me there. I have no way of proving that I never touched Sansa Stark, save for Lady Stark’s own word.” He thought of her being pulled away by Jon Snow. He was unlikely to get much help from her on this front; by now they would be on their way to Essos, if the Targaryen brat had any sense (though given his heritage, Jaime would guess that he did not). “Where on earth did you get this ridiculous notion?”

“Everyone knows, General Lannister,” the friend interrupted, swinging a chain almost playfully in his hands. Jaime leaned forward, testing his bond. The rope was old, but too strong, given his current position and the weakness in his hands. He’d never be able to untie himself, either; the knot was in front. His hands were bound by rope and he could feel the knot tantalizingly close to his fingers, but his right hand was simply too weak. “Everyone has been talking in the north about what you’ve done to her.”

If he told them he had intentionally let the Stark girl go, he would be framing himself. Word would get out, would spread, and Littlefinger would have him. But what could Littlefinger possibly do to him? Not to mention Dickon might not be any kinder about him having freed Sansa Stark…thus giving her directly to the Targaryens.

“My father knows, too,” Dickon said now, stepping closer. “You must have blackmailed him into keeping your foul behavior to himself—“

Jaime burst out laughing. Oh, this was too good. The universe was truly a sarcastic bitch sometimes. Dickon’s eyes widened in horror. “You laugh about blackmail?”

“No, I laugh because it’s much the other way round, I assure you, boy,” he said, breathless with laughter. “I would never have said anything about your father’s habits—I don’t judge any man for what he prefers behind closed doors—but as it’s come to this…Oh, the irony is truly too good.”

“Spit it out,” Dickon snapped, his face flushing, fists clenching.

And there he saw his opportunity. Jaime flashed a grin at Dickon.

“Oh, I shouldn’t,” he said innocently. “It would be unkind. I suppose everyone must already know—rumors do spread, as you well know—but they would never be from my lips.”

“I have you here, tied and imprisoned. You will do what I say,” Dickon said furiously. “What is this secret about my father?”

“See, that’s just the thing,” Jaime said, wincing. “As the general of the royal army, I’ve worked quite hard at learning to keep secrets under duress.”

This was a dangerous—and probably utterly stupid—game he was playing. Tyrion would have been able to come up with something clever. Cersei would have been able to seduce them. As it
was, without a sword or dirk or gun, Jaime had nothing but the sheer luck of the gods to go on.

Well, it had got him this far. “So you may as well begin your torture,” he continued, nodding to the chains in the other man’s hands, “because you clearly believe I’ve raped your sweet former betrothed, and I’ll never spill your father’s secret.”

“What shall we do, my lord?” The other man asked, in a ridiculously obsequious tone. Dickon looked like he was trying very hard to think; Jaime almost congratulated him on clearly expending such effort.

“...We will let him sweat overnight. Perhaps he’ll be more talkative in the morning,” Dickon finally said.

“You are in charge,” the friend said with a sigh, and he hung his chains on a nail poking out between the wet stones. Dickon lingered, looking uncertain, but then clenched his fists and turned away.

And thus they left Jaime there, with nothing but his thoughts and the pain in his right hand, in the darkness.

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Jon woke first, to icy rain filtering through the branches above them, with his arm curled in between his chest and Sansa's back, and their legs tangled. For a moment he lay there, wishing he had actually kept the old gods, really kept them, so he could pray without feeling like a hypocrite.

The skies were murky, suggesting another day of rain, another day of wandering through the Barrowlands, with little to guide his way, another day of gnawing hunger and all-consuming thirst... And what if Dany and the others had never made it?

It was a distinct possibility, hovering like a spectre over every thought, every strategy. Lannister might have released them, but Jon had no illusions about what the general or his army might do if they encountered Dany.

What if Dany was dead?

The possibility was too big, too bilious, to even consider, so Jon shunned it, even as it lingered. Everything would change; everything he had built his life around would be ripped away. He would have nothing of his life left, and would have to start over, build from the ground up.

He would be, he realized, in exactly the same situation as Sansa was now.

He gingerly moved away from Sansa, so as not to wake her just yet, and went to carefully tuck both cloaks back around her. Leaning over her, he tucked the cloaks around her shoulder, and—just his luck—at that moment she stirred.

"Sorry, I was just putting the cloak back on you," he whispered, wondering why he was whispering. Sansa mumbled something, her hair in her face, and before he could stop himself, he brushed it away, then sharply withdrew his hand.

"S' raining," she murmured sleepily, and nuzzled into the fabric of the cloak. Jon edged back from her and got to his feet, squinting as the rain hit his cheeks. It began to fall harder, creating a halo of blurred light around everything. It made it harder to see, harder to tell which direction was west.

"Jon?" A sleepy voice pulled him from his dark thoughts. Sansa sat up, blinking, clutching both cloaks tightly around her. "Should we start w-walking?" she asked, breaking into a yawn mid-sentence.
Both still half-asleep, they cleared their campsite. Jon picked up the net and folded it when Sansa wasn't looking—she had insisted they leave it, that it was rubbish—and they set off into the gloomy day.

"Shouldn't we be near Torrhen's Square?" Sansa remarked. The land seemed flatter here, Jon had noticed it too. They might be near water, which would mean they ought to be near Torrhen's Square.

Why didn't he feel relieved?

He knelt in the dirt and pulled up some grass. Sandy soil.

"I think we are," he said, rising out of his crouch and brushing his hands off. "We're supposed to go to a pub there and ask for Arstan Whitebeard." Sansa snorted. "What?" Jon asked indignantly.

"Nothing, nothing," she said innocently. They resumed walking. "Do you think ...the others made it?"

"The plan was that Davos would reconvene with them with horses, but I don't know if he made it." His belly lurched at the thought. He had always liked Davos best of them all. "If they weren't on horseback, they won't be traveling swift. Tyrion's slow, and with a group, it's harder to move fast."

"What about Missandei, and Daario, and Grey Worm?"

"Missandei will have gone with Dany and Daario. It was Grey Worm's task to retaliate."

Grey Worm was probably dead. Dead and gone, along with most of their Unsullied and Dothraki force. Between the disease that had felled them in Gulltown and General Lannister's garrison, they had been decimated.

Within an hour, the shape of Torrhen's Square emerged in the mist. It was an old castle that had been turned into a little town, due to its positioning in the middle of so many key destinations. As they approached, Jon turned to Sansa, stopping them on the road.

They were both filthy, faces smudged with dirt and shadowed from hunger and exhaustion. Sansa's hair was not the lacquered copper it had been when he had kidnapped her, but rather a wild mess, with leaves and twigs poking from it.

"...I was going to say we ought to take care to disguise you, but I don't think anyone will recognize you," he observed with a sly grin.

"Oh, I can't even bear to think of how I must look," Sansa replied, self-consciously combing at her hair.

"You don't look like Sansa Stark, and right now that is a good thing," Jon said, as they resumed walking.

The public house in question was dark even in the midday light, and had only a few patrons lingering by the bar. An older gentleman with a remarkably silky white beard was working behind the bar, and Sansa recognized him at once. Barristan Selmy, though well into his sixties, was as lean and fit as any man in his prime, and even the loose, dingy-coloured vest, shirt, and apron he wore could not quite hide it. His dark eyes flicked to them, so briefly, and she saw his brows arch in recognition before he turned away to speak to one of the patrons.

All eyes were on them—on her, in particular—and Sansa felt Jon stand far closer to her than
necessary, his hand at her back as he led her to the bar.

"We need a room for the night. We're on our way to Bear Island—I was told to ask for Arstan Whitebeard," Jon said, retrieving a small leather pouch of coins from his belt. She would never have been able to tell that he knew Barristan, or that Barristan knew him, and the duplicitous nature of it disturbed her. She would not have guessed that Jon might be good at this, even if she had accused him of being 'false coin' mere days ago.

"Aye, that's me. Third room on your right. It's not been cleaned," Barristan said, barely looking at them, as he passed Jon a tarnished key from his pocket. "Let's see...it'll be..." Barristan narrowed his eyes in thought, "...five gold dragons upfront, though I'll expect more later, if you want a hot meal."

"How much more?" Jon asked, looking annoyed, as he passed five gold dragons to Barristan. "This is hardly King's Landing."

"At least three, depends on how much you eat," Barristan shot back. "Rooms are up those stairs." His eyes lingered on Sansa. He recognized her, knew who she was, she could see a glimmer of it.

"Pretty wife you got there. Looks a bit ladylike for the likes of you," he addedmeaningfully, looking at Jon, who—whether it was acting or true embarrassment, she could not say—actually flushed.

"Keep your eyes and hands to yourself," he said coolly, and he took Sansa's hand and pulled her to the staircase in the corner.

Atop the stairs it was almost too dark to see; the hallway was cramped and smelled of wet wood.

"Did that mean five people--" she began, but Jon looked over his shoulder and pulled a face at her. He still had her hand clasped in his, and was counting the doors with the other. When they got to the third room on the right side of the hall, he dropped her hand and unlocked the door.

The room was tiny, with a soot-covered hearth and a lumpy-looking bed, but notably, the room was extremely overcrowded.

Daenerys was sitting on the bed with Missandei, Tyrion was in the only armchair, balancing a cup of wine on his leg, and Jorah and Daario were sitting before the fire, both men tending to their rifles.

"Took you long enough. I assume you did a little sight-seeing on your way," Tyrion greeted, as they entered and Jon locked the door behind them. Sansa felt a flash of self-consciousness and lingered at the edge of the room. They were all looking at her. "Good of you to bring our valuables, too," he added, his eyes alighting on Sansa, "though with the state she's in, Tarly may just kill us anyway. I have no idea how we'll get to--"

"--Tarly sold her," Jon interrupted, shedding his cloak and systematically shedding his weapons as well, dropping them onto a low writing desk. "To Baelish. Half the point of the raid was to get her."

"The other half being to execute me," Daenerys said.

"A shame; my brother is not accustomed to such total failure," Tyrion drawled, his gaze still fixed on Sansa. "Though while I am infinitely more certain that Littlefinger has three thousand gold dragons available, I am also infinitely more certain we will not be able to get our hands on it. Why on earth did you bring her?"
Sansa held her breath, and looked at Jon. All eyes were on him as he shifted uncomfortably and drew in a deep breath, but a knock at the door saved him from having to answer. Barristan appeared with a few trays of food, and Jon took them from him to help him in the door.

"Oh, thank every god there has ever been," Daario breathed at the sight of food, shooting to his feet immediately.

"The Mormonts and Rickard Karstark should be arriving soon," he said, and no one looked surprised by this. This was far more organization and involvement than Sansa had initially thought. These were the original five gold dragons, then, and Barristan was telling Jon that three more would arrive. "Jon, good to see you," he said, squeezing Jon's arm. He turned to Sansa and bowed. "Lady Stark. It's been quite some time."

"Ser Barristan, yes, it has," Sansa replied. He had received the honorary knighthood title back in King Aerys' day.

"Lady Stark was our hostage, but now that she is no longer marrying Dickon Tarly, we don't quite know what she is," Tyrion explained. "I suppose the last time you saw her, Selmy, she was betrothed to Joffrey."

"We both need food and water, and a bath if not a change of clothes," Jon said, before Tyrion could continue. "We've been walking for days and barely ate."

"Should have taken a horse or two, like we planned," Jorah said meaningfully, his gaze on Sansa.

"Jorah, leave it be," Daenerys said sharply. "Missandei can help Lady Stark with her bath, if we can get hot water."

Missandei looked ghostly, and she duly rose from the bed and she and Sansa followed Barristan out into the hall. It had been a dismissal, clearly. Barristan dropped his warm demeanor towards her the instant they were in the hall.

"You can use this room for your bath; I'll bring up some hot water," Barristan said brusquely, showing them into another cramped room, nearly identical to the one before it. Sansa went behind the dressing screen and began to shed her clothing. She needed Missandei's help with her corset. Twigs and leaves fluttered to the ground as she undressed.

"I'm almost afraid to look at myself," Sansa remarked lightly, as Missandei helped her out of the dress. There was a knock at the door; Barristan had brought a tub of hot water. Sansa shivered, naked, behind the screen, until he had left. "When did everyone arrive?" she tried again, when Missandei said nothing.

"The evening of the raid, Lady Stark," she replied, helping Sansa into the tub. Sansa did her best to submerge herself, but the tub was small, and the water was not hot. When she emerged, she began the task of detangling her long hair, which was filthy and matted at the nape of her neck. Without speaking, Missandei sat beside the tub and began to help her with patient, nimble hands.

"Has Ser Barristan been waiting here at this pub the whole time?"

"I'm afraid I cannot give you any information, Lady Stark."

The girl was clearly numb with grief or shock, so Sansa stopped trying to talk. She knew that state all too well; it was kinder to simply leave her alone. She wondered if Missandei had had some sort of relationship with one of Daenerys’ men who had stayed behind in the raid.
While Missandei untangled her hair, Sansa scrubbed at her skin. Her feet were covered in blisters and her hands were raw and chapped, and the water that came away from her skin was murky. She had never been so filthy in her life, not even as a child. Freedom, she thought, watching the water grow ever darker.

"Lady Stark was worth three thousand gold dragons to us. I was not about to just leave her, especially as we've now lost most of our men, horses, and guns," Jon said hotly.

"She was worth fifteen hundred gold dragons, actually, as Princess Daenerys had lowered the terms of the agreement," Tyrion corrected. "But I do see your logic. Though how did you come to learn that Baelish had bought her?"

Jon had not yet explained his encounter with General Lannister. Everyone was staring at him, hard. He licked his dry lips; he needed water, and he needed food, and he needed to sit down.

"We were tracked down by the general," Jon admitted. "He told us that Baelish had bought San—Lady Stark," he corrected hastily. Daario's eyes narrowed slightly, but he said nothing. "He ...let us go."

There was a sharp collective gasp; even Tyrion seemed floored.

"He what?"

A knock at the door saved him once more. He could not say why he was so reluctant to explain his encounter with General Lannister, but he was glad for any delay. Barristan appeared, and opened the door wider.

The Mormonts and Rickard Karstark had arrived.

There was nothing to be done about the filthy dress; there were no other clothes available. She did her best with her appearance. Missandei helped her to pull her hair back and pin it up, and at least she was clean now.

Missandei led her back to the room where the others were. There were more voices now—had the Mormonts already arrived? With a deep breath, Sansa entered.

Jon was standing in front of the fireplace, and Tyrion had been exiled from the armchair. A tall woman with salt-and-pepper hair and a very strong jaw, clad in fine riding leathers and furs, was seated there now, one leg crossed over the other, and a heavy-set man with sparse white fluffy hair stood beside her chair, and a barrel-chested man with a wild grey beard was pacing by the windows. They all went sheet white at the sight of Sansa.

"Catelyn’s daughter," the woman deduced immediately. It had to be Maege Mormont.

"We’re seeing too many ghosts today," the heavy-set man beside her said with a gruff chuckle. "First Ned Stark and now Catelyn." She thought it was Jeor Mormont, but she couldn’t be certain.

"He looks more like Lyanna, I tell you," Maege insisted stubbornly. "The mouth is all Lyanna." Jon turned around in surprise, and she offered him a wry smile. "I named my daughter after your mother. I cared for her deeply." She rose to her feet and went to Sansa. "You wouldn’t remember me, but I remember you as a child." She placed her hands on Sansa’s shoulders, looking her over.

"Of course I remember you, Lady Mormont," Sansa replied.
“You don’t seem terribly surprised to find Lady Stark with us,” Tyrion noted, pushing himself off the end of the bed. Jeor snorted.

“I was about to ask where she was just now. There are rumors flying up and down the country about Lady Stark. Married, unmarried, killed, kidnapped, raped…the last reliable information we had was that she was with you.”

“Raped?” Daenerys looked furious. “Surely we are not thought so little of.”

“Not the Targaryens. General Lannister’s gone missing. There are all sorts of rumors, that he raped Lady Stark,” Maege said. Sansa drew in a sharp breath.

“Jaime would never,” she blurted immediately. All eyes were on her now.

“Indeed. That does not sound like my brother,” Tyrion agreed immediately.

“He let us go,” Jon added. “I don’t know why. But he told us that Sansa had been sold to Lord Baelish. She’s not engaged to Tarly any longer.”

“We know she’s engaged to Baelish; his men are already roaming the north, hunting for her,” Jeor said. “I would not count on a ransom from him.”

“Indeed, we will need to return her—“ Tyrion began heavily, but Sansa could not contain herself.

“I can’t go back to King’s Landing,” she interrupted, her voice tight. “I’ll do anything but go back there. I can’t marry Petyr Baelish. I cannot return to King’s Landing.”

“His men are crawling all over the north, looking for you,” Maege said. “Child, I understand you don’t want to return to King’s Landing. But you’ve been there for so long, been among the Lannisters for so long. You must understand it would be difficult for us to trust your intentions. And to have his men hunting you puts the Princess Daenerys in danger.”

“You would rather be a prisoner of Princess Daenerys?” Rickard Karstark asked now. “You were well-kept by the Lannisters. This is no place for you.”

So this was the loyalty of the clans that had sworn fealty to her father. Sansa was hardly surprised—it was not as though they had come to save her, when she was trapped in King’s Landing. It was not as though they had ever tried to avenge her father, mother, brothers, or sister.

“As much as I do understand the horror of my own family, you must see sense, Lady Stark,” Tyrion said wryly. “We took you for the ransom you would net us. Now that that is no longer the case, we cannot just keep you. You are our enemy; you have never shown any signs of even quiet allegiance to Princess Daenerys.”

Sansa wanted to scream. She let out a callous, caustic laugh.

“I was a prisoner in King’s Landing for over ten years,” she began, her hands shaking, so she fisted them. “I was beaten and humiliated on a daily basis by Joffrey and the Lannisters. They executed everyone I loved, and then made me look at their heads each day, to see how much they had decayed. They—they sold me between each other, like I was a—a broodmare, or a piece of land. I was alone in King’s Landing for years, with no one to help me, no one to save me. I have no love for King Joffrey or the Lannisters. I wish them all dead, or worse.”

Her eyes burned, and she looked to Daenerys. “I have no love for you, Princess Daenerys, that is true. I’ve spent my life hearing jokes and japes about you. But I hate the Lannisters more, and I
hate King’s Landing. They destroyed my family before my eyes, and then tried to destroy me too. I
don’t care who ends their reign, so long as it ends, and I would happily do everything in my power
to help you accomplish that.” Her voice was growing stronger. “And you need me. I know King’s
Landing, and the intent of the Crown, better than any of you. People talked in front of me, said all
kinds of things.” She looked to Maege, Jeor, and Karstark. “For example, Roose Bolton will betray
any alliance he forms with you; he works directly with the Crown, and the Crown’s gold fills the
coffers of the Dreadfort. He may tell you he intends on acting as a spy for the north’s cause, but
you should not believe him.” Maege paled; in contrast, Karstark purpled. “And I know the north,
too. My father was once Warden of the North, and I am the blood of Winterfell.”

“But if Baelish’s men are hunting you, it will create much more trouble for us, my lady,” Daario
said now. “So long as you remain marriageable, we will forever be watching our backs for
Baelish’s men. I do not know the man but I know the name, and the reputation. It is a lot to risk for
a few inside secrets.”

The silence was ringing. And then…

“What if she were no longer marriageable?” Jon asked suddenly. His voice was quiet. “Sa—Lady
Stark is right. We do need her. And isn’t this exactly what you fight for, Dany?” He looked to
Daenerys now. “You once told me you wanted to create a world where no one could ever be
bought or sold. Have you changed?”

Sansa saw Dany swallow, her eyes never leaving Jon’s.

“Lady Stark will be marriageable for ten years. No matter what we could do to somehow soil her
reputation, Baelish will marry her—“

“Not if she’s already married.” Jon was not looking at her. She could not seem to draw in a breath.
No one could. Jon bit his lip, then spoke. “Daario is Tyroshi. Jorah is in exile. Tyrion is
supposedly dead. None of them could marry her. But I could.”

“You’re the son of a traitor to the realm,” Tyrion pointed out, but he was rubbing his chin
thoughtfully, his mismatched eyes narrowed.

“But I still belong to Westeros. And if she were married in a Sept to a Targaryen—“

“—It would be completely legal, completely binding, and would mean utter ruin for her
marriageability,” Tyrion finished for him. Maege suddenly got to her feet, her eyes bright.

“It would unite the North to your cause,” she breathed. “I did not think of it, but now it seems so
obvious. Look at you two, you are Ned and Cat come back to us. What greater endorsement for a
Targaryen restoration than marrying the blood of Winterfell to a Targaryen?” She turned to Sansa
now. “Of course, it is your choice, child, but it might be the only way you can stay out of King’s
Landing.”

Sansa blinked rapidly, and looked to Jon. He finally was looking at her, and he seemed to be edged
in fiery gold by the firelight.

“It would be marriage in name only,” he told her, stepping forward. “We would marry, but you
could live however you would want. And then, someday, should you meet someone, after…
everything…we would annul it,” he promised.

“We would need to do it soon,” Jeor said. “And publicly.”

“If we go to Winter Town and have it in a Sept there,” Tyrion began, pacing, “and we have a
wedding feast at one of the inns there, and make the bedding public—“

“—No—“ Sansa and Jon said at once, not looking at each other. Tyrion rolled his eyes.

“Fine, then at least an extremely loud bedding during the wedding feast, with proof of consummation, then we’d have dozens of witnesses.”

“Witnesses, and therefore people becoming devoted to the cause,” Maege added. “When they see Sansa Stark come out of the Sept in the Stark tartan, bound to a Targaryen, how could they not?”

“Jon is not marriageable,” Daenerys said loudly.

“Is it more important to you that we uphold vows that you made up when you were fourteen, or that you protect innocents?” Jon countered furiously.

“Lady Stark will hardly be innocent after Snow beds her,” Daario snarked, and Maege shot him a warning look. Jon and Daenerys were facing each other, their gazes locked in such intimacy that Sansa felt she had intruded on something.

“You took the vows of a Bloodrider,” Daenerys said into the ringing silence. “I did not make up those vows. You vowed to give your life to my cause. Marriage makes honoring that vow, to the letter, impossible.”

“I vowed to stand behind a leader who wanted to change the world. I vowed to give my life for someone who would not resort to the methods that every king of Westeros has used to oppress people for all of our history. If you are willing to buy and sell a person like they are livestock, all to gain a bit of gold, how does that make you any different from any king or queen who has come before you? If you’re not willing to protect your people, you are not the queen I vowed to give my life to. I vowed to do anything necessary to put that queen on the throne. And besides that, you’ve heard Lady Mormont and Tyrion,” Jon said in a low, fierce voice, stalking toward her.

He looked different. He was standing taller, Sansa realized. “Sansa Stark has been called the key to the north for a reason. Sansa Stark was held in captivity in King’s Landing—rather than executed—for a reason. The Lannisters know it, but you don’t seem to understand it yet. You have gained a powerful weapon, one that can unite the north under your cause. If you dismiss Lady Stark, if you trade her for petty gold, or even simply give her back to avoid a hassle, you are both foolish and heartless. You are not the leader who deserves my vows.” When he finished, he was breathless, shoulders rising and falling, fists clenched.

Daenerys’ eyes were wet. She does not want to lose him, Sansa realized. This would mean the end of it. Whatever had been between Jon and Daenerys would end.

This marriage would free him, too.

Daenerys turned her lovely head to look at Sansa now, her violet eyes shining.

“Would you have this done, Lady Stark?”

“I told you I would do anything to never go back to King’s Landing—I would die before I went back there,” Sansa said slowly. Her head was pounding, the blood thick in her ears, the pressure building. “If you really mean to take back the throne, to avenge the north, then yes—I would have this done.”

Daenerys’ lips trembled. If they did not know the secret of her heart before, they all do now, Sansa reflected. This was not the face of a queen looking upon a knight less devoted than she had once
thought; this was the face of a woman betrayed by the man she loved. It could not have been plainer if she had simply thrown herself into Jon’s arms, begging him not to leave her.

Everyone knew the stories: the Targaryens had danced too close to madness, the gods flipped a coin every time a Targaryen was born. Mad or sane. Daenerys swallowed, her gaze fixed on Sansa.

“I do mean to. And I will.”

It was a sacrifice made for the throne. Daenerys had already smoothed her features, and she turned to Missandei. “We will need a dress made of the Stark tartan, immediately.” She then turned to Maege and Jeor and Rickard. “We will need the word spread—that Sansa Stark of Winterfell is to wed Jon Snow of the Targaryen house in the Sept of Winter Town in three days’ time.”

“Three days?” Jorah balked. “That will hardly be enough time to—“

“—It must be three days,” Daenerys insisted. “We cannot linger much longer with Baelish’s men on the hunt for Lady Stark, and our cause has been stalled too long. If we truly mean to do this, it must be done now.”

Sansa still had not looked at Jon. She found that she could not even look in his direction. She was numb with shock, and barely felt Missandei’s hand on her arm.

“Come, we will have to look for a seamstress who could make the dress,” she said, and she led Sansa out of the room.

Davos arrived some hours later. Sansa and Missandei had still not returned from their errand, and they had spent hours discussing logistics with the Mormonts and Karstark, and when the former smuggler sneaked into the room, Jon was relieved. He had thought Davos dead.

“Most of the men were slain. Everything’s been taken,” Davos told them as Barristan handed him a tankard of ale and a hunk of bread. “Last I saw, Grey Worm was leading a small group away, but I don’t know how far they’ve gotten.” He had a bad wound on his leg; a dirk had got him. He had aged about ten years in the last few days; apparently he too had not been able to take a horse, and had had to make his way on foot. “I’ll be glad to get further north, to Bear Island,” he remarked wryly. “The central north is no safe place right now.”

They all exchanged glances. Tyrion cleared his throat.

“Yes, about that… as it turns out, we will be traveling to Winter Town in three days’ time,” he said carefully. Davos scoffed in disbelief.

“Winter Town? That makes no sense; there’s no reason—“

“—There is now,” Tyrion said. “Jon Snow is going to be marrying Lady Sansa Stark in the Sept at Winter Town, and we want it to be a public celebration.”

Davos looked like he had been slapped.

“It makes good sense,” Jorah said. “The Stark girl will unite the north. Having a Stark on our side —“

“—But what of the Tarly gold?”

“—The Tarlys sold her to Petyr Baelish, of the Vale. They were never going to pay the ransom, it
seems. Marrying Sansa gives us multiple advantages.”

“Marrying Sansa protects her from those who have abused her and held her in captivity,” Jon burst now, his face growing hot. Why did no one seem to care about this? “She’s my blood, and therefore, she’s Dany’s blood, too.”

“I would not emphasize the ‘my blood’ bit, if I were you,” Daario said with a smirk. “That is rather famously a Targaryen thing, to marry their own blood, and we can all see how Westeros feels about that.”

“He is a Targaryen,” Dany said acidly. “Why should he hide it?”

“He’s a Stark, too, that is for certain,” Maege said, shaking her head. “To marry a girl to save her from cruelty—that is Ned Stark, make no mistake.”

“And Rhaegar,” Dany shot back, rising from her seat, her cheeks flushed. “My brother was known for his honor, his kindness, his sweetness. This is what Rhaegar would have done.”

“Interesting. Rhaegar also more or less stole a Stark girl in a fit of passion. Though I think we can all agree that that one ended in tears.” Tyrion took a long drink of his wine. “Oh, come on, can no one laugh about this? It’s been what, twenty-five years? Surely it’s funny now?”

“No, I’m afraid we cannot yet laugh about events that left a little boy parentless and a realm overturned,” Jeor said coolly.

“It is still a usable angle,” Tyrion countered lightly. “We need to emphasize both the similarities and the differences. They have the passion of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark, yet the wisdom and stability of Ned Stark and Catelyn Tully,” he said, waving his hand as if to paint a picture. “We will have the face of Lyanna and Ned in Targaryen colours, and Catelyn Stark’s ghost herself, joined together in the Sept. Catelyn Stark’s ghost will be cloaked in Targaryen black and red. That image alone will do wonders for our cause…the dragon and the wolf, joined yet again. A force of nature, immutable, unstoppable, eternal,” Tyrion mused, almost wistfully.

He looked to Jon. “Are you quite sure you’re against a public bedding ceremony? It would be a nice way to work that passion bit in—“

“Yes,” Jon exploded, rising to his feet. “I am against it, and that’s the end of it.”

Abruptly, Daenerys got to her feet.

“Excuse me, everyone,” she said, “I will be back in a moment.” No one spoke again until the door had clicked shut. Jorah seemed to be trying to decide whether he ought to follow her or not.

“This seems to be a sensitive point,” Daario observed. “Surely Snow isn’t concerned about his performance? I believe he’s had plenty of practice.”

His gaze rested heavy on Jon, and Jon clenched his jaw, trying to physically stop himself from another outburst.

“It seems you have something to say, so why not say it, Naharis?” Jon asked in measured tones. Maege, Jeor, and Rickard seemed bewildered, but no one else did. They all know. They’ve always known.

The Tyroshi got to his feet and approached Jon lazily. He stood a finger’s width taller than Jon, a point that he had always drawn attention to and that had always rankled for Jon.
“They say sellswords switch allegiances with the wind,” he began in a low voice. “You have played her—and all of us—false. You vowed that although your claim to the throne was stronger, you did not want it…yet, this move legitimizes you, doesn’t it? You have used her, and now—“

—How dare you,” Jon growled, his hand reflexively going to his belt for his sword—then he realized it wasn’t there. He’d shed his weapons. “I have never wanted the throne. I have given everything to—“

—You had nothing to give. You are considered a traitor to the realm, and without Princess Daenerys, you would be dead. Every breath you take, you owe to her,” Daario seethed, and he gripped Jon’s shirt.

“And every breath has been given back to her, you—“ Jon pushed back, hard, with a growl of rage, but then rough hands were pulling them apart.

“That is enough,” Maege said in disgust, yanking Daario backward as easily as if he had been a child, whilst Davos pulled Jon away.

Breathlessly, they stared at each other, ignoring the others.

“I think some food and a bath might be wise, Snow,” Davos said now, letting go of Jon. He pulled a twig out of Jon’s hair. “Seems like it’s been a while, no?”

Jon said nothing, he stalked out of the room, with Davos on his heels, blinded by his rage. The older man pulled Jon into another room, where Barristan had dragged together a few lumpy mattresses. A fire was lit in the hearth, but the room was still cold.

“Going to blows with Naharis? I thought you cleverer than that,” Davos said, not unkindly, as Jon paced furiously.

_They all know._

He was cornered, trapped, for a thing he had never chosen. Like a wild animal, he walked back and forth, waiting for his blood to stop pounding.

“I must be tired,” he finally said, slowing to a stop before the fire, staring at its flames. _They all know._

“That sort of nonsense won’t do when you’re married, I can tell you,” Davos said wryly, dropping down on one of the mattresses. He chuckled to himself. “Wives will expect more of you.” He paused. Jon watched the flames dully. “Speaking of wives…I thought you vowed to never marry,” he reminded him cautiously, conscious of how his temper had raged earlier.

Jon continued to face the fire, avoiding the older man’s eyes.

“She needs me,” he finally said.

“I don’t need to tell you to be careful.”

“Careful?”

“You’re crossing some very powerful men. And you’re reminding many people that you’re alive—and many people want you dead, son. That’s the facts, sadly.”

“Baelish will quit once word gets out that she is married,” Jon said, finally turning to look at
Davos. He offered Jon a half-smile.

“You’ve injured the pride of both Tarly and Baelish now. Even if they don’t want the girl, they’ll want their pride. You can be sure of it.”

They had spent all afternoon sending ravens, in desperate search for a seamstress and for the Stark tartan. Sansa had never thought they would be able to have the Stark tartan in time, but to her shock, people all over the north had been weaving it.

“‘The rumors about the General spread fast, I think,’” Missandei observed as they walked back up to the rooms they were staying in. She had grown a little more lively throughout their afternoon, but her darkness had settled once more as they returned to the pub. Now, Missandei looked for Daenerys, and Sansa remained in the dark, silent hall, for a moment. She too had been caught up in the task of finding the Stark tartan, but now that her mind was no longer occupied with that, she was left alone with her shock. She went to the window at the very end of the hall and gazed out at the dingy street, dark with evening and empty of passerby. She gripped the windowsill until her knuckles bleached. A door creaked open and then shut again with a click, and she waited for Missandei to direct her to where she would be sleeping, but for a moment, there were no words.

She turned round; Jon was there, biting his lip.

“Sansa,” he began, stepping forward. “I know it’s a lot—“

“—Thank you,” she interrupted, stepping closer to meet him. “Thank you, I mean it.” She reached out, instinctively, and took his hand; at first he pulled back, yet his fingers linked tightly with hers even so. “It was a sacrifice.”

Jon’s lips twisted as he looked down at their linked hands.

“You won’t go to King’s Landing ever again,” he said, looking back at her. “I swear it.”

His grip tightened, and then they released each other. Without another word, he went into another room, leaving her with wet eyes and a pounding heart.
"Where the hell have you been?"

Father was waiting for him when Dickon rode into Winterfell late that night at the hunter's gate, holding up a lantern. He was barely sheltered from the rain by the entrance, and clad in a magnificent red silk coat, which made Dickon think of Jaime Lannister. Father's eyes took in the riding leathers that Dickon had borrowed from Ramsay as Dickon slid off his horse.

"Hunting, with Ramsay," Dickon replied shortly. He didn't want to even look at Father, let alone speak with him. Everything felt like it had been shifted or warped; he felt unequal to even holding a conversation. He attempted to brush past Father, but a vice grip on his upper arm stopped him. Dickon stared ahead, facing the opposite direction of his father, but beside him, held firmly in place.

"...You ought to have told me," Father said after a long moment. "I …was worried."

There was a weary gentleness to his voice that made it hard to breathe. Dickon swallowed.

"Sorry, Father," he said. "I left rather early and I didn't want to disturb you."

He risked a glance at his father. In the flickering torchlight Father looked older, and suddenly Dickon felt very tired. Father seemed smaller, weaker; diminished, somehow. He had secrets, shameful secrets probably, and it was disappointing, for reasons Dickon could not even name.

"Get some food. Hunting is hard work," Father finally said, letting go of his arm and slapping him on the back. Dickon pulled away, but his father's voice stopped him once more. "I've been looking for your brother."

Dickon turned in shock. Father wouldn't meet his eyes. "Haven't heard anything yet," he said gruffly, "but it's early days yet."

"R-right," he stammered. "Of course."

Numbly he walked to the kitchens, which were empty at this late hour. There was bread on the wooden table, and he meant to eat it, but he found himself sitting there at the table, staring at the grain of the wood.

He hadn't seen Samwell in so many years. Just the thought of seeing him again made Dickon clap a hand over his mouth to staunch a sob, even as his eyes burned. When that didn't work, he bit down hard on his knuckles, focusing on the pain, scrunching his eyes shut. He waited for the urge to cry
to pass.

Of all the nights for his father to start looking for Sam...Dickon had been thinking of Sam the whole ride from the Dreadfort, thinking of what his brother might have thought of his choices. Kidnapping Lannister had been a mistake, a terrible mistake, the kind of mistake Dickon had never thought he could make. Lannister had said it himself: they would be hanged, now. They could not just let him go; this was not a thing that could simply be undone.

Understanding of what needed to be done—what could be the only possible path forward—had been settling in the pit of his stomach, heavy as lead, since he had left the Dreadfort. But to do such a thing...he kept thinking of how his brother's eyes had looked, the first time Dickon had gone hunting.

He'd killed a young deer, its spotted russet coat impossibly soft and silky—he was good at hunting, had been good at it from the start—and they'd brought back its carcass. His brother had sobbed, blubbery like a ridiculous baby, and had not stopped even after Father had beat him black and blue. Dickon hadn't been sad until he'd seen Samwell cry, and after that he had felt guilty and defensive every time he went hunting. It had not even occurred to him to be sad for the deer. It was just a deer, what did it matter?

What would his brother's face look like, if he knew what Dickon had done? If he knew what he had to do?

He didn't eat. He was never hungry anymore anyway. Leaving the bread, he stalked to the Sept, but it was locked for the night, and he did not even know who had the keys. It was his own Sept, technically, and he could not even go inside, this one time that he felt he needed to pray. With a burst of furious frustration, he turned away and went to the godswood, and stood before the heart tree.

Its mournful carved face looked upon him in silent judgment. Help me, he thought, touching the bark, but then he felt silly and ashamed. The old gods did not exist; everyone knew that. It was just a face carved into a tree. There were no gods here in this wood. It was a stupid lie. He might as well pray to one of his little sister's dolls.

Someone help me, he begged, turning round though he knew he would find no help. From this angle, Sansa Stark seemed terribly far away and inconsequential. What madness had possessed him to kidnap Jaime Lannister in her honor? What did it matter if he had raped her? It was not as though kidnapping him, or scaring him, could possibly undo it.

She wasn't even going to be his wife anymore.

He paced. I'll just make a deal with him, he decided. To hell with Ramsay and his plans. He would make a deal with Lannister and free him, and they could put this business behind themselves. Lannister knew that the Tarlys were loyal, and besides, he was a man of war; he had to understand the urge to defend what belonged to you.

Having decided on it, Dickon felt giddy and light. It will be all right, he told himself. I'll just ride to the Dreadfort tonight and end this at once. And then Sam would come back, and perhaps Dickon could move back to the Reach.

He re-saddled his horse and was back on the road within a quarter hour.

When Dickon got to the Dreadfort, it had to be well after midnight, but there was enough activity even in the courtyard to suggest that the Bolton clan had visitors. Dickon dismounted, leaving his
horse for the strange, mute stablehand, and went to the main keep.

The Bolton clan was small, and the Dreadfort was normally austerely empty of human life. Even Winterfell was more crowded these days, with servants alone. Dickon found it strange to be able to walk through the main keep, to the great hall, without encountering a soul at any point. Of course, this was primarily why the Lannister general was being held in the Dreadfort, rather than Winterfell: it was highly unlikely that anyone would come upon him.

In the main hall, Roose Bolton was talking with Lord Baelish, who looked like a rare and exotic bird compared to the rest of the Bolton clan. Today he was clad in a splendid rusted red cloak, clasped with glittering opals, and embroidered in gold and silver. Beneath it, his waistcoat was the palest mint green brocade, done up with dozens of tiny silk-covered buttons. Roose Bolton, by contrast, looked like he had rolled in mud. Baelish was the height of fashion in King's Landing, emanating wealth more clearly than if he had simply tossed out handfuls of gold dragons, and yet... Dickon could not help but respect Bolton more, upon sight alone. He is a man to be feared, a man not to be trifled with, Dickon though as he entered the hall, even without invitation. Baelish looked more decorated than the most vain of ladies in King’s Landing.

The men turned to him when he entered, and to Dickon’s concern, neither man smiled in greeting.

“Dickon Tarly,” Baelish greeted, cocking his head, bird-like. “What an odd coincidence,” he pondered, studying Dickon. “We were just speaking of your former betrothed.”

Ramsay joined them then, his hair still wet from a bath, clad in the plainest, most nondescript of tunics. He looked like he had traveled back in time, to the days of knights.

“Former betrothed?” he asked brightly as he strode in. “Do we mean the Lady Stark?”

“Indeed,” Roose said in that hushed, buttery voice. He held up an unfurled parchment. “Baelish’s men have informed him she is now to be wed to the Targaryen wolf.”

“A terrible shame,” mourned Baelish, eying Dickon. “For such a lady to be so befouled…I can only imagine what they will do to her lovely body.”

“Then take her back,” Dickon blurted, staring at Baelish. Baelish sighed sadly, though his eyes were dancing.

“Ah, to be young, and fierce, and unafraid,” he grieved, eyes roving over Dickon. “But I was never so blessed as you, my sweet boy, with your fitness and abilities. I am simply a glorified accountant, nothing more. I could not hope to best the Targaryen savages.” He looked down. “If only,” he said regretfully. “But even my hired sellswords lack the bravery of, say, you, and your dear friend Ramsay.”

“But she’s marrying a Targaryen? She can’t,” Dickon confirmed, walking closer. All eyes were on him.

“Not just any Targaryen. The Targaryen,” Baelish said sadly, shaking his head. “The Targaryen wolf. No fiercer swordsman there has ever been, I’m afraid. When General Lannister invaded the Targaryen holdfast, the Targaryen wolf bested him in a fight for Sansa Stark, and stole her away.”

“By Targaryen wolf, he means the boy that Eddard Stark raised in secret,” Roose Bolton explained. “The son of Rhaegar and Lyanna.”

Dickon knew who the Targaryen wolf was; he had grown up hearing horrible tales of the Targaryen wolf. Once upon a time, there had been concern that he might return, might try to take
the Iron Throne. Dickon had grown up imagining a brute-faced savage with silver hair descending upon the shores of King’s Landing, holding a spear. As a boy, he and Sam would lay awake at night, and in the darkness, so skilled at spinning stories that felt real, Sam would whisper. And then the Targaryen wolf jumped from his boat, swinging a spear, roaring in a language no one knew, and first he went for the Princess Myrcella; he was going to scalp her and wear her golden hair...

“As we all know, Rhaegar Targaryen kidnapped and raped Lyanna Stark, in the way that these Targaryens are so prone to,” Baelish added. “I’ve often wondered if a child borne of rape can be capable of humanity.” He shook his head, pacing away from them. “To best Lannister...he must be quite the savage. And look at me,” Baelish said, turning round and opening his arms. “I could hardly fight off a housecat, let alone the best swordsman in the country.”

Dickon and Ramsay looked between each other; Dickon looked away hastily. “And as he is to marry her, legally, in the Sept in Winter Town in but less than three days, I cannot even have the King’s men charge him.” Baelish’s swarthy eyes lingered on Dickon. “I’m afraid only you can truly imagine how I am feeling, my sweet Lord Tarly. To have an innocent, helpless beauty like Sansa Stark ripped away from you...and she has suffered so very much. First the repeated rape of Lannister, and now to be befouled by the Targaryens...even I cannot imagine the horrors they will inflict upon her. Such violence would be even beyond rape...Within days she will be unrecognizable.”

The words were out of his mouth before he even knew what he was saying. Dickon’s heart pounded.

“We must help her,” he said, looking to Ramsay. Ramsay nodded eagerly.

“Oh, yes, my lord,” he agreed vigorously. “You are so valiant to say so. She is no longer even your wife—“

“—But she needs us,” Dickon reasoned frantically. He imagined the Targaryen wolf: wild silver hair and cruel violet eyes, wielding an arakh or spear, ready to scalp the first southron maiden he could find. He had heard that the Targaryen boy had lived among the Dothraki, and he shuddered at the very thought.

To have such a snake grow up in Sansa’s proximity, and then to have him turn on her as he had... He pictured the fight between Lannister and the Targaryen savage, two brutes fighting for the chance to rape Sansa Stark. This animal, if he had bested Lannister, had to be a brute indeed, as Baelish had said. “...He is her own blood, if distantly,” he realized in horror. “He has repaid Eddard Stark’s generosity with rape and captivity.” Dickon swallowed. *Northmen would not allow such an act to go unpunished.* “Winterfell cannot stand for such degradation,” he said more loudly, clenching his fists.

“What are you suggesting?” Baelish asked with a scandalized gasp, covering his mouth. “Surely you don’t mean to actually—“

“—My lord does,” Ramsay said quickly, looking upon Dickon with his eyes shining with something like adoration. “So brave, to be willing to fight those Targaryen savages.” Ramsay went to Dickon, and took his hand, clenching it in his grip. “I will go with you, my lord. We’ll bring back Sansa Stark, and save her innocence.”

“What’s left of it, at any rate,” Roose said dryly. Lord Baelish dropped to his knees before Dickon.

“I would give you whatever you asked of me, Lord Tarly,” he said.
“And the Northern clans would be yours,” Roose reasoned. “As I told your father—to rape Sansa Stark is to rape the north…and, therefore, to save Sansa Stark is to save the north.”

Dickon thought of Sam, thought of General Lannister tied in the pit of the Dreadfort. *If I can save Sansa, she can accuse Lannister…and then it will not matter that I have harmed him.*

“I’ll save her,” Dickon said, clenching his fists. “I swear it by the old gods and the new.”

There was a gnawing hollowness at the pit of her stomach that felt like hunger, but it was so much worse than hunger.

Daenerys had grown up knowing all too well what hunger felt like. She was used to it; she could weather it better than nearly any of them. Daario, Tyrion, Jorah, Missandei, and Jon all became irritable and rude, or lethargic and sulky, but it rarely had an effect on her. She had grown accustomed to it, she knew how to distract herself, to focus on other things. But this was beyond her.

She lay on the lumpy mattress, with Missandei squeezed in next to her, though Missandei faced away from her. The room was blue in the dawn. On the floor, Maege Mormont and Sansa Stark shared the other mattress. Maege was splayed out on the mattress, leaving Sansa little room. Her copper hair spilled out onto the floor, pooling on the dark grubby wood.

Daenerys had not slept all night. Her stomach began to turn as the room brightened, and she gingerly pushed off the bed without touching Missandei, and padded across the floor on bare feet. Sansa stirred but did not wake as she walked past her, her steps ruffling the long, thick copper hair. She just needed some air, she told herself.

In the hall all was silent, not even Barristan had awoken and begun his work for the day. Daenerys crept to the room that the men were sharing and, so slowly, turned the knob.

Jon lay on the floor beneath the window, on a net made of tied reeds, his cloak cast over him, not completely covering him.

How did you give up someone who had come to mean everything to you? How did you let go of your entire world?

He would never touch her again; she would never again feel him inside of her, never again feel his stubble against the soft inside of her thigh, never again hear him gasp into her neck. It was over. They had had their last kiss, their last touch. The last night they had lay together, she had been so tired, and almost fallen asleep against him, her hand over his heart, feeling its even, smooth beat. If only she had lay there just a few more moments. She had been so consumed with worry about Sansa Stark's ransom; if only she had known it was to be her last night with him. She might have lay there a little longer, might have reached up and kissed him one more time.

And how fitting, that the thing she had loved most about him—his unfailing need to love, to help, to protect—was the thing that had torn him away from her. She had always thought it was the best of him and the worst of him, just like how she knew that her desire to strive for her values was the best and worst of her as well.

"Princess," a sleepy voice brought her out of her agony. Jorah sat up, blinking blearily.

"Go back to sleep," she whispered, and made to leave. Jorah followed her out into the hall, and shut the door behind him. Wordlessly he took her in his arms.
"I'm so sorry, Princess," he said hoarsely into her hair.

The tears she had been fighting were threatening to come out, and she buried her face in his shirt, scrunching her eyes to stop them from coming. She clenched her teeth.

"There is nothing to be sorry for," she said through her teeth. Jorah ran his palm over her hair, light as snow. She couldn't breathe.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again. And then the damned tears came; she hated herself for crying into Jorah's shirt like a little girl. This was not the behavior of a queen, this was the behavior of a lovesick little girl. Jon would never again laugh into their kiss as she flipped him over on the bed; Jon would never again look at her with those dark eyes as he entered her; Jon would never again sigh her name into her hair like she was the only person in the world.

Maybe he had been pretending, the whole time.

That made her sob harder, clutch Jorah's shirt tighter, shake more violently.

Maybe he had never loved her.

She thought of Missandei staring listlessly out the window, waiting for Grey Worm to return; she thought of Jon advancing on her, fury etched in his features. She poisoned everything, she ruined every love.

He had not even seemed sad. He had barely looked at her since he had agreed to marry Sansa Stark. She barely existed to him anymore.

He had never loved her.

Her stomach writhed and the room spun. She didn't know how to be strong through this. This was so much worse than hunger.

“This is a bloody nice net. Never knew you to fish.” Davos had unfurled Sansa’s net and was holding it up in admiration. “Better for ocean fishing, though. It’s a bit too big for the river. Were you planning on fishing on Bear Island?”

The morning had been chaotic, and Jon, having slept on the net, had been awoken and so busy that he had forgotten to fold it up and hide it away. For some reason he didn’t want anyone to see it—but leave it to Davos to see the things he would rather keep hidden.

“San—Lady Stark,” he corrected hastily, “made it while we were traveling here.”

Sansa, unfortunately, happened to be passing by the room at that moment, and Davos stopped her. Her eyes widened when she saw the net. Jon wished he could simply melt into the floor.

“Where do I get one of these?” Davos teased, stretching it a bit. Sansa flushed molten red. “Didn’t know the ladies of King’s Landing knew so much about fishing,” he mused.

“It’s a bit like making lace,” Sansa said slyly, in spite of her embarrassment, her gaze flicking to Jon. “I didn’t realize Jon had kept it.”

“Smart of him to. This will be useful on Bear Island. Not much game to hunt there,” Davos replied. “That is, I’m assuming you both will be following us to Bear Island after the wedding.”

“No, I thought we’d move to King’s Landing,” Jon said sarcastically. He snatched the net from
Davos, who was chuckling, and turned away to fold it and to hide his blush.

“And how are the dress preparations going?” Davos was asking Sansa. Their voices thinned as Davos followed her into the hall, leaving Jon in the room by himself.

He’d spent the morning helping Daario, Jorah, Tyrion, and Barristan plan appropriate defense for both the Sept and the inn where the wedding feast would take place. Tyrion had found an inn near the Sept that had a room lofted above the banquet area, which would be ideal for “witnessing” the bedding. Maege and Jeor had been busy sending ravens all morning, and the area near the window was littered with bird droppings as the clans had responded to the impromptu wedding invitations. He was just thinking that he’d not seen Dany all morning when there was a soft knock on the doorframe.

Jon turned to find Dany standing there, holding a bundle of black cloth. Her eyes looked red, and she was pale.

“Delivery for Jon Snow,” she said wryly, clearing her throat. Jon’s stomach gave a lurch.

“Come in,” he stammered, shoving the net underneath his cloak and turning to her as she shut the door behind her, drowning out the chaos.

“We finished it just in time, thanks to Sansa,” Dany said, walking to the bed and shaking out the bundle. "She is quite the seamstress. ...A perfect wife, I suppose."

Jon stared at the ceremonial cloak splayed out on the bed before him. Dany stood next to him, arms wrapped round herself. "It isn't like the one Rhaegar cloaked Lyanna in; that one was embroidered and decorated with rubies. Viserys described it so many times." She reached out a hand and lifted the black fabric. It was lined with silk of the deepest burgundy, and the silver clasp, the three-headed dragon of Targaryen, had been borrowed from Dany's own cloak.

"This suits me better, I think," Jon said, holding it up. Dany was still staring at the red silk.

"You won't be the one wearing it," she pointed out softly, stroking the silk. "This will pair well with the tartan; it's simpler, more crude." She dropped the cloak. "I have never understood the tartan. They all look the same from a distance."

"I think that's probably the point," Jon countered with a half-smile. "More unity."

"One can only hope," she said darkly, turning away, clutching at her stomach again. She looked pale and somber. She stared out the window, placing a pale hand on the sill. "Sometimes I wonder if all this has been a waste."

Jon did not speak; he merely waited. "Grey Worm hasn't returned, and I think it is slowly killing Missandei. She won't admit it, but I know she is beginning to hate me." She laughed softly, looking down. "Every step I have taken toward the throne has cost me someone I love." Her shoulders tensed. "The ones who matter the most come to despise me."

"You gained an invaluable ally last night—"

"—I want a friend," she interrupted, her voice shaking. "You were not my follower, not my servant. I thought..." Her shoulders shook now, just once. "...I wonder if I held onto you too tightly. I made you want to run from me."

"I wanted to save a hurting, scared girl from a terrible fate. That is the beginning and the end of it," Jon replied. “I would have thought that that would matter to you more than anything.”
Her shoulders shook again and she bowed her head.

"It should, but I cannot bear it," she said, barely audible. "I cannot stand there in the Sept and watch you—" her voice broke and they were silent for a long time. "I love you. I love you the most."

All the hairs raised along his skin. They’d never said it. He’d thought it, at various points, but his mouth could never form the words. “I can’t tell if I want you or the Iron Throne more. I don’t know if I can give you up to get the throne."

“Then you don’t love me the most,” he said softly, setting the cloak back on the bed. “If you did, you’d know.”

“Do you love her?”

“No.” He almost wanted to laugh at the folly of it. Yet even as he thought it, a flush rose along his neck. He did not love Sansa…not yet, a voice whispered. Not yet.

“Do you love me?” Her voice was so small, so un-Dany.

“Yes,” he said at once, “but it is not the kind of love you want or deserve.”

His hands were shaking. He felt as though he had been doused in icy water. Breathing was hard. He had told the truth, had said the thing that had not been said, in all their years together.

“Get out.” Her voice was hard; her back became straight as a sword.

Jon left, heart hammering in his chest. In the hall, he heard Sansa’s laughter coming from the other room, followed by Davos’ chuckle. They were talking about sewing; he then heard Missandei’s softer, more subdued tones.

“We’ll leave tonight,” Tyrion’s voice came behind him. Jon turned and looked down at him. Tyrion looked weary, and for once had no wine with him. “We’ll have to travel separately. Daario went out scouting and he says there are soldiers everywhere, looking for her.” He mopped his face. “On the other hand, of course, Maege and Jeor have been so inundated with acceptances from the clans that I’m not even sure we’ll have a place to put them all for the feast.”

“Do you think it’ll work?” Jon asked. Tyrion gave him a roguish grin.

“Do we have any better plans?”

He could not argue with that.

Jaime woke to find an ugly, fat woman staring at him. Just how one wants to be awoken, he mused, writhing against his binds. Everything hurt, and his hand wouldn’t move, and he was very, very close to pissing himself. It would have been all he could think about, but he had the matter of his hand to occupy all of his fears and consume him completely. Lucky me.

She was staring at him, open-mouthed, eyes wide. Her tartan dress was shot through with blood red and was rather shabby, and she was holding a bucket of washing.

Jaime flashed his most brilliant smile at her.

“Why, you’re a sight for sore eyes,” he said sweetly. She stepped forward curiously. “I did not know they had such beauties in the north.”
“Y-you’re a soldier,” she realized with a gasp. “Your coat—“

“—Is red, yes. Beauty and brains—your husband is a lucky man.” He winked at her and she flushed. “Come closer, let me see you. Your beauty is reviving me,” he added, trying to make his voice more hoarse. He had never had much practice at seduction. She looked around, as though waiting for permission, and stepped forward haltingly. “No, come closer…I can hardly see you,” he coaxed.

Soon she was standing before him, and gods, it was worse than he’d thought. She had to be a Frey; they all had that weasel-y look to them.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she muttered.

“No, you shouldn’t,” Jaime agreed. “Who knows what we might get up to in the dark.”


“No need to rub it in,” he pouted. The fat woman screwed up her face and turned from him, and waddled off.

When she was gone, Jaime swore an oath. He really was about to piss himself.

And his damn right hand still wouldn’t move.

“The northerners aren’t fessing up, your Majesty.”

Bronn shrugged and watched Gregor Clegane, acting general of the army, slowly arrange his brutish features into a scowl at his words. It looked heavy work, like dragging rocks across a lawn, and Bronn instinctively turned to his left to say such to Jaime, but then remembered, as he had a thousand times already that day, that Jaime was not there. The horrible lurch hit him anew, even as he bared his teeth in a smile at Clegane.

“My uncle Jaime is gone. I want to know who did this, and then I want to take their head off!” Joffrey shrieked, banging his hand on the armrest of the Iron Throne.

“That’ll be a lot of Northern heads, your Majesty,” Bronn said honestly. He thought of that innkeeper’s ruddy face, twisted in dislike, as she had watched him circle the premises of the inn over and over again, never offering any help or any information. “It was planned, I’m telling you. There was a whole lot of them involved.”

Joffrey leaned forward, his green eyes glittering with anger. He ought to have looked like Jaime, but there was something undeniably runtish and mean about his features, something rattish and small. Jaime looked haughty and arrogant; Joffrey looked stupid and cruel. As he had left behind adolescence and grown into a man, he had only resembled Jaime less and less. He’d not grown quite as tall as anyone had thought, and there was already a hint of a gut underneath his red brocade waistcoat.

“Then we’ll get more pikes,” he said in a low, vicious voice.

Cersei had been alternating between being ghostly and remote, and fiery anger that raged like a forest fire. At the moment, she was standing beside Joffrey, staring at Bronn blankly. On Joffrey’s other side, his lovely queen Margaery was fretting.

“But why take Jaime?” she wondered again, shaking her brunette curls. “It makes no sense.”
Bronn glanced at Sandor Clegane, the younger and far smarter brother of Gregor. Their eyes met, and each man barely imperceptibly shook his head. They can’t know.

The north rumbled with talk of Sansa Stark, of how Jaime had raped her mercilessly, repeatedly. At first it had been a mere wisp of a rumor—he might have manhandled her once. But so quickly it had escalated. By the time they crossed the Twins, it seemed that Jaime had somehow locked Sansa up for years at a time as his personal sex slave. The image was so hilarious to Bronn that he had—rather unfortunately—laughed in the northman’s face as he’d told it to him.

“He’s a symbol of Lannister,” Sandor reasoned roughly. Varys made a pondering noise, tapping his powdered cheek thoughtfully. Littlefinger, Bronn noted, was absent. Duly noted, you scheming little cunt, he thought gleefully. He would have bet any amount of gold that this was the little Mockingbird’s doing. He did not know how, but he was sure of it.

“But Uncle Jaime is invincible,” Margaery said sadly, doe-like eyes misty. Bronn wanted to roll his eyes, but he did not dare it. Again he felt a pang: he would have liked to make a joke to Jaime about the queen, and he knew that Jaime would have laughed.

Bronn left the throne room. His only option was to go to his favorite brothel, a little hole in the wall in Flea Bottom. He stopped in his quarters first, shedding his redcoat—the whores liked it but the rest of Flea Bottom did not—and then continued on.

A pliant brunette with soft thighs and a talented mouth named Darcy—one of his favorites—was waiting for him when he got there, and for a little while, Bronn lost himself in her cunt and tits. He’d never been able to convince Jaime to give whoring a try; there was only one woman the man had loved. And what a worthy recipient, Bronn mused as he pumped in and out of Darcy, watching her tits bounce hypnotically. On a chaise on the other side of the room, her friend Ros, a pretty redhead with intriguingly dimpled thighs, was sighing ecstatically as a man fucked her arse.

He pounded and pounded, switching positions often, but he could not come. He’d never had this problem before. Never. He flipped Darcy onto her back and made her take him in her mouth, but he went soft even as the wet heat of her mouth enveloped him.

“What’s wrong?” she pouted, sitting up to look at him. Bronn sat down on a pouf heavily.

“His—best friend—is missing—haven’t—you—heard?” Ros grunted between thrusts up her arse. Darcy looked at him with simpering eyes, and Bronn looked away irritably.


“He’s a fool; he’d be the first to tell you,” Bronn replied, burying his face between her tits.

He’d never known Jaime to lose a fight. But clearly, wherever Jaime was, he’d lost a fight. Bronn couldn’t stop thinking of how haunted Jaime had looked as he’d stalked out of the inn.

And now Gregor Clegane was acting general of the army, in Jaime’s stead. Bronn mashed his face against Darcy’s tits, wishing he could just disappear into them for a while. Why wouldn’t his stupid cock work? This had never been a problem for him.

But the idea of Gregor Clegane as acting general—the very thought—made him sick. He knew the man, knew the man too well. People might call Jaime brutal and vicious, but Jaime’s violence only
extended to what was expected on a battlefield, and it was always, always with a purpose.

At long last he gave up, leaving a pouting Darcy with far too much of his money.

He couldn’t think, couldn’t drink, couldn’t fuck, until he’d found Jaime. So he might as well go look for the arrogant bastard. And kill him for interrupting my fucking time, he thought irritably.

Even whilst they’d been sewing, Missandei had been staring out the window, only further confirming Sansa’s suspicions, and when her lovely face stilled in horror at Tyrion’s announcement, Sansa knew she had been right.

“We’ll leave tonight. The darkness should help us avoid Baelish’s men,” the dwarf informed them, pacing before the fire. “We’ll leave individually, and go straight for Winter Town. Barristan has been kind enough to procure us new horses.”

Sansa watched Missandei’s face carefully; she saw how the Naathi woman’s jaw dropped slightly, how her eyes went, yet again, to the window. “Princess Daenerys will leave last, guarded by Jorah, Daario, Davos, and Barristan.”

Tyrion turned to Sansa now. “You and Jon will leave first. They’ll not be expecting you to travel alone, and we might be able to pass through to Winter Town without notice.”

“But what of the rest of Princess Daenerys’ army?” Sansa asked, still unable to tear her gaze from Missandei, whose eyes met hers in surprise. “Should we not wait at least one more day?”

“We can’t afford to wait any longer. We’ll leave Lady Mormont and Lord Karstark here overnight, should any of them arrive.”

She wished she could not feel Missandei’s grief. It was overwhelming. Sansa rose to prepare for the journey with heavy, aching limbs. Missandei was still staring out the window.

“You’ll want a heavy cloak; it smells like snow tonight,” Jon told her as she walked to the room she had shared with the other women. “I’ll meet you in the stables.”

He had been businesslike and remote all day, only becoming more so after Davos had shown that he’d kept the net she had woven. They had not spoken alone since last night, and now they would spend hours alone together. Hours alone, with nothing but silence and evening air between them.

Sansa dressed warmly; Barristan had lent her another heavy cloak, and boots as well, though they were far too big. Missandei accompanied her to the stable outside of the inn, where Jon, dressed all in black, was saddling a grey horse.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa said as they reached the shelter of the stables. A light snow had already begun to fall. Missandei offered a wan, blank smile.

“I am no lady anymore,” Sansa reflected. Soon she would be Mrs. Snow. A thrill of something—fear? Grief? Excitement?—rippled through her at the thought, and she glanced back at Jon, who was soothing the horse, running a gloved hand over the horse’s neck. She looked back at Missandei with a sad smile.

“You know,” she said simply. Missandei looked down at her clasped hands.
“I will travel with your dress. I wish you a safe journey,” she said formally, before turning away from Sansa.

And now she and Jon were alone in the stables.

_Damn._ Why did she have to keep thinking of the stupid bedding? Tentatively she approached Jon.

“How long will the journey take?” she asked, watching him strap a leather pack to the horse’s saddle.

“A few hours. We’ll be there before dawn,” Jon said shortly. He glanced over his shoulder at her, examining her clothing. “Good, you’ve got boots.”

He was being especially gruff, especially short. _He is embarrassed_, she realized.

Jon helped her into the saddle, his strong hands on her waist, and Sansa could not meet his eyes. Bedding. _It’s the stupid bedding_. It was making everything so awkward. She slid in his grip slightly, his gloved hand too high up on her rib cage, and she practically threw herself over the other side of the horse in her effort to correct it, and he nearly dropped her.

“Sorry,” they said at the same time. “No, it was me,” they each said at once, then looked away from each other. She thought of the bite mark on Daenerys’ lovely pale neck. _You just...do what you want to do, I guess_, he’d said, that night, his northern voice rough with northern whiskey.

Jon mounted the horse behind her, a rush of his scent filling the air around her. His hands were on either side of her, gripping the reins.

What did he want to do to her? Had he thought about it?

She was glad to face away from him, so he could not see her flush. With a kick into the horse's side and a low noise, they were off, leaving the stable and heading out into the street. The snow was heavier now and all was silent. He was too close; she could feel his chest brush her back.

_You just do what you want to do, I guess._

He had wanted to bite Daenerys’ neck. Did he still want to bite Daenerys' neck? Was he sorry to be marrying her? Did he want to bite her neck as well?

Why couldn’t she stop thinking about that stupid damned lovebite?

“Are you warm enough?” His voice was too soft. She was overcome with the urge to slap him, though she could not say why. She clenched her teeth.

“Yes.” After a long pause, as they rode toward the gate of Torrhen’s Square: “…Are you?”

“Yes.”

A shadow stood at the gate, cloaked in grey, waiting. _Missandei_, Sansa realized as they drew closer.

“Who is she in love with? Is it Grey Worm?” Sansa asked over her shoulder, in a low voice.

“Aye,” Jon murmured.

“She is _very_ handsome and mysterious,” Sansa remarked, thinking of how his dark eyes had lingered on them when she had first arrived at the holdfast. “And she is lovely and mysterious. It’s
like a novel, isn’t it?”

Jon said nothing, but he slowed the horse as they reached the gate. Missandei was shivering, clutching her cloak round her slim shoulders.

“Safe travels, Jon and Lady Stark,” she said politely between shivers.

“You too,” Sansa replied for them both.

“Don’t stay out too long. You’ll freeze,” Jon merely said, and with a whip of the reins, they left Missandei behind.

For a long time they rode in silence. The falling silent snow began to cover the land, as they approached the Wolfswood. She was not cold, but she was sad. The falling snow always made her think of the family she had lost. She wondered if Jon was thinking of them.

“Do you remember when you gave Bran that fish? Because he hadn’t caught one and was sad,” Sansa asked suddenly. She felt his warm breath rush against the back of her neck as he let out a sad laugh, and every hair on her body prickled to attention.

“Of course,” he said sadly, his voice nearly lost in the trees as they entered the darkness of the Wolfswood.

“And—you taught Arya how to fight with a sword, and Mother was so mad.” The horse had to slow, as the bramble was too thick underfoot to continue at such a pace. They might have been the only people in the world as they rode through the silent wood. “And that time you and Robb scared us all in the crypts.”

“You screamed like a babe,” Jon recalled with a short laugh. Sansa found herself laughing as well, but it was agonizing, too. The wood around them shifted in the snow, pale shapes like ghosts following them. “I think of them all the time,” he confessed suddenly. “Robb and Arya the most.”

“If I had a son—"

“—He’d be Robb, yes,” he agreed immediately. “And Arya, for a daughter. I’ve always wanted—” he stopped abruptly and did not finish the thought, but she knew what he would have said.

For a long time, neither could speak.

“Robb missed you so terribly. They all did. It was awful to watch,” Sansa finally said. She heard him swallow. “And Rickon didn’t stop crying for days. Robb kept secretly promising he would go and rescue you, and it was the only thing that would stop the tears.”

She thought of her brother, his beautiful Tully hair and beautiful Tully eyes, his head decaying on a pike; Joffrey gripping her chin, forcing her to look. He can make me look but he can’t make me see, she had told herself furiously, each time, and then each night she would see them anyway, the family she had lost, rotting and given over to maggots and flies, reduced to nothing more than rotting meat. And then she thought of how General Lannister’s strong hands had held her upright when her legs would have buckled beneath her. Fuck everyone, he had said in her ear, so fiercely that it had taken her aback. The venom had given her strength, in the moment.

“Being back in the north isn’t easy,” Jon finally said, in agreement. He shifted in the saddle and she felt him brush against her again. Everything in her head felt a mess, her thoughts and hopes and fears all tangled like ruined thread. She did not know how she could be so empty, so wrecked with despair, and yet so electric and filled with desperate hope at the very same time. She did not even
know what she was hoping for. Everything had been taken from her, always—her dreams, her family, her home—so why did she hope now? What did she even hope for?

“Do you think they’ll find us?” she finally asked, feeling his hard chest brush her back yet again, his strong legs against the backs of hers. You just do what you want to do, I guess. She thought of how his neck had looked as he’d swallowed the whiskey, thought of how his lips had twisted into a sly half-grin. Her belly warmed as though she'd drank half a bottle of whiskey.

“I like our odds, I think,” he said lightly, and she laughed.
Part I: Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

Ugh, I had written this chapter days ago and I HAVE NO IDEA WHERE THE ORIGINAL WENT. Poof. Gone. So I had to completely re-write it.

I also had to move a bunch of scenes around when I realized some things were happening too soon, others too late.

Oh, also: I realize that I have ...adjusted...the spatial relationship of certain elements of Westeros. For example, the Dreadfort is much closer to Winterfell here than in the books, and Winter Town, while very close to WF, is not right next to it. This is partly done to minimize the narrative time spent on traveling--unless I really need it--and partly done to facilitate certain plot points. So...there. *deflates slightly*

Anyway...thanks to everyone for the lovely comments and kudos. I obsessively check my email for the comments and read each one with a huge (probably disturbing) grin on my face.

Jon had felt Sansa slump back into his arms after a few hours, even as his own eyelids had grown heavy. The contact jolted him awake, and he drew in a few bracing breaths. Her head lolled against his shoulder, and he could feel the weight of her exhaustion...and the softness of her body, even through their heavy cloaks. His skin tingled where they touched, as though she had run her fingertips over his bare skin.

In less than two days' time, they would be married. And what then? They would go to Bear Island, and work for Dany's cause, and live as husband and wife? Or would they be married in name only, and live separately? They had never actually discussed it, though the question had lingered in the air between them the whole journey, around which they sidestepped gingerly, hyperaware of it. He did not know how to ask; he was afraid to find out what she wanted. That, and lately, the idea of continuing to support Dany seemed like a dark forest on the edge of which he was lingering. He did not know if he wanted to continue. He did not know if he could stop, though.

By the time they had made it through the Wolfswood, the snow had stopped, and the rolling land was blanketed in ghostly white. Winter Town loomed up before them, a mass of snow-capped terra cotta and slate roofs, the horizon pierced by the dark obelisk of the Sept's tower.

"Sansa," he said in her ear, reluctantly, and heard her sigh sleepily, before gaining awareness and startling, sitting forward and away from him with haste. The cold air rushed between them, to fill the space she had occupied.

Sansa's face burned; she was glad Jon could not see her. She'd not meant to fall asleep against him, and now she couldn't help but worry whether she had snored or drooled. "We're almost at Winter Town," Jon added, nudging the reins in the direction of the snow-capped buildings.

Winter Town was a labyrinth of whitewashed walls green with moss and vivid slate-stone and terra cotta roofs with so many greens, blues, and reds, that it looked like the sea, stretching out before them. The snow made the night brighter, so that the white walls stood out nearly as much as they
might have in daylight.

She had not been scared to be so close to Winterfell before, but Winter Town, even at this late hour, glittered with life, and Winterfell was closer than she had realized. Torrhen's Square, so abandoned and remote, had made it too easy to forget just how much danger they were really in. There were hundreds of people in Winter Town who were not loyal to the clans, and who would happily turn any of them in for a fair price.

The Sept was at the center of Winter Town, looming over everything at the top of the hill over the town square. It was new compared to most of the other structures in the town; northerners had only recently begun converting to the Faith of the Seven, within the last century. Sansa had always found the stained glass of the Septs so lovely, but in the darkness, it seemed little more than a towering, grim obelisk dedicated to southron culture.

And then, beyond Winter Town, loomed Winterfell, a mere shadow in the purpled sky.

The surge that went through her at the sight of it left her breathless and reeling, her eyes burning. Home. She blinked and rubbed at her eyes. Home. I want to go home. I just want to go home.

"I see Winterfell," she explained thickly.

"Aye," Jon said softly, a rush of warmth against the shell of her ear. "I forgot how close it is."

They came to the western gate of Winter Town, which consisted of two crumbling turrets flanked by ancient walls, their roofs of warm, rippling terra cotta partly hidden by the snow. A clansman—it was a Mormont man; the tartan was green—was slumped at the entrance with a rifle balanced between his legs. He startled at the sound of the horse, and clumsily picked up his rifle.

"State your name and your business," he insisted sleepily, unfortunately punctuating the command with a yawn.

"Lady Sansa Stark of clan Stark, and Jon Snow," Jon said, not dismounting, angling the horse slightly away from the clansman. He gasped and stepped forward, peering up at them.

"Sansa Stark," he breathed, dropping at once into a low bow. "Aye, it is you indeed. That is Catelyn Stark's daughter before me. And both Eddard and Lyanna behind you." He looked misty-eyed as he rose. "You're here sooner than we thought."

"And cold and hungry and tired," Jon said meaningfully. "Lady Stark has been through much."

"Of course, of course," the clansman stammered, flustered. He went to the gate. "Aye, the inn is close. Make a right immediately and you'll see it. The Wolf and Fish Inn," he said, rolling open the wrought iron gate with a thin rattle. "Winter is coming," he said respectfully to Sansa, bowing once more, deeply.

Winter came for my family already, she could not help but think, and where were you? though she smiled upon the clansman.

"Here we stand," she replied dutifully, but was glad to turn away from him. Here you stand, while the corpses of my family rotted long ago in King's Landing. She could not explain what so poisoned her heart—after all, there was no doubt that the clans, even the Mormonts, could never have bested the royal army and broken into King's Landing to save her family. But they had sworn they would try, she could not help but think, as she had so many times while in captivity in King's Landing. What is the point of a vow if you will never honor it?
They passed through the gate and heard the clansman shut it again with another jangling rattle. The streets, winding and twining up the hill leading to the Sept, were muddy, a foul mix of mud and icy slush, and a few people walked along the streets in shadow, but that was not what made Jon abruptly still the horse. Sansa looked up in surprise. "Why are we—oh."

The Stark tartan hung from the flagpole of every facade, rising like grey birds in the sky. Embroidered into every single one was a red wolf: hand-stitched, and done quickly, at that.

In the low wind and snow, the tartan rolled and undulated lazily, so that the red wolves flashed and whipped and flickered before her.

She felt Jon let out a slow breath, and it rushed against the nape of her neck, and shudders rent her body. He tensed around her.

"It must be for you. The red wolf," she said softly. "Red for Targaryen. You're the red wolf."

"I think not," Jon said, tugging on the reins and moving in a circle, looking round them. "I think this is for you. I like this not."

"Nor do I," she shivered. Her heart was in her throat. If these hundreds of flags were for her—if Jon was right—then why did she feel so much fear? "This smacks of Tyrion," she realized suddenly.

After word of Viserys' bloody death had reached King's Landing, back when Tyrion was still working for the Crown, they had hung flags with the Targaryen crest—the three-headed dragon—everywhere, in mourning. It had been a blistering bit of a smear campaign. The whole of King's Landing had laughed as each banner was unfurled, and people toasted to Viserys everywhere. The night it had been done, in the banquet hall, they had solemnly toasted to "The Beggar King," before bursting into laughter. Poor King Viserys, they had all said, so mock-sadly, and there had even been a rather funny puppet show, a satire of a tragedy detailing the sad, stunted life, and many failings, of Viserys Targaryen. Tyrion had received many congratulations on this particular campaign, and after that, no one had seemed to be very worried about the Targaryens anymore, and the unrest accompanying Joffrey's ascension had slowly died down.

"Aye, it does," Jon seethed, and he dug his heel into the horse's hide and turned at the first right. They went down a narrow street laid with stone, and the horse's hoof-strikes were loud here. At the end of the street, The Wolf and Fish Inn's lighted windows patterned the street with patches of jewel-like golden light. A black-lacquered sign swung above the door, carved and painted with chipped paint depicting a wolf leaping from a river with a fish in its jaws. Its walls were whitewashed and stained green with moss and rainwater. Jon immediately veered left to the stables, and helped her dismount. She stumbled a bit, her legs sore and stiff from riding—her whole body was weak, actually. Jon caught her, holding her by the arms.

"S-sorry," she said, embarrassed, straightening. "It seems I'm still not used to so much riding."

"Don't be sorry," he said softly. "Wait for me; we'll go in together." And he cast a suspicious look around them before leading the horse to stable.

After tying up the horse, they went through the front entrance, a crooked lacquered black door set into the whitewashed walls, and the horse's hoof-strikes were loud here. At the end of the street, The Wolf and Fish Inn's lighted windows patterned the street with patches of jewel-like golden light. A black-lacquered sign swung above the door, carved and painted with chipped paint depicting a wolf leaping from a river with a fish in its jaws. Its walls were whitewashed and stained green with moss and rainwater. Jon immediately veered left to the stables, and helped her dismount. She stumbled a bit, her legs sore and stiff from riding—her whole body was weak, actually. Jon caught her, holding her by the arms.

"Their gazes both traveled in search of the room lofted overhead. Rickety wooden steps, more or less tacked onto the stone wall, led to their fate. The bedding again. We can't escape it. Sansa
flushed and busied herself with removing her gloves, and Jon cleared his throat and began in search of the innkeeper, and then they both saw it.

Against the back wall, the Stark tartan hung, emblazoned with that red wolf. A red-faced woman with curly, frazzled blonde hair partially covered by a lace cap came to greet them, glowing at the sight of Sansa.

"We're here under Lady Mormont's name," Jon greeted the woman brusquely, taking a roll of parchment from his cloak that had been sealed with the bear of Mormont, and passing it to the innkeeper. She beamed at them.

"I know who you are. It might as well be Ned and Cat coming to my hearth," she whispered excitedly, her words curling in the northern way, and Sansa felt a pang of homesickness that she felt every time she heard such a thick northern accent. She touched Sansa's cheek, then Jon's, so fondly, like she'd known them all their lives. "Aye, you look just like your mother, just like Lady Mormont said," she said to Jon. "Them are the Stark eyes, and that's the Stark mouth, or I'm a Lannister." She chuckled at her joke, but Jon and Sansa merely looked at her coldly. "And you, look at you—Catelyn Stark born again, though you've got the Stark look about you, too."

She set her hands upon Sansa's shoulders, gazing at her lovingly, and sadly. "Aye, you poor child. How you've suffered, suffered far too much. Come, we've rooms upstairs, and a hot supper. Look at you two, you're nearly frozen through. Come, come."

The woman was a distant Tallhart relation, named Dilys, and she was surprisingly light of foot for a woman so large. After stopping at the kitchen to collect two trays of supper, she led them up another set of stairs to a hall of rooms. Three had been set aside for their group, in addition to that other room, set aside for the bedding. "Here you are, have some supper and warm yourselves, and I'll bring up the others when they arrive," she told them, ushering them into one of the rooms. It was a cozy room with three beds, and two chairs by the hearth.

Jon shed his dirk and sword, still looking ill at ease. Sansa hung up her cloaks and dropped into one of the soft, worn chairs to remove her boots, and Jon sat down across from her, scowling into the fire.

The pervasiveness of the Stark tartan—aft all, it had been far too easy to acquire it for her wedding dress—kept niggling at her. And what Dilys had said... how you've suffered, suffered far too much. Even if Tyrion had sent a letter to every clansman of the North, that alone could not have got so many people to stitch a wolf into the Stark tartan, to hang the Stark tartan from their flagpoles. This was beyond them; this was so much bigger than they had realized. And yet... she thought of the Mormont man, bowing to her, and felt another stab of anger.

"This will sound unkind," she began tentatively, picking at the roll of sour bread. She felt Jon watching her. "But I was held captive in King's Landing for quite a long time, and no one ever made any attempt to get me back. All these clans swore fealty to Father, and not once did anyone try to save me, or try to save Father, or Robb, or any of us."

She hated herself for voicing the words that had been locked inside her heart, like a vial of poison she had been keeping hidden, for so long. They burned her tongue as she spoke. "You saw how the Mormonts and Rickard Karstark reacted to seeing me. They were all too ready to send me back, without another thought. And now the Stark tartan everywhere, and the Mormont man bowing to me, and Dilys Tallhart so sympathetic...the sudden loyalty feels quite false. That's why I think the red wolf must be you. It can't be for me."

"That doesn't sound unkind. It sounds ...right," Jon mused, the fire dancing in his eyes.
"It makes me feel like I don't belong anywhere," she suddenly confessed in a rush. "I was a prisoner in King's Landing, and I can't pretend I've forgiven the northern clans. My family was executed with almost no resistance against the Crown. No one came to break my father out of his imprisonment, no one came to Robb's rescue, and when my little brothers and sister and mother were captured, no one came to steal them back, either." She was systematically tearing up the bread. "And now—if the red wolf is me—they just want to use me, they think I belong to them, just like everyone else seems to." Her voice shook.

"Aye, I know a bit of what that feels like," Jon said softly. "You know that you do not belong to me, right?"

Sansa looked to him in surprise. His eyes looked darker than ever. "I want to free you, not imprison you. Aye, it's not how I'd wish to do it—it's still confining, I know—but it's the only way I can think of keeping you safe and out of King's Landing. It doesn't matter what the northern lords, or Tyrion, might say of it—you don't owe us your allegiance. You don't owe us anything. And it matters not what Dany says, because deep down she does not mean to trap or enslave you. To use you as she has is not who she truly is."

He looked away now, his gaze far off, at a point in time she could not travel to with him. "In Essos, Dany stormed from one city to the next, freeing those who were enslaved. She didn't want the Iron Throne at all, in the beginning. That had been Viserys' dream, not hers. They called her Breaker of Chains in Essos, and that is who she is, deep down. What she did for me...she saved me. And I know that if I had ever truly wanted to walk away, she would have let me, in the end."

"She seems lost, right now," Sansa said carefully, thinking of the look on Daenerys' face when Jon had proposed the idea of marriage.

"Aye, she is lost," Jon agreed sadly. "We're all lost, it's just as you said."

Jon would have said more, but there was a knock on the door, and it opened, to reveal Tyrion and Missandei, both so thickly bundled that at first they were unrecognizable. The trunk bearing Sansa's wedding dress was dragged behind Missandei.

"Princess Daenerys is on her way," Tyrion told them as Dilys showed them into the room. His mismatched eyes were dancing. He was in the best mood that Sansa had ever seen him in. He looked positively cheerful. "Now, where is the ale? Give me all of it," he told Dilys with a grand gesture, and the woman chuckled. Tyrion dropped onto the floor before the fire, holding up his hands. "What on earth is the matter with you two? You both look like it's your bloody funeral."

"J-just cold, is all," Sansa said quickly, rushing to fill the silence. Jon was staring at Tyrion with eyes like ice.

Not long after, Daenerys arrived with the other men, and the room began to feel quite overcrowded.

"Strange sense of decoration they have here," Daavos remarked gruffly as he shed his own cloak, looking at Jon and Sansa. "Never seen a whole town decked out for a wedding."

"Ah, so you noticed?" Tyrion asked innocently, pouring himself more ale. Jon had got up off his
chair to allow Daenerys to sit, and was leaning against the mantle of the hearth, arms crossed. He straightened at Tyrion's words.

"Of course we noticed," he said, "the whole bloody place is covered in the Stark tartan and that red wolf."

"It might be my best work yet," Tyrion confessed with relish. "You will recall how Jeor Mormont told us that word of Jaime raping you has been flying up and down the north. Well, I had heard that people were beginning to wear the Stark tartan, in solidarity, and in honor of you and what had been done to you. So I merely capitalized on that," he explained slyly.

Sansa's blood went cold. "You are our red wolf, with your flaming red hair and your Stark blood, my dear lady Sansa, and now that the godswood at King's Landing has been burned, the northerners are positively salivating for a rebellion."

"But Jaime didn't rape me," Sansa insisted, feeling sick. "In fact—"

"—Even so, we might as well make use of the rumor," Tyrion interjected.

"You would do that to your own blood?" Jon asked now, his voice low, and scathing, with disgust. "You always said Jaime was the only one of your family who was kind to you."

"Please, Snow," Tyrion said now, settling comfortably against a pillow on the floor. "The rumors will be there whether they make flags with a wolf or not. And if you think that the Crown would not do the same against us, you are an even bigger fool than I thought. Jaime was perfectly willing to attack our holdfast and destroy our force, and obviously that means he was willing to face the difficult decision of whether to kill me."

"But he didn't," Jon insisted. "He let me and Sansa go without even a scratch."

"That remains a mystery," Tyrion dismissed.Sansa studied Daenerys carefully. Daenerys's mouth was set in a grim line and she stared, as though transfixed, at the fire.

"We were using Lady Stark as an endorsement of our cause anyway. This is simply taking it a step further," Daario reasoned. "The rumor was simply the spark. Now we'll bring the fire."

Jon was still staring at Tyrion. Tyrion returned the gaze steadily.

"I am well aware you've never respected my methods, Snow, but you cannot deny that they work." He cocked his head to the side. "Funny, I've often noted that marriage does not exactly improve most men. It seems to have made you even more sulky, and more vocal. Curious."

"If there is a rebellion, it will be built on a lie," Jon said. "A lie that we have no way of proving—"

"—Or disproving." Tyrion's good mood was beginning to visibly ebb.

"But Jon's right," Daenerys said at last, narrowing her eyes at Tyrion. "Jaime was always the only one that you ever had any love for. This will damn him, you know this."

"He was already damned," Tyrion said, staring into the fire. "And he knows it." He looked around at them. "Does no one else see the brilliance of this plan? We have turned a nasty rumor into a significant advantage!"

"You would never have done this before," Jon insisted. "This plan is built on a lie, not to mention it makes the risk of this wedding even greater than it was before. We are practically within a stone's
throw of Winterfell, which Dickon Tarly holds. This is fool's work. Something's changed."

"Yes, Snow, something has changed," Tyrion snapped, setting his ale down with a clunk. "This is our final push. If this does not work, I have no ideas left. Do I want to sacrifice my family? Well, yes, but not Jaime. You are correct in that I would never have done this before. But we are desperate, and Princess Daenerys isn't getting any younger. No one wants an old queen. They want a young, beautiful queen, a marriageable one, at that. We are running out of time and out of resources. I don't know if you noticed, but my dear brother has decimated our forces, in the original sense of the word. We are one-tenth what we were one week ago, and what we were one week ago was not even effective enough to rob a Winter Town market for food. These are the ugly deeds one must do in pursuit of the throne."

He looked down. "And as I said, Jaime was already damned. No one wants to hear that he did not rape Sansa Stark. No one will believe it, even if Sansa Stark herself goes to every bloody house in the north and tells them herself. The world has despised my brother as much as they have desired him, and they are just as ready to kill him as they ever were to fuck him. He will never outrun the rumors of Joffrey's true parentage; they have at last caught up with him." Tyrion smiled slightly. "I'm Tywin Lannister's son before I'm anything else, and my father would never pass up such an opportunity."

Sansa thought of the man who had danced with her at Joffrey and Margaery's wedding, the man who had given her his coat when her own dress had been ruined. A lump rose in her throat. \textit{He was already damned.}\n
And then she studied Daenerys, who was hugging herself. In this moment, she did not look like a queen. She looked like a scared little girl, who just wanted to be sent home.

After they had all eaten, they retreated to the rooms they were sharing; Sansa, Missandei, and Daenerys all together in one. While Daenerys bathed, Missandei and Sansa unpacked Sansa's wedding dress, which had only barely been finished in time.

"It really is so lovely," Missandei said quietly, stroking the tartan.

The dress was rather more daring than Sansa might have normally wished, but, as Maege and the seamstress—and Tyrion too—had insisted, a sober gown would not light the imagination of the northerners on fire. They needed to ignite passion, to paint a picture of two young people in love—a love somehow inextricably tied to Daenerys' claim to the throne.

And so it did not quite cover her shoulders, and the sleeves were the softest grey whisper of sheer fabric ending at her elbow in feminine pleats, just sheer enough to hint at the skin of her arms underneath. It was almost scandalous, really, particularly for a northern wedding. She had never had quite so much of her skin on display.

But the stomacher was her own work, and the part of the gown she was most proud of.

Embroidered in silvery thread, she had depicted leaves weaving together at her waist, and rising up, to give form to a shadowy wolf roaring at her bust, though upon first glance, the embroidery would look like some unidentifiable, decorative design. The silver of the thread lent a certain glamor and enchantment to the dress, which, had it been merely the Stark tartan, would have been quite dull indeed. The skirt was massive and heavy, so heavy that Missandei nearly dropped the whole dress when she took it from its wrapping.

Just when they were hanging up the dress in the wardrobe, there was a knock on the door. Daario was waiting in the hall.
"Grey Worm is here—with the Mormonts and Karstark," he told them breathlessly. He'd been out in the snow; it was still melting in his hair.

Sansa gasped; she looked to Missandei, who seemed to have become frozen in place, and was blinking rapidly. A splash reminded them of Daenerys; she was holding up a cloth in front of her, her eyes bright.

"Grey Worm?" she breathed. "Help me get dressed—"

"—I'll help her, Missandei; go," Sansa said immediately.

Missandei did not move for a long moment, and then, almost as though controlled by puppet strings, moved slowly and stiffly to the door, looking at the floor, and then went into the hall as though possessed.

It was just them in the room, now. Sansa helped Daenerys into her corset and chemise, wishing she could look out the window and watch Missandei reunite with Grey Worm. The corset was hard to fully lace up; Sansa struggled with the strings. She couldn't seem to get them to the indentations made in the strings from being worn in the same way for so many months. She'd never had to do other women's corsets, of course. She had renewed sympathy for her maids she had had throughout her life.

"Oh, hurry, it hardly matters; I'll just put on a cloak," Daenerys said, snatching her cloak from the floor. "Come, let's go," she said, radiant with joy. Sansa felt a pang for her; the princess' visible relief told so much. *She's been worried*, Sansa reflected, as they excitedly scrambled into the hall and down the steps.

The other guests had all gone to bed; the main hall of the inn was empty, and the fire was dying. Daenerys and Sansa pushed through the door and into the night, breathless, clutching their cloaks.

In the yard beside the stable, a dozen people were dismounting horses, including the Mormonts and Karstark. Jon was helping some of them with their horses. Beyond them, Sansa watched Grey Worm drop off his horse with the sleek grace of a cat.

He looked terrible; the side of his face was poorly bandaged, and his arm was wrapped in a sling, and he looked drawn and gaunt, dark shadows beneath his dark eyes. Missandei stood to the side of the yard, staring at him mutely, with wide eyes. He landed on his feet and turned to her, and offered nothing more than a wordless nod, before abruptly turning away to tend to his horse. Daenerys went to him, still clutching the cloak round her un-corseted form, her silvery hair dripping wet.

"We feared the worst," she said, placing a hand on Grey Worm's arm.

"We lost nearly everyone," Grey Worm reported simply, and turned and led his horse into the stable. Missandei stared at the ground, clutching her cloak round herself, and then abruptly turned and went inside, without speaking to or looking at anyone. She looked weak with relief.

Everyone went inside, tending to the Mormonts, Rickard Karstark, and Grey Worm and his men; in the commotion, Sansa was forgotten, and for a long time she stood outside in the yard. The snow had begun to fall again and she closed her eyes, feeling each flake kiss her cheeks and forehead. Over the pointed rooftops she could just barely make out the shadow of Winterfell, and her eyes began to burn again.

She just wanted to go home. She wanted it so badly that she could not breathe. She knelt in the
snow, busying herself by forming the snow mindlessly, though before she knew it she was forming shapes she knew all too well. The armory, the hunter's gate, the Sept... Tears tracked down her cheeks as she pressed her thumb into one of the mounds, to make the broken tower.

Snow crunched underfoot behind her; she felt someone kneel next to her.

"Here, the godswood." Jon leaned forward and pressed a few broken pine fronds into the snow in a pattern.

They were silent as their bare hands, red and numb with cold, built Winterfell from memory. It seemed a necessary task; the thought of going inside, leaving it unfinished, was unbearable.

She thought of the flickering red wolves on the Stark tartan; she thought of how quickly the Mormont clansman and Dilys Tallhart had sworn their allegiance to her; she thought of the fear in everyone's—even Tyrion's—eyes as they had discussed Tyrion's maneuver. She thought of Jon's rage, of Daenerys' pain.

She had thought she wanted vengeance, but now she realized that all she wanted was to go home. The clansmen's false loyalty made her feel weary and sad. Where had those banners—and all the fire that went with them—been when she had been imprisoned by Joffrey? When her family's heads had been put on pikes?

When they had finished, they each stared at the Winterfell made of snow before them. The snow castle became a blur of silver and white before her, and she felt Jon's gentle hand on her shoulder.

"You need sleep," he said heavily. They got to their feet, and she felt his hand on her back as they walked back inside. The main room of the inn was empty, now, and the fire in the hearth had died down to glowing embers. The Stark tartan, embroidered with the red wolf, seemed to sag sadly at the head of the room.

"You go on to bed," she said to Jon, who looked back at her with his brows drawn together. "I just...I need a moment to myself," she explained. Jon's hand lingered on her arm, and he dropped it.

"Don't stay up too much longer," he said softly. He bit his lip, she saw his gaze flick to her lips, then to her eyes again, and then, hastily, he turned away, and went up the stairs on light feet.

Sansa hugged herself, staring at the red wolf, and went to it, touching the embroidery. Why could she not appreciate this sign of devotion, of fealty? Why did her heart feel so blackened, so poisoned? Years ago, when she had still been innocent and hopeful, she would have been brought to tears by the gesture, by the sight of so many flags in her family's honor—in her honor—but now... She quickly turned away from the flag and paced back to the hearth, hugging herself more tightly. What would happen to Jaime Lannister? The irony of it all was so cruel: he had been her lone champion in King's Landing—granted in often unexpected and underhanded ways—and had done more for her than any of the northerners had ever done...and yet now they were all rising up against him in her honor. And she knew Tyrion was right; she was powerless to turn the tide.

"Lady Stark," came an unfamiliar voice. Sansa froze before the hearth and let out a gasp of surprise.

Across the room, beneath the stairs, a woman cloaked in red was smiling at her. From the shadows she stepped forth, and her feet made no noise. In the dim lighting, shadowed by the hood, her smile was skeletal.

Sansa fought the reflex to run or scream, and turned to face the woman. Was she one of Baelish’s?
Was she Cersei’s?

“I don’t believe we have met,” she said politely, dropping into a curtsey. The woman narrowed her eyes, studying Sansa. In the low light they looked almost ruby, but that couldn’t be right.

“We have not, in the flesh, though I have watched you in the flames so many times I feel as though I know you.” She stepped closer to Sansa, and Sansa flicked her gaze around the room as subtly as possible, looking for a path of escape—or a means of defense.

She would not be taken. By anyone.

“The flames?” she queried politely. All of those years at court had led her to perfect the art of appearing politely interested.

“The Lord of Light has chosen to show me your face. It has taken some time to find you.”

*Don’t step back. Don’t show you’re afraid or that you suspect her.* Sansa smiled, showing no teeth.

“Well, my address has changed quite a few times in the last month,” she joked, but the woman’s expression did not change.

“No, it is that we were not fated to meet just yet…but I had to see you. The Lord of Light has been good and granted me this chance, the chance to deliver a message to you. I had thought it would come to pass no matter what, but if He has allowed me to meet you…”

A drop of sweat began to crawl down her back. Sansa swallowed against the dryness in her mouth. The red woman stepped forward, her eyes suddenly burning with the fire of a zealot. “There will be fire and blood when the young wolf has grown, and when the dragonwolf becomes a kinslayer, and is slain at the Crownlands, darkness will descend. I have seen it in my flames.”

_Jon. Kinslayer. …And Dragonstone._ Sansa smoothed her features into a mask.

“I’m sure I don’t understand you,” she said breezily. “Is that a riddle?”

The woman ignored her, and stepped closer once more, and gripped Sansa by the wrist, her grip stronger than a man's.

“Find the white stag before the young wolf has grown. Or you will lose everyone you love at the Crownlands, and the realm will burn.” Her voice, so melodic, was smooth and rich as red wine, and her eyes glimmered even though the room was not lit.

“Lady Stark?”

Davos appeared at the top of the steps, followed by Grey Worm and Jon, and Sansa jolted in shock.

“She—“ Sansa looked back, but the red woman was gone. She shuddered as Jon thundered down the steps.

“Who were you talking to?” he demanded, but Sansa was peering round the corner, into the hall that led to the kitchens. Nothing.

“She disappeared,” Sansa stammered, feeling Jon’s grip on her arm, turning her back to him. She met Jon’s grey eyes. _…When the dragonwolf becomes a kinslayer, and is slain…_ “It was a woman all in red. She said she saw me in the flames,” she repeated, as Jon walked her back out of the hall, to rejoin Davos and Grey Worm. Davos, to her shock, snorted.
“I thought we were done with bloody witches,” he snarked to Jon, who let Sansa go and stalked out the front door.

“Witches?”

“Red women,” Grey Worm explained shortly, his unbound hand going to his dirk almost as a matter of reflex. Jon came back in, snow melting in his hair. He looked furious.

“They were crawling all through bloody Essos,” Davos complained. “Couldn’t open your damn front door without hitting one. I can’t believe one made it this far through Westeros, though. Heard they were being hanged here. Evidently they don’t drown, so that’s the test: try to drown ’em, and if they float, hang ’em.”

“What did she say?” Jon asked, stepping closer to Sansa.

“Just…nonsense about a battle at the Crownlands,” Sansa said carefully, shrinking from Jon’s gaze. Why can’t I tell him?

She felt him set his hand on her shoulder, and she risked a look at him again. His eyes were so soft. He is no kinslayer.

“Oh, very good—seems they’re getting more specific with their guessing game,” Davos was saying, chuckling. “I suppose one of them learned Princess Daenerys was born in the Crownlands. Seems nice and poetic to have her battle there. I suppose the red woman predicted that she would die there, too?”

“…Yes,” Sansa lied, wrapping her arms around herself. There was no need to upset Jon; he was already feeling so guilty for questioning Daenerys…and though the red woman’s words were nonsense, they left her cold and weak with an inexplicable fear. Fire and blood… “And something about a white stag,” Sansa added suddenly.

“Stags aren’t white,” Grey Worm said bluntly, and Davos was chuckling again. Even Jon looked like he was trying to stifle a wry smirk.

“How do you know? Met every stag in the world, have you?” Davos teased, as they began walking back up the steps.

“The Baratheon symbol is a stag,” Sansa pointed out as they reached the long hall leading to the rooms they were renting.

“Oh, that’s right,” Davos conceded. “Perhaps when Joffrey’s old, we can call him the white stag.”

He is no stag, Sansa thought, but she did not speak it. “Pay the red woman no mind, Lady Stark. If she gets into the building again, she’ll not do much more than talk nonsense at you.”

Davos and Grey Worm went back to their own room, leaving Jon and Sansa in the hall.

“Are you—“ Jon began, then halted, looking unsure. When the dragonwolf becomes a kinslayer and is slain…

“I’m only a bit shaken,” she said. “We should sleep.”

“Aye.” But he did not turn away just yet.

The hall was too warm, and his eyes were too dark. She was drowning, the hall was airless. A lazy
heat, not unlike the molten golden heat of whiskey, was pooling in the very pit of her belly.

He looked away, trying not to smile, and ran a hand over his jaw. “Davos told me he is shearing me like a sheep first thing tomorrow,” he told her, stepping back, making to go to his own room. “The beard has to go.”

“No,” she blurted, and his gaze jerked back to her with a curiosity in his eyes. Her face grew warm, nearly as warm and damp as the lazy heat in her belly. A sudden giddiness possessed her. It’s the stupid bedding. And the red woman…it is all making me drunk. “I just mean that it looks very northern,” she said lamely. His lips twitched.

“Northern,” he confirmed skeptically. “And that’s why you don’t want me to shave.”

“Exactly,” she insisted primly, holding her chin up. “Really, you all should have thought of that yourselves.”

Trying not to laugh, she turned on her heel and went to her door, painfully aware of his gaze on her back, and the shameful, lovely, dangerous, aching heat between her legs. “Good night,” she said in that same prim tone, before turning the knob and going inside.

“You’ll need men, and luckily, the Greyjoys ought to arrive early in the morning,” Roose Bolton was saying from the long table. He and Lord Baelish were poring over a map.

“Greyjoys?”


“Are they not savages?” They were like the Dothraki of Westeros: disorganized, uneducated, hairy savages, who raped and plundered and killed.

“Savages who control many of the smaller clans, such as the Mallister, Glenmore, Ryder, and Ryswell, among dozens of others,” Roose said patiently.

“And they are the fiercest of men,” Ramsay added, pacing. “They are true men. They will make quick work of taking back Lady Sansa Stark for us—”

“—But I’m going to take back Lady Stark,” Dickon interrupted, then his face flushed in embarrassment. Why did they all look so amused?

“Of course you are,” Baelish finally said, “…aided by the Ironmen. So many birds with just a single stone...The Greyjoys are like kings there, and they have sent their Prince Theon Greyjoy to us with a garrison of warriors.”

“But why? There is no war,” Dickon pointed out, confused.

“The Dreadfort is woefully under-manned, and the north’s turmoil is rising,” Roose said. “Without the Greyjoy force, we cannot hope to stand by you and your father for Winterfell, if the north does rise.”

“The Greyjoy boy will enjoy a little sport,” Baelish mused, toying with a golden pin on his waistcoat, of some kind of bird.

“Do keep an eye on him, when you take back Lady Stark with him,” Roose said aside to Ramsay and Dickon dispassionately. “He has an unfortunate habit of raping anything with a cunt. It is one
of the less savory traits of the Ironmen. They never bother to control their urges.”

“Lord Tarly will not let any harm come to my betrothed, I am sure of it,” Baelish said, turning his glittering, penetrating gaze upon Dickon, who flinched away.

“The Targaryens will take her to the Sept in the late afternoon; the ceremony would be finished by sunset, were it to occur successfully,” Roose said now. “They are staying at an inn close to the southern gate of Winter Town. All told they have no more than fifty men, including the Mormont and Karstark forces. The inn is not well-protected, but the Sept is another matter. Once she gets to the Sept, you will have far more difficulty extracting her. Not to mention the multiple infamous swordsmen who will be in proximity to her: Sir Barristan Selmy, once a lieutenant general of the royal army; Jorah Mormont, once a brigadier; a former commander of some sort of an army in Essos; and the Targaryen wolf, who is known and feared for his savagery.”

“A good friend of mine in Braavos tells me he slew hundreds of masters in their raid of Astapor,” Baelish added, stroking his goatee.

“Raid of Astapor?” Dickon asked, blinking. He would not even have been able to pick out Astapor on a map of Essos.

“The slave trade once flourished there, and before she decided she was entitled to the Iron Throne, the Beggar Princess decided she knew better than hundreds of men, centuries of careful government, and abolished the slave trade with fire and blood,” Roose explained. “I am surprised you did not hear of it.”

He could vaguely recall Father mentioning it, and Lady Sansa had asked him for his thoughts on the subject at the masquerade, but he had not even known for sure what had happened or when it had happened, and had merely offered a noncommittal noise before changing the subject, to avoid further embarrassment.

“But slaves are not allowed here. That seems a just cause,” Dickon said uncertainly, wondering if he had grossly misunderstood Bolton’s explanation.

“Only because of Eddard Stark, who insisted relentlessly. It was an unpopular change. And at any rate, hundreds of innocent men died and Astapor has been broken ever since. Everything was built upon the slave trade. Now no one is safe—master or slave. Children starve, parentless, in the streets, and the women who were once slaves now have no choice but to prostitute themselves. It has been a disaster,” Baelish said. “And they say the Targaryen wolf slew half.”

Dickon did not respond. He felt queasy. Slavery had always been a clear wrong, but the idea of an overturned, starving, ruined city was terrible, too.

“We ought to check on our guest, Lord Tarly,” Ramsay said suddenly. Dickon’s gaze snapped to Ramsay, whose smile was brilliant.

“Guest?” Baelish asked with interest.

“Nothing—er, no one,” Dickon said sharply, and furiously followed Ramsay out of the main hall.

“My love, my light, my reason for carrying on has returned,” Jaime said, as the fat woman darted into the dungeon, a mere shadow. He’d pissed himself hours ago, which might hurt his chances of seducing her, but somehow he thought not. He was beginning to get through to her. Just a little more effort…”
He had managed to pull from her that this was the Dreadfort, and that she was married to Roose Bolton, which had only increased Jaime’s certainty that he could seduce her and escape. The man had the eyes of a cold, dead fish, and an eerie, haggard face. Jaime had met him once, at court—the man was quite the northern snake—and had been unable to stop himself from visibly shuddering.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she muttered, stepping closer.

“I’ve been thinking of nothing but you,” Jaime whispered. He had never needed to seduce with words—hell, he had never needed to seduce. When things had still been good between him and Cersei—and even after it had all fallen apart—they had been simply drawn to each other’s skin like a force of nature, unstoppable. There had been no need for seduction or cajoling; rather even the act of not touching her was an enormous exertion of self-discipline. When he’d been young he’d not seen the need for such discipline and had taken absurd risks for even a few minutes alone with her.

Not so with this one. “It is just my luck,” he said sadly, “to meet such a captivating woman when I myself am a captive already.” *Oh, that was clever*, he congratulated himself. *Tyrion would be proud.*

...*And Cersei would slap me.*

In the darkness he could just barely see her face screw up in tears.

“My husband says I’m ugly, that I’m nothing more than a cunt and a womb,” she confessed in a low, choking voice.

“Your husband is a fool,” Jaime whispered urgently, matching her tone. “He must be so overcome with jealousy.”

“Jealousy?” she asked stupidly, nearly dropping the bucket she was holding, as a prop.

“Of course,” Jaime reasoned. “A beauty such as yourself—if you knew you were beautiful, you might think you deserve better than him. He needs to make you believe you are ugly so you can never stray to greener pastures. It has no honor but I can understand the sentiment. Beauty drives men wild; they will stoop to shockingly low measures for a beautiful woman.”

"You are a liar," she choked in a watery voice. "You are as cruel as they say." She turned and fled, but Dickon Tarly was at the entrance to the dungeon, still rain-soaked and looking even worse that he had earlier. Behind him, Bolton's boy, Ramsay, was following, like an ugly, vicious little terrier.

"Walda, what are you doing here?" Ramsay asked, casually slapping her across the face. She really did drop the bucket this time. "Couldn't resist a look at the Lannister general, could you? Horny, desperate cunt," he said summarily, and kicked the bucket out of the way as he passed her. Dickon looked uncomfortable and uncertain, but did not challenge Ramsay, and instead went to Jaime.

"We're going to save Lady Stark from the Targaryens tomorrow," Dickon informed him heatedly, stepping closer to him.

"Of course you are," Jaime said, rolling his eyes. "And then she can tell you herself that I never touched her. I'm sure she will be terribly thrilled to see you. And where will you be taking her? To your own bed, so you can take her as you took Winterfell, or to Lord Baelish?" Dickon's mouth twitched in rage, his eyes growing wet.

"I didn't take—"
"—Yes, you did. But what does it matter? The Tarlys have always been ambitious," Jaime reasoned viciously. "Don't pretend you're so valiant, Tarly—you're no different than me or Baelish or even the Targ—"

The blow was a surprise. Dickon Tarly had backhanded him; Jaime's jaw throbbed and his neck hurt with the force of the strike. Dickon stepped back with a look of horror, his mouth trembling, his eyes bright with tears.

"Stop it," Walda whispered from the corner, and Ramsay hit her so hard she did not say another word, and merely knelt upon the cold, wet stone, whimpering in pain.

"I'm not like you or Baelish or the Targaryens," Dickon insisted in horror. "I would never do what you had done."

Blood was pooling in Jaime's mouth, and he spit it out before raising his gaze to the Tarly boy. That mouth will be the end of you, Tyrion had warned him once. I pray to the Seven that someday you will learn to keep your mouth shut, Cersei had said furiously. You're too impulsive; you cannot resist having the last word, and it will ruin you, Father had said.

He was lurching over the edge of a cliff. One more step would probably kill him. So why did he move? It was not for Sansa Stark, it was not for anyone but himself. He smiled, all bloody teeth, at Dickon Tarly, whose Adam's apple moved as he swallowed in horror.

"If Baelish is so horrible, why are you bringing Sansa Stark back to him?" he asked scathingly. Dickon's hand fisted, and he raised the fist, shaking, but at the last moment he dropped his hand, and suddenly turned on his heel and left.
Part I: Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

So. This is LONG. But I really wanted to keep all the plot points together for thematic reasons. This is one of the chapters I've been most excited to write, and kicks off two character arcs that I am REALLY excited to dig into. I'm SO nervous about what everyone will think. I hope it is exciting to read!

Early that morning, the Ironborn garrison appeared on the horizon, dirty smudges against the pale sky. Dickon did not want them to come, and he had willed them to be detained—he had prayed for a lamed horse, a change of heart, or even bandits, though from the sound of them, the bandits would have come away poorer from that exchange.

"Prince Theon was raised by the Stark clan. He's a bit like the Targaryen wolf," Ramsay had explained as they had rode out to meet them on the hill overlooking the Dreadfort. "In that he too returned Eddard Stark’s generosity with savagery the moment he could."

"Aren't the Ironborn known for being stupid and disorganized?" Dickon had only heard of the Ironborn as pointlessly brutal idiots who barely maintained control over the petty clans surrounding them; a lot of drunken rapers who, as Father had put it, thought with their cocks.

"You're so clever to see it, my lord. But we do not need their minds, we merely need their men," Ramsay replied as they squinted at the western horizon in the dawn. Dickon thought of Jaime Lannister, tied up in the Dreadfort, of Sansa Stark imprisoned by the Targaryens, of his father in Winterfell. Everything was unraveling faster than he could catch the thread. He had the sense of watching something fall deeper into a dark chasm, but what it was, he could not say. Something had been lost, something he should have held onto better. But what was it?

And then the Ironborn were upon them. Grey and sandy as river rocks and just as brutally faced, they approached on mismatched horses, in nondescript grey that made him think of discarded snakeskin. Their faces were craggy and scarred, their eyes small and hard.

The one leading the way had a quiver and bow strapped to him, and his face was smoother than the others', his eyes and smile slyer. Dickon disliked him at once. He was one of those people who was always laughing at you, always in on some joke and intended on leaving you out of it, always looking for someone more popular to befriend.

"Why, this is no northman," the man observed as soon as he reached Dickon.

"I am Dickon Tarly of Winterfell," Dickon informed him, drawing his horse closer. He was taller than this jester. The thought made him sit a bit straighter. He was taller and broader, by a lot. He had been more of a man than this fool by his twelfth nameday.

"Oh, of Winterfell, are you?" His lips curved into a snide smirk. "I am Prince Theon Greyjoy, of the Iron Islands. My men and I are at your service...to rescue Sansa Stark." His glance back at his men was knowing and cruel. "I remember her. She was a pretty cunt."

"She would have been a child when you knew her," Dickon blurted, confused. Prince Theon
"A fuckable child, then," he shot back, and his horse reared as the rest of the Ironborn reached them, spilling around Theon like marbles. Dickon tamped down the squirming darkness inside him.

"My lords," Dickon shouted above the wind, "today we will storm the Targaryen wedding and save Lady Sansa Stark from rape and forced marriage by the Targaryen savages." He studied each of them, feeling a thrill rush up his spine. He'd always wanted to try his hand at being in charge. He thought of Father, so gallant on his white horse, in his red coat, with his glossy black cornered hat. "We will ride at once to Winter Town—"

"Fuck, no," groaned one of the Ironborn, leading his horse away. "I need me some fucking ale."

"We've been riding all fuckin’ night. The cunt can wait," another one sneered, and then they were laughing raucously.

"N-no, we've got to go now, we haven't the men to storm the wedding later—" Dickon protested, and then they all were laughing at him, even Ramsay. Dickon's gut churned worst at the way the Bolton man laughed with the rest of them.

"’Haven't the men?’ To defeat a bunch of inbreeds and dried-up soldiers? Hope that saddle's not chafing your cunt, princess of Winterfell," one of them shouted, and then they were laughing again, and riding ahead of him, without even a glance backward in his direction.

Furiously, his head boiling, Dickon felt his lips twist into a hate-filled grimace, and he hastened after them.

He had made his decision the moment he had knelt beside Sansa and placed the pine needles in the snow to mark the godswood at Winterfell. The tears had gleamed on her cheeks, bright like stars, and he had known. She would not need to cry those tears if not for me.

But perhaps he had made it sooner, perhaps he had made it the moment the gates of Winter Town had opened and the Stark tartan, with that bloody wolf, had risen up before them, hundreds of red wolves snapping their jaws. Or maybe before that—when she had fallen asleep against him. Or maybe it had happened in the woods, when Jaime Lannister had drawn his sword against him. Well, let's see if the Targaryen will fight for you, he'd said.

A Targaryen boy stealing a Stark girl, he'd said.

“Do you know you’ll hang for this, right?” Davos had asked even as he’d sent the raven that Jon had requested, mere hours after Sansa had built Winterfell from snow.

“But you can do it? You’re positive?” he had pressed the older man, as they both glanced round warily.

“Positive, yes. And I’m also positive you’ll hang," Davos had insisted, maneuvering to force Jon to look him in the eye.

“I was going to hang no matter what,” Jon had said, turning away. He heard Davos chuckle.

“Suppose we all will,” he said.

An entire day had passed, and he had been unable to even look Sansa in the eye. Luckily, they had
been so busy with preparations that it wasn’t quite so noticeable. He hoped, anyway.

“We just need to get past the bedding,” Jon had told Davos the night before the wedding, standing in the courtyard so they’d not be heard. “And then—as soon as the marriage is official—”

“—Yes, yes, I know the plan,” Davos had said. “I’m only sorry we didn’t do it sooner.”

“Aye, me too.”

The snowy Winterfell had been trampled; all that remained were the broken pine needles that Jon had placed. He knelt down and brushed them further into the snow. For some reason he could not bear to see them.

This was the right thing. He knew it was the right thing.

But seven hells, it hurt.

There was a gnawing in his chest, and he felt Dany’s worried gaze on him all day, and then he felt it at supper, too, but he had no wish to speak to her, or to anyone. At the other end of the table, Sansa was talking in low voices with Missandei, and they both seemed flushed and happy. Sansa was gesturing with her hands, and he realized she was talking about dresses. Jon bowed his head and furiously tore up his bread.

Even amid all of this, she will seek out happiness, he thought. It would not be so bad. She could find a way; we could find a way. He watched her laugh and his ribs seemed to knit together, making it impossible to breathe. We could have a son named Robb. He could almost see it, could almost see their child in her arms, red hair and grey eyes. He could not turn away from that vision. I suppose this is what makes men think themselves prophets.

He wanted to tell himself he was seeing the future, but he knew he was just seeing a pretty dream.

The day of Sansa’s wedding dawned bright and cold, and she woke with dread heavy in the pit of her stomach. Not how one ought to feel on the day of one’s wedding, she thought, laying there on the narrow bed in the silence. Bumps and voices below told her that the cooks of the inn were already awake and moving about, preparing the food for the wedding supper.

She heard Daenerys stirring, and watched, her gaze partially hidden by her hair, as Daenerys sat up, looking pale and clammy, and then got up and padded on bare feet to the window.

“Are you unwell, Princess?” Missandei’s soft voice came. Sansa stilled her breath, to avoid notice that she was awake. Daenerys did not turn from the window, and leaned her forehead against it.

“I feel a little sick, that is all,” she replied. “You should wake Lady Stark. There will be much to do this morning,” she said, and left the room.

Sansa kept her eyes shut as she heard the rustle of bedclothing, and heard Missandei walk to her bed and gently shake her awake.

Wake up, Lady Stark. We have to start getting ready,” she said quietly. "You are getting married today." Sansa pretended to stir, and stretched. She couldn’t tell if she had fooled Missandei.

The morning went by in a blur. The time seemed to melt and drip away fast as a burning candle, and each time Sansa looked at the clock, she was floored by how many more minutes had melted away. She was ushered into a hot bath by Dily and Missandei, her scalp scrubbed and her skin
scraped until she was pink and raw.

She had not seen Jon all morning, and that was just as well. Perhaps it was his fault that she felt this horrible knot of dread in her belly. Yesterday, throughout the chaos of preparations, he had not met her eyes once. Every time she tried to meet his eye, or catch his gaze, he had turned away hastily, looking miserable.

*I should not have said that I liked his beard,* she reflected in shame, swishing her hands in the water as she felt Missandei running rose oil through her long hair to smooth it. She thought of the molten heat that had spread from the pit of her belly and bloomed within her when she had met his eyes after confessing that she liked his beard. His eyes had been so dark, his gaze lingering in ways that made her feel like he had touched her bare skin with his fingertips.

In that moment, it had almost felt like the bedding might be…wonderful. *You just do what you want to do,* he had said that night, and in that moment she had had many, many ideas of what she wanted to do—things that seemed insane, things that made no sense, things that made warmth pool between her legs and heat rush along her skin. The prospect of it had not seemed mysterious and painful, as with Joffrey, or embarrassing and girlishly awkward, as with Dickon, but lovely and warm and insane and desperate and perfect.

And it had felt like he had been thinking those things too, and yet, now he would not look at her. She ached with fear and shame, like a constant stomachache. What if he decided he would not marry her?

She had nowhere else to go.

“*You’re trembling, Lady Stark,*” Missandei’s soft voice drew her from her anxieties, back into the room, where the water was growing cold and her hair, heavy with water and rose oil, was curling against her skin. Sansa was glad she was facing away from Missandei.

“*The water is growing cold,*” she said.

She got out of the bath, helped by Missandei, and stood, dripping and shivering, and was handed a cloth to dry herself while Missandei gathered the new undergarments together.

The sark was a rough cotton, nothing like the silken chemises she had had in King’s Landing, but it was new and clean and felt wonderful against her skin after so many days of rough, unwashed undergarments that did not fit. The stockings were a dark grey wool and finely-knitted, though far lumpier than the fine silk of the stockings she had once owned. In the mirror, she watched as Missandei helped her into the corset and began lacing it up with swift, practiced movements, and she felt another shudder of anxiety as she watched the soft skin of her breasts pushed upward by the garment. In less than twelve hours, Jon would have already taken the corset off of her, would already have seen her naked body. But it seemed suddenly as though he had no wish to see it. She thought of the lovebite on Daenerys’ neck. Perhaps he was more conflicted about his relationship with the princess than she had thought…

Next came the hoops, which were far broader than anything she had worn in ages, save for the masquerade she had attended in King’s Landing so recently. That had been less than a month ago, but it may as well have happened to a different person. She held the hoops in place clumsily while Missandei tied them, bending awkwardly. In King’s Landing, she had had two maids to help her with these.

Sweating slightly, Missandei picked up the next petticoat, and Sansa nearly toppled over as they struggled to put that one on. Her fingers felt so thick and clumsy, not at all the fingers that had so
deftly woven the net of reeds or stitched the silvery wolf into her stomacher.

At last it was time for the dress and stomacher. Missandei pinned the stomacher in place before helping Sansa into the gown, the tartan making soft, hushed, swishing noises as it brushed against the hoops.

“Don’t look yet,” Missandei said, with a somewhat forced smile. Her brave attempt, however futile, at pretending this was a normal wedding was kind. “We need to finish your hair.”

Sansa averted her eyes from the mirror and sat at the little vanity table for Missandei to work on her hair, twisting and pinning it carefully, looping the red locks around her finger over and over again to make spirals of the damp waves.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Missandei darted in front of Sansa as the door opened, in case Jon was in view in the hall, but it was Daenerys alone.

She looked pale, fragile. She offered a wan smile to Missandei.

“You’re needed. No one can seem to agree on Jon’s hair, and Jon does not care, and I never pay much attention to men’s fashion, so I wouldn’t know,” she informed Missandei. “I can finish Lady Sansa’s hair.”

Missandei excused herself, and Sansa was left alone with Daenerys.

She felt the Targaryen woman’s lovely eyes rove over her dress, her hair. “I bought these in Qarth,” Daenerys began, “and I had sent them to Barristan for safekeeping along with all of my other fine things. I never knew why I had bought them; I had just wanted them. But it seems I bought them for a reason after all. They are the perfect touch.”

She had been holding a small pouch of pale leather, and she set it down on the vanity before Sansa. “I don’t know if you’ll like them, but I don’t think anyone else has any other jewelry to give you. And you should have jewelry on your wedding day.”

Sansa looked to Daenerys curiously, then took the pouch with still-awkward fingers, and fumbled to open the little pouch.

Inside were half a dozen hairpins, each ending in the tiniest white paper flower, held in place by a tiny, imperfect pearl.

“They are so tiny, it seems impossible that human hands made them,” Sansa said softly, holding one up to peer at it more closely. “They are so lovely. They look like snowdrops.” In the spring, the godswood at Winterfell had been carpeted in the little white flowers.

“This sort of thing would be so costly here, but in Qarth they cost almost nothing,” Daenerys remarked, taking the pins from Sansa and moving to stand behind her. Her hands were careful as she tucked the pins in place. “They wouldn’t even be visible in my hair, but they’ll stand out in yours.”

In the corner of her eye she could barely see herself and Daenerys in the mirror’s reflection.

“Thank you,” she said, folding her hands in her lap, her skin prickling against the contact. She heard Daenerys let out a small laugh.

“Snowdrops, for Mrs. Snow,” she said sadly.
It was unbearable to feel so many things at once: grief for Daenerys and what she was losing, anger at Daenerys and Tyrion and the clans for how they were using her, fear for Jon’s sudden change in demeanor, bittersweet happiness that she was finally getting a wedding, and agony that it was not in Winterfell.

There was a storm inside of her, welling up, threatening to boil over. “There,” Daenerys finally said, placing the last pin. “You are …so lovely,” she said. “You must be every man’s dream.”

In the mirror her first thought was that she looked a bit like a weirwood tree, with her grey and silver dress and her red hair and her pale face. Her collarbone and the tops of her shoulders and far too much of the skin of her breasts were all on display, and as she realized this, she watched her own skin become flushed in the mirror.

Daenerys went to her side and reached up and tugged a few curls loose. “We’ll be late,” she said at long last. Sansa nodded mutely. The weirwood girl in the mirror blurred and glowed before her and she blinked to clear her eyes, before turning away for good.

The mood outside was far different. Many of the men had been drinking since early morning, and the inn was spilling over with Mormont and Karstark clansmen. Sansa was kept hidden as the men began to gather to begin the men’s procession to the Sept. The women would follow, guarded by Jorah, Grey Worm, Barristan, Davos, and Daario. Sansa looked for Jon, hidden though she was, but could not see him, and her anxiety grew by another leap.

“You’re a vision, Lady Stark,” Daavos said, after the other men had left, and Missandei and Daenerys helped Sansa manage the stairs in her enormous, bustling dress. Sansa felt Daario’s gaze lingering on her breasts, and she flushed and turned away.

“I need a cloak,” she announced to no one, and Daario snorted.

“You’ll get one in the Sept, remember?” he teased. She had sewn the wedding cloak herself, lining the black cloth with the loveliest, darkest silk of burgundy; she had sewn the clasp bearing the three-headed dragon of Targaryen onto it as well. Jon would be wearing it now, until he shed it and cast it over her shoulders during the ceremony. Her belly tightened yet again, and she wished for some wine, ale, even whiskey—anything to stop that horrible knot from tightening any further. Can the gods not even give me a happy wedding day?

“You’ll have some of the best swordsmen…and women,” Jorah was saying, as everyone bustled around them, preparing to leave. “Lady Mormont and Brienne will be with us too.”

“Brienne?” Sansa asked, curious. A tall woman with lank, short blonde hair cut like a man’s, wearing a waistcoat and heavy cloak, stepped forward. She had a plain face but her eyes were striking, like pale sapphires. She looked formidable. Davos was beaming behind Jorah.

“Lady Sansa, meet Brienne,” he said proudly, and Brienne bowed as Sansa curtsied uncertainly. “An old friend of mine. She wouldn’t ever miss a big wedding. Isn’t that right?”

She is shy, Sansa noticed, and she gave Brienne a warm smile.

“We ought to begin the procession. Don’t want to keep your new husband waiting, Mrs. Snow,” Davos said now, offering her his arm to lead her out into the clear day.

“Not Mrs. Snow yet,” she corrected softly, as the door opened and she was briefly blinded by fresh
sunlight.

And her breath was stolen.

Hundreds of faces stared back at her: men, women, children, old and young, rich and poor; the Stark tartan and that red wolf were everywhere. It made her dizzy, and she was suddenly quite grateful for Davos’ arm. They were waving tartan at her; some were crying, others cheering, and tossing paper flowers onto her path. Sansa Stark, they screamed and chanted, but the words were lost and blurred and instead it sounded like a thousand raging oceans roaring up to her feet, deafening and enormous.

No wedding in King’s Landing—not even that of Joffrey and Margaery—could have compared to this sheer force of humanity. They are here for me, and yet, it is not me they want, she thought numbly.

The walk up to the Sept seemed to last years and, yet, later Sansa would not be able to recall seeing any of it, beyond the flashing of grey and red in sunlight, and the dark silhouette of the Sept looming ever closer. She would later remember that she had felt people grab at her; she would later remember wondering if she would ever be able to set foot inside a Sept again. She would later remember wishing for her mother, wishing for home, and, oddly, wishing for Jon.

And then they came to the doors of the Sept, and they were newly painted red as heart tree leaves, and somehow the doors opened, and then cold silence and darkness ensconced her.

The seven-pointed star was burning red with sunlight, a blinding point in the darkness of the stone Sept, and though every bench was packed to bursting with people—people she did not know, people she would never meet—the place was silent, and the silence roared in her ears as loudly as the crowd outside.

And standing beneath the blinding red star was Jon.

“They’re at the inn. If we don’t take her now, we’ll never—“

“Shut the fuck up, pretty boy.” A tankard of ale flew past Dickon’s head and he flinched. He thought of his father, then pushed away the thought.

They’d found a public house near the northern gate of Winter Town; it had barely even been open and prepared to accept patrons so early, but at the promise of gold dragons—which Dickon was not entirely sure they had—the bartender had opened up the pub.

It was now nearing noon, and everyone was drunk. Dickon himself had been goaded into many more tankards of ale by Ramsay and Theon than he had ever had cause to drink, and the room was spinning. He lurched to his feet, feeling sick, and covered his hand with his mouth and stumbled outside. Half the problem was the feeling of fullness that ale always gave him; he felt he’d just eaten three feasts, though in reality he’d eaten nothing all day.

There was something going on in Winter Town. Dickon had idly noticed a lot of flags everywhere when they had entered town, but he had been so preoccupied with the Ironborn that he’d not looked closely. Now, leaning against the wall, waiting to vomit, he noticed the flags again. They were a grey pattern that looked oddly familiar, embroidered with something red, but the world was moving too much to see what it was. A silly thought, that it could be for Sansa’s wedding, flitted through his fuzzy mind, and he laughed helplessly, before lurching again and nearly vomiting against the wall. I was supposed to marry her, he reminded himself, gasping and wiping spit from
his lips, as he attempted to straighten.

Except, no, that’s not right, he recalled vaguely, swaying slightly as he narrowed his eyes in the painful sunlight and studied the flags. Father said he’d sold her to Baelish from the very beginning.

So why didn’t he tell me?

All the ale he’d drunk that morning came up right then; Dickon nearly smacked his forehead against the stone as he doubled over and watched, helplessly, the frothing mix of ale and bile spill forth. For several long moments, he gasped and heaved, sweaty hands braced against the stone wall, until his belly was empty. When he straightened, he felt better, and though his head throbbed it was clearer than it had been a moment ago.

Trembling and weak, he felt his way back into the public house, where the Ironborn and Ramsay were rowdier and sloppier than ever.

Theon was standing on one of the tables, vividly reenacting what Dickon guessed was his last venture to a whorehouse, and for a moment, safe from the Ironborn, Dickon observed him, feeling more lucid than he had in days. Theon’s face was flushed, his eyes wild, every line of his posture conscious of his performance.

Ramsay looked up and saw Dickon, and Dickon had the awful notion that Ramsay had not been drinking as heavily as they all had.

“Feeling alright, my lord?” he asked, barely audible of the shouts of laughter from the Ironborn as Theon reenacted a particularly unusual sex act.

“Yes, just needed some fresh air,” Dickon replied, still staring at Theon in something akin to wonder. At court Theon would have been mercilessly teased and excluded; he would have been an embarrassment.

“You seem unhappy,” Ramsay remarked carefully. Dickon did not bother looking at him. “Prince Theon is a fool, isn’t he?” Ramsay asked, a smirk in his voice.

If my father did that to me, I’d kill him.

You’re not a girl, are you?

Hope that saddle’s not chafing your cunt.

Dickon looked slowly at Ramsay.

“Shut up,” he said shortly. Ramsay’s eerie pale eyes sparked with interest, but Dickon ignored him. Something settled within him. He swallowed and pulled his sheathed sword from his belt, and walked round the table, to go behind Theon.

“And she was screaming, oh, oh, oh Theon,” Theon was shrieking in a high, breathless, insipid voice. Dickon watched the Ironborn watch him walk behind Theon, and Theon’s absurd braying seemed to fade away. Dickon felt like he was under water. They were pretending to laugh with Theon but their eyes were on him, watchful, as he raised his sheathed sword, and stepped up onto the bench behind Theon. Even on the bench, he was taller than Theon who stood on the table.

Wham.
Theon crumpled, and with a metallic clatter, dozens of tankards were pushed off the table, spilling everywhere, as Theon tumbled off the table and onto the floor. None of his men made a move to help him.

Still standing on the bench, heart pounding and head throbbing, Dickon stared down at them all. He had never seen so clearly in his life.

“...He was talking too much,” Dickon finally said, and he attached his sheath back onto his belt with terse motions. “Finish your fucking ale, and then let’s go.”

Walda was crying when she came into the dungeon. Jaime had a hard time focusing on her. He was so thirsty he could not think, and so sick from hunger that every fiber of his body seemed to shudder with weakness.

“Your shirt is all bloody,” she whispered, and he felt something rough and wet on his jaw. His first stupid thought was that she was licking him, but he slowly, thickly realized she was wiping him with a damp rag.

“Dickon Tarly’s got a hard hand,” Jaime said, his mouth like cotton around the words. He felt cold, yet hot, and there was a burning pain running like roaches up his right arm.

“You’re on fire,” she realized, touching his skin.

“Need to sit,” he slurred. He felt something tickling his back; was it a mouse?

Suddenlively the ground was rushing up to meet him, and he landed, hard, on wet stone. Walda was crying more, saying something, and he tried to move his stiff legs, but they wouldn’t obey him. You must run, he told himself, strangely hearing it in his father’s voice. Run, you fool.

But my legs don’t work, father, he protested weakly, but he’d always—well, almost—done as Father had told him, and he struggled pathetically to roll onto his back. Walda was hovering over him, still sobbing, and her tears and snot dripped onto his face.

“Drink, drink,” she was urging him, her voice surprisingly soothing, and then he was choking on tepid water, coughing and sputtering, and it ran down his face and neck, into his coat, like icy fingers creeping beneath his collar, and he was shaking so violently that it hurt.

Run, you fool.

Jon had never worshiped the Faith of the Seven. He could not even recall the last time he had set foot in a Sept. He numbly stared at the seven-pointed star, trying to recall the little he had learned. Father, mother, warrior, smith, maiden, crone, stranger. He counted off the points of the stars, imagining a stone-carved face waiting at each point. He needed to, because if he did not focus on that, then his anger might simply take over and burn everything.

The last time he had seen a crowd like the one outside the Sept, hundreds had died, and hundreds more had become homeless and lost. They had charged into Astapor, Dany leading the way on her silver, the image of crucified children burned into their minds, and the screams and cheers of passion for Dany had been deafening. An entire city had risen in her name.

And it had felt so good. They were in the right, they were ending slavery, and they were getting
revenge for the children who had been killed.

Yet, they had left behind a smoking ruin. And Jon could remember thinking, this is a thing that can never be undone. We have made our mark upon the world.

He had wondered if it was a good mark. He still did not know.

This morning, walking to the Sept, he had seen that same passion, and he had thought of Sansa kneeling in the snow, building Winterfell from memory and crying all the while. This is a thing that can never be undone. That kind of passion only brought death and destruction. That kind of passion followed Dany, burning the bottoms of her bare feet as she walked the path of cinders. And he had followed her.

_Dragons plant no trees_, Jorah had said one day back in Essos. It had been a joke, and yet, Jon had never been able to forget the words; there had been some terrible truth in them. Jon counted the points of the star desperately. _Father, mother, warrior, smith, maiden, crone, stranger. Dragons plant no trees_. He had always pictured the Father as Eddard Stark, and the Warrior as Benjen, Eddard’s brother. The Crone was Old Nan, who used to tell the Stark children stories, and sometimes she’d even let him listen in. The Mother had his mother’s face, of course; he knew her face from the statue of her in the crypts of Winterfell. _My mother’s body is in Winterfell and now no Stark is in Winterfell. I have done that. I have given away my mother’s bones._

The Sept was silent. No one seemed to breathe. The dull roar grew louder, and Jon clenched his hands and set his jaw. It was like there was a great beast waiting outside that he must face and defeat. There was a creak, and then the roar was deafening, and Jon looked back over his shoulder.

Silhouetted by the painful sunlight outside, Sansa stood in the doorway of the Sept, her face a mask of ivory. And then abruptly the door was shut, and there was silence once more, and momentary blindness while his eyes adjusted to the light, and then she came forward, into the path of light from the seven-pointed window of coloured glass.

Dany was walking beside her. It made strategic sense, and Jon glimpsed Tyrion watching every beat, every movement, with his hand over his mouth, analyzing each instant. It made him sick. Dany’s face was in shadow as she walked beside Sansa, and behind her, Daario, Jorah, Barristan, and Davos filed into place. Jon could look at none of them save for Davos. He had never been so filled with hatred. Behind Davos, he saw the imposing figure of Brienne, and their eyes met and she subtly nodded at him before sliding into the very back of the Sept.

The Targaryen cloak would soon be on Sansa’s shoulders, her lovely bare pale shoulders that he wanted to kiss so badly he could hardly think straight. _I wanted to kiss her the moment I saw her_, he thought guiltily. _Anger and lust, the Targaryen colours_, he thought dizzily, and he turned away before Sansa could read his heart. _Fire and blood._

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Jon was clad in simple but finely-made black clothing, and the Targaryen cloak that she had sewn herself was cast over his shoulders. For one burning moment he had actually looked at her, but then abruptly turned away.

So many eyes followed her as she walked, her back straight, her gaze level. She felt Daenerys’ arm loop through hers, and she had a mad, giddy urge to turn and slap her, then run away. _Wouldn’t they be shocked_, she thought dizzily, as she approached Jon’s back. The Septon was looking at her exposed skin hungrily; everyone was looking at her hungrily, save for Jon. He had hardly even seemed to notice all of the skin she had on display, and a burst of anger, heady and rushing, filled her like hot blood. _Other men would be happy_, she thought savagely, as she went to stand beside
him, all too aware of him as their arms brushed.

The Septon was speaking but she heard none of it, and cared for none of it. She was reeling with a billowing anger. *He will not even look at me*, she thought furiously. *Men have battled to marry me and he will not even look at me.* What did it matter? She thought of Dickon, gripping her upper arms painfully tight yet kissing her so softly, so sweetly. She had felt flustered, and happy. When she thought of Jon kissing her... every hair on her body pricked as though a ghost had run through her, and then there was unbearable fire, and then she was angry all over again. *Is this lust?* She felt drunk. Drunk and angry and too warm and dizzy and—

“You may now cloak the bride and bring her under your protection,” the Septon was saying, and Sansa realized she must turn to face Jon now. *Will he look at me now?* She wondered vengefully, and, holding her chin high, she turned slowly to face him, as he turned to her.

Their eyes met, and his grey eyes were so warm, and so soft, and so sad. The Sept was airless. She watched him reach up and unclasp the cloak, the Targaryen clasp—which she had sewn on herself mere days ago—unlatching with a tiny click, and then in a luscious rustling of fabric he swept the cloak off his own shoulders, and the burgundy silk caught the light beautifully, romantically, just as she had known it would.

There was only a moment’s hesitation before he stepped forward, and she would not bow or bend or yield; it was his fault for being so inexplicably cold all of a sudden. He blurred before her—she was so stupid, so stupid, just as Joffrey and Cersei and everyone else had always said; so stupid to ever think this could have been something happy. And the heavy cloak was draped over her shoulders, and he was standing far too close to her. She hated him, she wanted him. She could smell his skin and she thought of lovebites and snowflakes on her cheeks.

“How you join hands,” the Septon prompted, and they stood side-by-side once more and she distinctly felt his strong hand envelope hers and lift her hand up. In the light of the seven-pointed star, she watched his scarred hand be bound to hers with a grey ribbon. *I thought his hands were beautiful even the night he stole me,* she remembered with a pang. *I did not want to admit it.* “In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these souls, binding them as one for eternity.” The old man was smiling fondly at them now. “Now, look upon one another and say the words.”

Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth and her heart was pounding as they faced each other once more. The ribbon dug into her skin, but his hand was still squeezing hers so tightly, so lovingly. Was it part of the act too? Why did it matter? His eyes were so sweet. How could he look at her like that, after ignoring her for the past day so coldly? How dare he look so sad? And yet... it did not make sense... His eyes were so intent, in their sadness, like he was in mourning... like he was apologizing... but for what?

She squeezed his hand back just as tight, drawing him slightly closer, if only to try and read his eyes better. He was trying to tell her something, she knew it, but she did not know what it was.

“Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger, I am hers,” Jon was saying as she spoke, his voice soft as a wolf pup’s fur—

“—And he is mine,” she whispered, desperately searching his eyes.

“From this day—“

“—To the end of my days.”

Silence fell again. She was gripping his hand so tightly, reeling, wishing they could communicate
simply by touch. Was he apologizing for the crowds? For Daenerys giving her away? For having stolen her in the first place? What was it?

But there was an explosion of noise: the Sept was ringing, shaking, with song, as every person in the Sept burst into song. They were not even singing the same hymns; Sansa found herself being rushed along to the door inexorably, still tied to Jon.

They burst into the sunlight once more, and the screams were deafening, and for one moment, Sansa found herself staring at a sea of bodies all screaming for her, and time, which had melted away so quickly before, seemed to slow to a drowsy, hazy stop. Jon was on her left, and Daenerys was on her right.

If there were ever a moment to turn this into support for Daenerys, it would be now, she realized. She could turn and tearfully hug her in a burst of very un-southron emotion; she could sink to her knees before her queen, her dress billowing dramatically in the sunlight; she could even simply look at Daenerys with a brilliant smile. And the passion of the people would be ignited, and Daenerys might even be crowned queen in the north in that moment.

Sansa looked ahead, and she and Jon began to descend the steps. She did not embrace her; she did not bow; she did not kneel. She would not yield. They did not own her, and she did not belong to them. Her hand was still clasped in Jon’s painfully tight grip, and she risked a glance at him.

He was angry. His jaw was set, his eyes dark. Beyond him, she saw Tyrion trying to catch Jon’s eye.

He wants him to do something. Perhaps kneel to Daenerys here and now, or take me and kiss me in a fit of passion… and he will not.

In the cold wind, the Targaryen cloak flapped around her, exposing the brilliant wine-coloured silk lining just as she had known it would, and she almost wished she could be simply a bystander in the crowd, looking upon them. She wondered what she might see. The silk was sensuous against the bare skin of her shoulders and she could smell his skin and she thought again of lovebites, of his teeth grazing her neck, of his strong chest against her back as they had ridden together away from Winterfell.

In a few hours, he would unlace her corset and lay her on the bed in the inn and he would bed her, and then—only then—they would be truly married. As they walked toward the inn, their wedding party behind them, the absurdity of it all—the drama, the artifice, the theatricality—struck her and she would have started to laugh like a loon if she had not perfected her mask long ago.

People were shouting about the Lannisters, shouting for the red wolf to cast down the inbred lion, shouting for the Targaryen wolf to destroy Jaime Lannister, the sisterfucker, that cruel raper of northern girls. What might they call Jon and Daenerys if they knew what they did? she wondered.

At the inn, everything changed once more: three men were playing fiddles, and someone shoved a cup of wine into her hand, and, thinking of Jon’s sad cold eyes, she drank it quick as she could, and some spilled down her chin and onto her dress, and she didn’t care. There was clapping and shouting, and then Daario was giving her another cup of wine, and she drank that too, and some Karstark woman told her that “that wedding was just as lovely as your brother’s!” but by the time she understood what the woman had said, she was gone, disappearing into a throng of wedding guests, and then she felt someone grab her and lead her into a dance, and she had not danced in so long and she loved it so much that she began to dance, only belatedly realizing that it was one of Maege Mormont’s daughters who was so excitedly dancing with her.

Dizzily she searched out Jon, and saw him by the hearth, surrounded by men, but he was watching her, his eyes dark—perhaps with desire; she could not tell—and his jaw set, and she spun around
“Wine?” Jorah offered him, and Jon shook his head slightly. The last thing he needed right now was to have his mind in a fog. He searched the crowd for Brienne and saw her in the corner, and their eyes met and he looked away hastily. He saw Sansa dancing, her soft breasts heaving with exertion, and he thought he might like to kill Daario, who was dancing far too close to her. *It does not matter,* he told himself, clenching his fists.

“Look alive, Snow—you’re marrying the most beautiful girl in the world!” Rickard Karstark, already drunk, yelled as he passed by him, and Jon saw Dany flinch nearby, but he wouldn’t look at her directly. He could feel Tyrion’s gaze on him, and he avoided his eyes carefully, too. *False coin, dishonorable; I am all of it,* he thought in agony.

He leaned against the hearth, a bystander at his own wedding, and allowed himself, just briefly, to exist in a different world: one in which he and Sansa were marrying for love, and they were about to start a life together. He allowed himself to watch his wife as she danced, her face and chest flushed with exertion and laughter and wine, her hair coming free of its snowdrop pins and sticking to her neck damply, and there was an ever-tightening rope around his chest, binding him; he could not breathe, so he stopped, because the fantasy was too tempting, and felt too real. *A son named Robb, a daughter named Arya… And they might even be able to construct some form of happiness. After all, Sansa danced in captivity, sewed silk cloaks while imprisoned…*

She planted trees, and he had only ever burned trees down. She had flowers in her hair and he had cinders on his feet.

Heady and drunk, Sansa broke from Daario’s arms—why had he been dancing with her? When had it begun?—in search of some water, or some food. Everyone was dancing and drinking and feasting, and the crush of bodies was overwhelming. She broke away from where everyone was dancing to the dizzying fiddle music, and stumbled to a low banquet table where some of the older guests sat, as well as Daenerys, Missandei, Jorah, and Tyrion, who was solidly drunk, per usual. Daenerys was as pale and grey as Sansa’s gown, and had not touched her food. Sansa felt Daenerys staring at her, as she found a chair and fell into it, conscious of how damp and flushed her skin was.

She felt another set of eyes on her, and she looked over her shoulder. There was Jon—still staring—and she realized that the bedding was drawing near. Plates were being cleared; guests were tiring of dancing; the sky was dark outside. She watched his gaze trace along her neck and that lazy heat returned, only this time it was an ache so painful it was hard to think of much else. *You just do what you want to do.* She wanted to weave her fingers into his hair and kiss him even as she wanted to shake him for being so cold and remote; she wanted to feel his slick skin against hers, wanted him to gasp in her ear, and she knew he could tell she was thinking these things, and she wished she knew what he was thinking.

“Queen Daenerys,” came a rich, familiar voice, and Sansa’s gaze snapped back to the table. Amid all of the chaos of the party, the red woman had appeared, and Jorah, Barristan, and Grey Worm were all getting to their feet, approaching her warily. Daenerys looked wearily upon the red woman.

“What is it now?” she asked her. “More cryptic prophecy? Last time I was to be a bride of fire; as you can see, this is not my wedding.” she said dryly, gesturing to Sansa.
“Daenerys Stormborn, bride of fire, slayer of lies,” the red woman said, stepping closer. Sansa’s palms grew damp with fear. *There will be fire and blood when the young wolf has grown...* “I have seen it in my flames that I would meet you tonight, and tell you your destiny, so that I may warn you.”

She was raising her voice, and the chatter of the guests began to die down. And soon, the inn was as silent as the Sept had been, a pregnant and fearful silence.

“Do get on with it; we have a bedding soon and I guarantee you it’ll be more interesting than any prophetic visions,” Tyrion finally said, breaking the silence. "The future is never so enticing as sex is." Sansa was too afraid to even cringe at the mention of the bedding. Everyone was staring at the red woman and Daenerys, who seemed to be quivering with anger and emotion.

“I have seen two paths in my flames, one that leads to a burning throne and one that leads to peace. There will be a battle of the Crownlands, Daenerys Stormborn, and at this battle, the one to whom you have given life—the one you love most—shall rise up and betray you. Your love will be your ruin, and the realm’s ruin, too. You will try to destroy this love three times, and thus will damn yourself three times. Each time you will step closer to the burning throne, and each time you will light the realm’s funeral pyre again.”

No one spoke, no one breathed.

Daenerys’s gaze had turned icy.

“You are a foul witch, and if you do not leave, I will hang you myself,” she announced, her face flushing.

“You must relinquish the throne, or your love will destroy you and the realm—“

“—Get her out,” Daenerys said furiously to Grey Worm and Jorah. “Are you not my protectors? Get this witch out of my sight!”

Sansa’s hands shook. She stared at Daenerys, watching her chest heave and her eyes grow wet—but she never looked at Jon. Sansa waited for her to steal a glance at the love that would ruin her—after all, by stealing Jon she had saved him from execution, and therefore given him life—but Daenerys seemed to have utterly forgotten about Jon.

*Is he not the one she loves most?*

The red woman left without much protest. Everyone watched her leave in silence.

“Bedding!” Tyrion suddenly proclaimed, holding up his cup of wine. “The bedding!”

After the horror of the red woman’s prophecy, the wedding guests burst into wild, desperate cheers for the bedding. Everyone wanted to run from that moment of horror.

*I love you, I love you the most,* Dany had said.

*The one to whom you have given life—the one you love most—will rise up and betray you.*

The red woman wasn’t seeing the future. The red woman was seeing the present.

He was false coin.

But Dany did not look at him. She did not even seem to remember that he existed. She was staring...
at the table, hugging her arms around herself, indifferent to the activities around her.

And now it was time for him to do what he had set out to do.

No, Jon pleaded, even as he watched Daario and one of the Karstark girls pull Sansa to her feet. *I’m not ready. I just need a little more time.*

But there was no more time.

“Look how nervous Snow is—he is a maid, Sansa Snow, your husband comes to your marriage bed as a maid!” Daario shouted, earning laughs all around, but Jon did not care. He turned to Davos.

“I need ten minutes of noise. Loud noise,” he said under his breath. The older man studied him.

“Let’s try for fifteen,” he suggested, and clapped a hand on his back, urging him forward. Sansa looked over her bare shoulder back at him with her face flushed. *A path of cinders and a path of sacrifice.* Someone tossed the Targaryen cloak over her shoulders once more, where it hung, lopsided. He was pushed and pulled and prodded towards the rickety steps by so many hands, Sansa in front of him, climbing the stairs with swishing skirts, and then, at long last, they were alone.

The room was aglow with candles, and the bed was big and soft, and a tray bearing two cups of wine was waiting on the writing desk beside the bed. She heard Jon shut out the noise of the wedding guests, and then it was too quiet.

All of the pain, all of the frustration, all of the desire, all of the loneliness, seemed to boil over, and she turned to face him, expecting him to be turned away from her, but instead he was fumbling inside his waistcoat.

“Wh—I’m not ready yet!” she stammered, her face flushing. Jon produced a small leather pouch and went to her. Downstairs, it sounded as though Davos was leading a truly rousing rendition of The Bear and the Maiden Fair.

“We haven’t much time,” Jon said in a low voice as he reached her and pressed the pouch into her hand. “We only have so many minutes before they start listening, and there’s a bit I need to explain.” He made her fingers curl around the leather pouch; his hands were sure and warm and dry where hers were clammy. Her heart gave an awful shudder.

“Explain?” she asked weakly. Jon was unsheathing his dirk at his hip.

“Aye. Did you meet Brienne?”

“Yes,” Sansa said slowly with a shaky nod, but her heart was beginning to pound in her ears as she began to comprehend.

“Davos trusts the woman with his life; she will take you to Mole’s Town. There’s some gold in that pouch, enough to start a life. You can leave today.”

Sansa clutched it against her chest in shock. Jon paced away from her, raking a hand through his hair. “You can leave if you want,” he suddenly added, still facing away from her, “Of course, it is your choice. But Sansa,” he began, and he turned once more, and in the candlelight his eyes danced with gold, “you saw those crowds today; you know what this means. I promised you I’d keep you safe, but I don’t think I can anymore. You don’t have to be the red wolf; you can make your own life.”
He came to her and was gripping her hands. “I took Winterfell from you, and I’m so sorry. I’ll never be able to undo that. But I won’t use you, and I won’t let anyone else use you.”

“Y—you’re not going with me?” she asked thickly, distantly registering how his thumbs seemed to move against her wrist of their own accord as he held her hands. His brows knit together, that same look of grief as he had given her in the Sept, and she understood. “When did you decide this? I thought—I thought we would marry, and—and live on Bear Island; I thought you wanted me—“ she halted, hating the naked sadness in her voice, and then he was so close. It would be so easy to kiss him.

“Sansa, I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.”

She stared at him in shock as his voice grew rough with need, and all of the secret wounds that she had carried for so many years seemed to knit together. “But you didn’t choose Dany, and I won’t force you to choose her. If you—if you want,” he began carefully, “then of course you can stay. But,” he continued desperately, “You deserve to have a life. One day you will meet someone and you’ll teach him to weave nets and he will give you a son named Robb,” he said so sadly, and her heart was breaking; every wound within her that he had healed was being reopened, and yet at the same time, there was a bursting, aching hope inside her. “You can go with Brienne. She’ll take you to Mole Town safely and help you start a life you choose, not one chosen for you, or forced upon you. If I could give you back Winterfell, I would do it, please believe me. But I can’t; this is the only thing I can give you. This is no life, here with Dany. We are heading for ruin. But I chose this ruin. You did not.”

“When did you decide to do this?” she tried again. Her mind was reeling. Grief and euphoria. A life of my choosing.

“I knew when we first saw the red wolf,” he said, shaking his head, “but I couldn’t make myself do it until I saw you building Winterfell out of snow. I realized even General Lannister had more honor than me.”

In the silence they held each other upright as the chaos of downstairs began to die down too much. Time was slipping away again, too many grains through a hole. “I have to bleed, and we might have to act,” he murmured, and let her go. He went to the bed and pulled back the covers, and unsheathed his dirk.

“No!” Sansa followed him. “It should at least be my blood,” she explained, not looking at him. She felt as though a thousand tiny birds were trapped inside her, desperate to become free. She stared down at the sheets. “Where should I…?” She held her hand out for him to cut, but then shook her head. “Wait, no. It shouldn’t be anywhere visible.” She braved a glance at him and smiled. “After all this, to have the marriage be suspected…”

“Sansa,” he began softly, as she awkwardly climbed onto the bed. She lay on her back, her skirts billowing up around her, her hoops becoming painfully crushed. The silk of the Targaryen cloak shifted against her shoulders.

“Help me get the hoops off,” she said, pulling up her skirts, trying to pretend she did not notice how painfully strange everything between them was. “No one will ever believe we—well, you know—if I’ve still got my hoops on.”

Jon hesitated and then, biting his lip, climbed onto the bed and knelt between her legs, and they each laughed softly as she finally found the string of her hoops and undid it. With a flushed face she wriggled them out of her skirts, and Jon helped her set them aside. "My stays, too," she added, reaching behind herself clumsily, and he leaned forward and pulled on the string. "And your coat,"
she whispered, and fumbled for his buttons.

The dirk was in one hand. The blade glinted in the candlelight. “If you cut my inner thigh, it will make the bloodstain in the right place...I think,” she said, piling up her skirts around her hips. Her chemise was bunched between her legs, but now the tops of her thighs were revealed. She saw him avert his gaze. “Don’t be so embarrassed. We are married, after all,” she teased, but her voice was too tremulous to have a very convincing effect. “This way no one will be able to see the cut, and —”

“Yes,” he said shortly, and he looked away and let out an oath before placing his hand on her skin. She startled slightly at the contact, and lay back, biting her lip. Surely he would be able to sense the damp heat pooling between her legs. “I can’t—”

“Yes, you can,” she insisted, opening her eyes and propping herself on her elbows to look at him. “If you have a cut, someone—probably Tyrion—will notice,” she added in a whisper.

She held her breath, watching him cast his gaze down to between her legs. He bit his lip and she felt cold steel against her upper inner thigh, but no pain. He’d not made the cut yet. “Just do it; we’re running out of time,” she said, and she sat up further, and their foreheads brushed. “Wait,” she breathed, just as he set the dirk aside, and murmured, please, and she took his face in her hands and pressed her lips to his in a searing, agonizing kiss. He reached out to grasp at the wall beside them, and stumbled forward, falling against her, and her legs twined around his hips as though she were a vine growing along him, clinging to him out of nature and nothing more.

Neither of them realized that downstairs, there were shouts and clangs of steel and screams and bangs, because they were kissing and they knew they would never kiss again. She could not think, she could not wonder or worry. She was desperate but not lost, and unsure but not afraid. A thousand people in the room with them could not have made a difference; she would not have known they were there. The roughness of his beard scratched her skin and she was consumed by his scent, by his heat, by the way he held her as he urged her backwards onto the bed, and then he broke from her suddenly.

“I have to—before I lose my head,” he said in a strangled voice, and his hands were on her again, his thumb too high yet not high enough as he held her in place, and she held onto him as the cold steel moved against her thigh, and he was whispering, I'm so sorry, against her lips, and then the door banged open. With a gasp they broke apart, and Jon hastily hid the dirk as they looked to the door.

His first thought was that the Targaryen wolf, the notorious savage, could not in reality hold a candle to the Targaryen wolf that Sam had conjured for him all those years ago. He was as slender and scarred as a common sellsword. The man who lay upon Sansa Stark was no taller or broader than him—in fact, it seemed he was only barely taller than Sansa herself—and did not have the Targaryen silver hair or the tanned, leathery skin of the Dothraki warriors. There was some part of Dickon—the part that had listened eagerly each night to Sam's stories, the part that was still playing in the gardens in the Reach—that was disappointed.

But that was blown away and forgotten when he realized that Sansa's gown was half off and her bare legs were wrapped around his hips and she was looking at him in horror, not gratitude or adoration or even the slightest relief. A northman's blood was on his hands and there were screams and clangs below, and his arm was bleeding, and the first thing Sansa did was to gasp, "oh no, Dickon, what have you done?"

Dickon stepped forward, drawing his sword. The Targaryen wolf was unarmed and was slowly
pulling away from Sansa with catlike grace. He did not look afraid, and it was jarring. He should be afraid, Dickon thought, I have a sword and he has nothing. The Targaryen wolf's plain grey eyes took him in, sized him up. He slew hundreds in Astapor, Dickon remembered Baelish had said, and his grip on his sword became a little slippery.

"I'm taking Lady Stark back to Lord Baelish, her betrothed," Dickon announced, trying to ignore how much of Sansa's skin was on display. She was grappling at bloodred silk, pulling it around her. A marriage cloak, Dickon realized, but the Targaryen wolf had got to his feet and pulled a dirk out of seemingly nowhere. Those plain grey eyes seemed to burn, as he shifted with ease into a defensive stance. His lips twitched with dislike as he looked at Dickon.

"No, you're not," he snarled, and then he lunged.

On the landing outside of their room, there was a man dressed all in grey, pointing a rifle down at the wedding guests, and the air was rent with screams, and then the deafening blow of a bullet, and Jon was advancing on Dickon. Sansa was frozen, but only for a moment. She knew Jon to be the better swordsman, but a dirk was not much use against a sword. She needed to get him a sword.

There was a clang as Jon's dirk hit Dickon's sword, and Dickon stepped back in shock, almost losing the sword.

"Go," Jon told Sansa, not looking at her. Sansa got off the bed, feeling the blood trickle down her leg. There was a bright red patch on the bed; it looked like she had had her moon's blood. She stumbled a bit, the Targaryen cloak clutched round her shoulders, and searched round the room frantically til she found what she could use: the chamber pot.

Jon had disarmed Dickon, but Dickon had him pinned to the floor as they wrestled and vied for control. Sansa tiptoed past them, holding the chamber pot in shaking hands, and approached the dark-haired man with the rifle. He was laughing, firing the rifle at random, and there were men—they seemed Ironborn, she realized distantly, and then she saw the emblem of the kraken on their weapons—fighting the northmen, overturning tables, spilling blood. Daenerys was screaming, furiously trying to fight one of the Ironborn, though Tyrion and Missandei were trying to drag her away to safety.

The dark-haired man before her let out another laugh, and that was when she smashed the pot over his head. The rifle dropped from his hands as he let out a yowl of pain, and she snatched it up before he could toss it to another Ironborn or take it back himself. It was heavier than she'd expected; she'd never held one. Davos waved to her from below and she threw it down to him before turning to Brienne, who was climbing the stairs, looking completely unruffled.

"Take another sword! Jon doesn't have one," she told Brienne, who simply turned, punched the closest Ironborn, and disarmed him with deadly efficiency before resuming her journey up the steps. Sansa snatched the sword from the blonde woman and ran back into the room, where Dickon had thrown Jon against the wall. Jon grunted in pain as Dickon scrambled to retake his own sword, and Sansa, cringing—she had never been very good at this sort of thing—tossed the blade to Jon, who reached out and caught it with ease.

"Come, Lady Sansa, we'll go out the window," Brienne informed her, utterly unmoved by the vicious duel between Jon and Dickon. There was a clang of swords, and Sansa looked back in horror, but already she could see the fight would soon be over: Dickon was barely a match for Jon even when he was armed and Jon was not, and now Jon had a sword.

"GO!" Jon yelled, and Sansa scrunched her eyes in pain as she turned back to the window, where
Brienne was dropping a knotted rope ladder that she had methodically tied to the bedpost.

"I'll go down first, so I can catch you if they cut the rope," Brienne informed her, still calm as a deep lake even as Sansa's hands trembled. The woman's calm shamed her and she drew in deep breaths. She looked back over her shoulder; the man she had hit with the chamber pot had come to and entered the room with a whip, and was rearing to hit Jon's back, but Grey Worm and Daario burst in. Grey Worm kicked the man in the back with such power that he was knocked several feet forward, just as Jon disarmed Dickon.

She would never see him again, but there was no time to drink in the sight of him, no time for goodbyes or tender, whispered words. She bit her lip, turned back to the window, and began to climb out the window, grateful that Brienne had used two ropes—her dress and cloak made the climb difficult.

Brienne was waiting below, and there was Davos, leading a saddled horse to them, still holding the rifle she'd thrown to them. She dropped the last few feet and Brienne caught her with ease before helping her onto the horse.

"Th-thank you," she gasped to Davos, still out of breath from the climb, and he nodded at her before rapping the horse's hide, and then they were off into the night.

Clegane had burned Cerwyn, per Cersei's orders. Bronn watched from the hill overlooking the old castle as the land around it burned in the night. The remaining clansmen were still fighting, though most of them lay slain. Raised above Cerwyn's towers, an enormous flag was the only thing that remained to be burned, and Bronn knew Clegane was inside, climbing the stone steps with his men, to burn that too.

But it was too late. The flag was grey tartan, with an enormous bloodred wolf stitched into it. Bronn had never given a fuck about the tartans, but thanks to Jaime's altercation with the northmen, he now knew exactly what the Stark tartan looked like.

"They'll call it the Red Wedding in the songs," Sandor mused drunkenly behind him. Bronn looked over his shoulder. "The dragon wants the wolf, and thousands die every time." He'd found the soldier hiding amongst the rocks, drunk and shaking, soon after the flames had begun to consume the Cerwyn clansmen. "Fuck it," Sandor had growled before disappearing, and Bronn, who had been mid-duel with a Cerwyn stableboy with a surprisingly good sword hand, realized that Sandor had echoed his thoughts precisely.

It had been too late to stop Clegane, so he'd simply walked away.

But he had no illusions about what might happen now. He was too high on the chain of command to go unnoticed. He'd be hanged for cowardice, if he was lucky. Bronn kicked at a rock and crouched in the dirt next to Sandor.

"You can't have my ale," Sandor informed him before taking another long swig. Bronn rolled his eyes.

"I didn't ask for your fucking ale, and if I wanted it, I'd just take it," he reminded him.

"You think you could?"

"Aye, I think I could do just about anything to you right now," he said shortly, slumping back against the rock, deep in thought. He'd looked all through the Cerwyn castle, but no sign of Jaime, and when he'd asked, threatening the Cerwyn men at swordpoint, none of them had seemed to have
the faintest idea. "Where the fuck is Lannister?" he wondered aloud. "And stop your damn shaking."

"Fuck if I know," Sandor grunted.

Well, the longer he sat here, the less distance he had between himself and Gregor Clegane, and it greatly behooved him to put as much distance between them as possible. Bronn sprang to his feet and brushed himself off. He'd brought his horse, and he pulled a black coat from the pack on the saddle. He stripped himself of the red coat, and tossed it on the ground. "Deserter," Sandor said with a dry, cruel laugh, as Bronn put on his own black coat.

"Seems so," Bronn said. "You'd better get up. We've got to get moving."

"I don't give a fuck about finding Lannister," Sandor informed him, spitting. "Bloody golden sisterfucker."

"Well, it's either the sisterfucker or brotherkiller. Given that choice, I know what I'd choose," Bronn said sardonically, nodding to the castle, where Gregor still raged.

Sandor lurched to his feet, complaining all the way. Their horses kicked up clouds of dust as they went north, their red coats discarded in the dirt, patterned brilliantly by the distant fires.

Run, you bloody fool.

"You poor man," Walda was sobbing into his shirt. "Your hand..." She held up his wrist and even the contact was agony. "You'll lose the whole arm. What have they done to you?"

It was a lightning strike; he was barely aware of how it happened but he knew what to do, and his body knew what to do. Jaime reached up and knocked her down with his left hand, and her head smacked onto the stone and she went limp.

At first he had to crawl, but his desperation lit a fire and suddenly he was stumbling forward, gasping, gripping the wet walls as he clawed blindly.

The stairs took longer. By the time he made it into the frosty air, he was shaking and blinded by pain, but the courtyard was empty, and so were the stables. He took the first horse he saw, and could not even pull himself fully onto the horse; at first he merely lay helplessly across it. The effort simply to propel one leg over the horse was incredible. He was so winded by merely that action that he slumped forward, losing consciousness for a long time. When he came to, the horse was clomping around the courtyard, and he dimly knew that he would be heard, seen, stopped. Run, you fool.

The horse trundled out of the Dreadfort. He did not even know which way he was going.

For all of the trouble, it had not taken much more than an hour to drive the last of the Ironborn out of the inn. Dickon Tarly, bleeding and bruised, had been dragged off by the remaining Ironborn, and Jon had not cared to stop them.

The inn was wrecked. Tables were split, blood stained the floors, platters of food were smashed. A few women were still sobbing, holding dead or wounded men. Jon was numb as he walked through the main room, to the kitchens, where Dany and the others had taken refuge. He felt eyes on him the whole way. A path of cinders, he thought again, the agony so great, so poisonous, that he would not have been able to speak had it been asked of him.
Dany was shaking and bloodstained, and was tending to Jorah with Missandei. Grey Worm followed him and his eyes went to Missandei at once, and Jon saw his shoulders sink a little. He thought of Sansa and mopped at his face. Tyrion and Barristan joined them, followed by Davos, who was walking with a limp. Daario was the last to join, soaked in sweat and blood, looking exhilarated.

"Where is Mrs. Snow?" Daario asked at once when he saw Jon.

All eyes were on him. He mostly felt Tyrion's and Dany's gazes; Tyrion's was knowing, Dany's unreadable.

"She is gone. Somewhere safe; I do not know where."

"You planned this," Tyrion realized, his voice thick with wine. Jon met the dwarf's mismatched eyes levelly.

"Aye, I planned to send her away. I did not plan for any bloodshed. Now the blood of so many innocents is on our hands once again."

"Once again?" Dany's voice was low, shaking. Jon raised his gaze to meet hers. Her shoulders were rising and falling as she stared at him in terrible rage.

"Astapor. Qarth. Mereen. People die wherever we go. We have made even a wedding bloody."

"You were by my side every time; you killed as many as I did," Dany raised her voice, approaching him. "We killed only who we had to kill."

"Aye, and how many more will we kill together?" Everyone in the room seemed to blur and fade, until it was only he and Dany there. "We have committed evil, Dany, and we will continue if we do not stop ourselves."

Never breaking the gaze, he took off the borrowed sword from his belt. Her lovely violet eyes widened and became wet.

"What are you saying?"

"This ends here." He set the sword on the table. "I cannot continue with you down this path. I don't know how I will live with the things I have done already; I cannot do any more. Every move we make ends in bloodshed. No throne is worth this cost."

"You vowed—"

"Aye, and now I'm breaking the vow," Jon said, and he turned away from her, suddenly breathless, and walked to the door. "Add 'oathbreaker' to the list of names they have for me. It's no worse than the rest."

"Where do you think you're going? Someone stop him!" Dany shrieked, and followed him into the main room.

Jon continued walking. He heard footsteps, heavier than Dany's, behind him, and he braced himself, preparing for attack, but Davos was by his side. "Stop him," Dany cried, and still no one moved. Jon glanced at Davos, who gave him a short nod, and then they went through the door. His soul billowed like sails.

The streets were wasted, still covered in paper flowers, deep grooves worn into the mud.
"We have nowhere to go," Jon realized, even as they continued walking.

"Not quite. I happen to know a lad," Davos said, and they ducked into an alley as a carriage and horses went by. In the shadow of the alley, Davos winked at him. "I think you'll get on famously with him. He knows a bit of what it feels like to look like a dead man and have a whole kingdom want you dead."

Dickon awoke on horseback, a wound in his leg throbbing in time with the horse's gallops. His face was chapped from the wind and his mouth tasted sour like bile and ale and his head hurt so bad he could hardly see.

"My lord was right," Ramsay's voice was so much more grating when his head hurt like this, and Dickon covered his eyes with his hands, pressing his palms against them, desperate for relief against the dull, consuming throb. "We did not have the men to take on all of them."

He'd known it, so why had he allowed it?

He lurched forward in the saddle and vomited off the side, even though he felt he had nothing left to vomit in his stomach. In a dizzying storm he saw the Targaryen wolf, that plain man, locked between Sansa's legs, and the flash of blood on the bed, just before the Targaryen had disarmed him, and then the whirl of tartan as Sansa slipped away, out the window, into the night like a snowflake.

The Ironborn were following them, looking pathetic, defeated. Theon had still been out cold when they'd left the pub, and they'd had to double back to get him.

What ineffectual savages, Dickon thought in disgust, closing his eyes and leaning against the horse, wishing he could simply lie still for a moment, and stop swaying. Now they follow so meekly. Now that we have lost. He hated them. He hated Ramsay. He hated Sansa Stark. He hated the Targaryens.

Winterfell was closer than the Dreadfort, so they went to Winterfell. Dickon did not know what he might say to his father, but he could not bring himself to care too much. He wanted to be in his bed, asleep, and unconscious of everything that had gone so wrong, all of the ways he had failed.

One of his father's men was waiting at the hunter's gate for them, and began to question them, but Dickon sat up and merely looked up the man, and that silenced him. They rode into the snowy, muddy courtyard. It was so foul and grey and plain. Everything of the north was so ugly. Some of the men went to the stables, others toward the kitchens, and Dickon, wanting to be alone, went to the Sept.

The door was locked, so he took one of the Ironborn's axes and bashed the wooden door in. He pushed through the splinters and dropped the ax on the stone with a clang that he did not hear. Moonlight filtered in through the seven-pointed star, casting everything in silver. Numbly, Dickon walked to the benches closest to the altar, and dropped down on one, unseeing.

Everything hurt, everything was wrong. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the Targaryen between Sansa's legs, he heard her say, oh no, Dickon, what have you done, like he was a fucking child who had done something naughty but stupid. He hated her, he hated her most of all. Shame squirmed in his chest and if he could have simply opened his chest as he'd broken in the Sept door and cut it out, he would have happily done so, no matter the blood.

I was going to save you, he thought, his eyes burning. You were supposed to thank me.

"What on earth has happened, boy?"
His father's voice rang throughout the Sept, and Dickon saw the flicker of fire approach on the floor as his father's boots clicked on the stone. "There are Ironborn everywhere, and the Bolton boy is bleeding. The north is burning. Sir Gregor Clegane has seized Cerwyn, and apparently there was slaughter at Wint—"

"—Shut up." Dickon pressed his fingers to his temples as the fire came into his periphery. Even its subtle flash was enough to make his eyes scream with pain.

"...What did you just say?" Father's voice was soft, a warning. "Surely you did not—" he began, his voice louder, but Dickon shot to his feet and rounded on him.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," he yelled, the Sept shaking. Father was dressed in a splendid forest green coat, dotted with gold buttons, his breeches snowy white, and Dickon thought of the Targaryen wolf, all in black, snarling at him like the dragonwolf he was. "You are a fool," he seethed. "We do not belong here in the north. This has been a mistake!"

"We are to play a key part in shutting down the rebellion, boy," Father said, advancing on him, the fire turning his shining skin gold. "We can't go home now." His eyes roved over Dickon. "You are covered in blood," he realized suddenly. "What have you done?!" He looked at Dickon with horror, not pride. Oh no, Dickon, what have you done?

"We went to take back Sansa Stark," Dickon said, the words so sour, where before they had been so sweet. Her mouth had tasted so sweet. She was a pretty cunt, he heard Theon say in his mind.

"Take her back?"

"The Targaryens had her. They wed her to the Targaryen wolf today in Winter Town. The whole town was chanting her name; the Stark tartan was everywhere," Dickon said in a low, shaking voice. "We killed some of them, but we barely got away, and she fled before we could take her. We will never shut down the rebellion, you stupid old man!" His voice raised to a strangled shout against his will, and his father's eyes were so wide, so full of fear, and it was like a bitter, sharp wine that went to his head. He swayed on his feet, struggling to breathe, and Father reached out with his other hand, stabilizing him.

"You are losing blood, boy—"

"—Don't call me boy—" Dickon wrenched Father's hand from him. "I'm not your fucking boy."

He turned away, gripping the top of one of the benches to keep from falling over.

"Dickon," his father's voice was gentler. "You will die if we do not stop the bleeding—"

"—Like you care." He was laughing now, even as his eyes burned with tears. "I was the backup plan, wasn't I? When Sam didn't turn out to your liking, you turned to me. Now I am not to your liking, either. I am—what was it?—oh, yes, rotting fruit." He paused, gasping for breath. "You do not even know where Sam—"

"—I do." His father's voice was grave, filled with grief, and there was a rushing in his ears. "I received word today."

He did not need to say what that word was. Dead, dead, dead.

"W-when? How long ago?"

"Soon after he left."
"He didn't leave," Dickon said hollowly, "you sent him away."

He straightened again. He was taller than Father—how had he never realized it? Father stepped back, looking angry and sad.

"I had no choice," he shot back furiously, the torch waving dangerously. "He was going to bring ruin to us. He shamed me."

"And what will you do to me," Dickon asked, "now that I have shamed you as well? Perhaps you should just kill me here, why let someone else have the pleasure?" He choked on the words. His father's eyes were wet. "You are so afraid of shame, yet Lannister told me you have a shameful secret. Is it worse than a sweet, soft son?"

Reeling, he approached Father, who stepped back in fear.

"I did nothing," he insisted, his hand holding the torch shaking. "I-I never meant to—"

"—Meant to what?" Dickon goaded at the top of his lungs, advancing on Father, and Father dropped the torch, where the fire took to the rushes over the stone. "Come on, Father, why keep any more secrets? Sam's dead, I'll die, there'll be no one else to shame you anymore!"

"Stop this at once. I have no shameful secret."

"He said he would never judge a man for what he prefers behind closed doors," Dickon breathed, and now Father's back was against the wall. The flames were burning, higher, licking at them playfully for now. "You wanted to fuck him, didn't you? You tried to fuck him. Maybe he even let you."

He saw the truth in his eyes. He thought of all of the things Father had called Sam, he thought of how stupidly and giddily, like a dumb girl, his father had laughed while drinking, stealing glances at Jaime Lannister, at Loras Tyrell, at all of the pretty boys and men in King's Landing.

"D-dickon! You're my son—"

His hand was on Father's throat, and Dickon felt tears stream from his eyes, yet he felt nothing, as he squeezed. Father was kicking wildly. His eyes looked like Sam's, dark and warm, and so sad. Father was crying, and Dickon waited to feel something, but his heart was raked over and raw, and he wanted Father to feel pain, so he squeezed harder. He heard himself let out a sob, but he had never intended on it. Hands scrabbled to loosen his grip, as his face purpled, and the flames climbed higher as Dickon gasped, soaked in sweat. Glass shattered somewhere.

He wondered how far he would go, so he squeezed harder. He felt the tendons, felt his father's Adam's apple move as he swallowed. I am rotting fruit, I have gone bad, Dickon observed, watching blood bloom in his father's eyes.

This is a thing that cannot be undone.

Father dropped the moment Dickon let go, and Dickon swayed, wondering why he wasn't moving, before he realized: he is dead.

The flames rose higher. Dickon stared at his hands. Father lay on the floor, all silk and gold and blood. The flames were taking his boot, then his leg. Why did he feel nothing? Was he dead, too?

Dickon left the Sept, covered in ashes, soaked in sweat. It was raining now, and the Ironborn were lit by the brilliantly dancing flames. They stood, soaked, staring at the Sept in horror. Even
Ramsay was silent for once. And they stared at Dickon, and he stared, chest heaving, back at them. He waited for cruel jibes, for laughter, for jeers, but he got back only silence and fear. He had won.
This chapter takes place ~3 months after the end of the last one. I'm really excited to see what everyone thinks of it, as this "arc" or part includes a lot of twists that I hope will be satisfyingly surprising. I'm also really curious to see if anyone saw coming the biggest plot point of this chapter...no one has commented on it yet but I don't know if that's because it was so obvious from the previous chapters, or if it really is a twist.

*Three Months Later*

Daenerys lay on her side, palm over her subtly rounded belly, staring at the wall. She had dreamed of that damned white stag again. It followed her through the forest, and every time she thought she had lost it, she would turn and find it on her tail once more, peering at her with plain eyes through the slim trees, its antlers like snow-covered branches. It seemed a gentle animal, yet the very thought of it filled her with dread. *Perhaps it is the ghost of Robert Baratheon,* she thought, as she had so many times now. *He is no longer a threat yet he follows me wherever I go.*

She heard the click of the door, then light footsteps.

"Are you hungry, Princess?" Jorah asked, closing the door. "Barristan is cooking breakfast."

"No, thank you, Jorah," she said as she felt the mattress dip beneath his weight behind her.

They sat in silence, listening to the rumblings of the pub below. The air was thick with Jorah's unasked questions. "All of this sitting around is making me fat," Daenerys finally said with a forced laugh, choking out the lie she had been repeating over and over again for weeks. "The last thing I should be doing right now is eating. I won't be able to fit on the Iron Throne—"

"Princess, you are pr—"

"—Stop."

She heard him swallow; her heart was in her throat. Even though she was laying down, the room spun as she began to panic. "It is not possible," she continued more softly, "so there is no need to suggest it." She pressed harder on her belly. "Besides," she added, "I have not lain with any man since Drogo."

"This child will cost you everything." Jorah's voice was so soft that even she had to strain to hear it. "You must get rid of it before anyone—"

"—There is nothing to *get rid of,* Jorah," Daenerys snapped, sitting up, her face flushing. "How dare you speak such words."

Jorah did not back down; his gaze traveled to her belly and back to her face far too slowly.

"We could run away and leave it all," he said in a broken voice, taking her hand. "I would raise the child as my own; we could live in Yi T—"
"—There is no reason to run away," she said acidly, her hand trembling, and she pulled it away hastily. "Get out of my room. I wish to be alone."

When Jorah had finally left, and she was alone in the silence once more, Daenerys lay back down on the bed, feeling sicker than ever. She wanted to cry, wanted to be comforted, but queens did not cry, and queens were not comforted, so she sat up and drew in deep breaths, and walked to the window, willing the nausea to still. Out the window, Torrhen's Square was grey and brown and dismal, but she could hear birds chirping—spring was near.

_Your love will be your ruin._

If she had this child, Jorah was right—it would cost her everything. She would have no chances left at the throne, and then everyone—Jorah, Barristan, Missandei, Grey Worm, Daario, and Tyrion—would have no reason left to follow her, and they would leave her, just like Jon had. She would be alone in the world, with no way of keeping the child alive.

But if she tried to end the pregnancy...

_You will try to destroy this love three times, and thus will damn yourself three times._

The tears were coming now even though she commanded them not to.

She thought of a baby boy with silken silver curls and Jon's grey eyes, and clenched her teeth as searing pain overtook her. He did not know; he might never know. She did not even know if he was alive, though she thought that surely if he had died she would have felt it. _I loved him first_, she thought furiously. _Before the red wolf sank her claws into him, he was mine._

The midwife had told her, after she had lost Drogo's baby, that she would be barren for the rest of her life. And she and Jon had lay together for years, every day at first, and she had never become pregnant. Towards the end it had been far more rare, and the passion so tepid that it seemed impossible that life could have sprung from it.

The day of Jon's wedding, she had realized it. She had been sick for weeks in the morning and thought it merely her worries adding up. Then her corsets had not been lacing as tight, and she had assumed that their life of hiding and laying low was making her grow fat. And then the day of the wedding had come, and she had woken up and simply **known**. It had come to her in her sleep.

She had dreamt of a tiny pearl hiding in a snowdrop, and had woken up with a hand on her belly and tears in her eyes.

Once upon a time she had been a foolish girl at a market in Qarth, and she had spotted pretty hairpins for sale in a jewelry stall. Pearls hidden in paper snowdrops. She had been noticing Jon more lately, how his lips looked soft, how the lean lines of his body were beautiful when he practiced his swordplay with Daario, how just brushing against him could make the loveliest heat unfurl within her, in a way softer and sweeter than the passion she had felt for Drogo during their brief marriage. And across the market on that sunny day she had spotted him lingering by a stall displaying arakhs, and he'd felt her gaze, looked up, and offered her a half-smile—the boy who never smiled—and in a silly rush she had turned back to the stallkeeper and bought the hairpins. _Snowdrops_, she had thought, feeling giddy and light-headed and girlish in a way that she had never felt before.

And that night, drunk on wine and the heat of the summer night and their latest victory, she had gone to his tent and shed her leathers, watching those pretty lips part in shock, and those lovely grey eyes widen, and she had kissed those pretty lips, and pushed him back down onto his sleeping
skin, and after a moment she had felt his fingers twine in her hair, so gently, and felt his tongue slide against hers at last. He had been so young, so inexperienced, so awkward and sweet and gentle. He had been so unlike any man she had ever known.

_The one to whom you have given life—the one you love most—shall rise up and betray you._

That red woman had known; Daenerys had seen her gaze flick—so subtly—to her belly as she had spoken.

_This baby can never be born. And yet..._ Silver hair and grey eyes, grey eyes like the eyes of her lover, her nephew, her own blood. She had already lost one child—she could not bear to lose another. It would kill her.

There was only one path forward, but it seemed the most painful path of all.

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He had dreamed he was hunting a white stag, and when Dickon awoke, his heart ached and he yearned to go hunting through the dappled, sweet young forests of the Reach. He could taste it, the air thick and sweet with honeysuckle and hazel. _But there is no such thing as a white stag_, he thought sleepily. It made him think of a story Sam might have told him, brown eyes wide and girlish, musical voice hushed as he wove the story as he spoke. _Once upon a time, there was a lovely white stag_, he would have started, and Dickon, still a child, would have laughed at him. _Yes, a white stag_, Sam would have insisted over Dickon's laughter, and _a lovely, gentle stag it was, and a fierce prince was hunting it..._

The lord's chambers in Winterfell were too hot, usually, and Dickon had taken to keeping the windows open, even in the pits of winter, but the last night had been warm, and now he woke damp and covered in sweat. The courtyard was blue in the dawn, and Dickon stood by the window, staring out at the world. These days he could sleep for ten hours and still wake exhausted, and the resultant feeling was of being continuously underwater, where everything looked blue, and everything seemed a bit far away. At first, after Father's death, he had been unable to sleep. Each night he would lay awake, tormented by the way the puzzle pieces of his past had begun to fit together. His brother's tortured childhood, his father leaping at the chance to move away from Mother... Dickon had been unable to even send word to Mother, had not known what he could possibly write, and the threat of her learning that he was dead, that everything was so different, hung over him like a sword waiting to fall.

So he'd obsessively trained with Ramsay, with Theon, with the Ironborn, instead of sleeping. He'd never been good with a sword, he'd known it, and then the Targaryen wolf had bested him, proving it. For months he had trained, relentlessly, and Winterfell had carefully carried on around him, everyone too afraid of him to question him. The burned-out Sept had become as haunted as the broken tower, and no one had gone inside since that night. Dickon wondered if anyone ever would again.

"My lord," a soft, high voice came from the door. Ramsay was waiting there, holding a raven's scroll. "Sir Gregor Clegane, general of the royal army, requests an audience with you today."

Dickon felt sick—that just reminded him of yet another failure. They had returned to the Dreadfort days after the Red Wedding to find General Lannister gone, and Roose's wife Walda twitching and writhing from a bad head injury. No one had seen General Lannister, and in the north there were posters calling for his head plastered to every wall, and in the south, Cersei Lannister said that any man that could find Jaime could name his own reward. Dickon could only hope he was dead, decaying on the moors somewhere. This too had been a sword hanging pendulously over his head, and Dickon had waited, helplessly, for it to drop.
Would it drop today? "My lord?" Ramsay pestered him, stepping into the bedchamber.

"I have no choice," Dickon said quietly, still staring out the window. "Perhaps this is the end."

"The end?" Ramsay laughed. "My lord, you forget yourself. Thanks to you, the Beggar Princess' forces have been scattered, and Sansa Stark is missing rather than wed to the Targaryen Wolf. The Crown should be thanking you. And don't forget that General Clegane owes his promotion to you," Ramsay added in a lower voice, coming to stand behind Dickon. "Not that he knows it, of course."

He felt Ramsay's breath on his neck, and he flinched and twisted away from the window, away from Ramsay.

"The Beggar Princess' forces have been scattered, and Sansa Stark is missing rather than wed to the Targaryen Wolf. The Crown should be thanking you. And don't forget that General Clegane owes his promotion to you," Ramsay added in a lower voice, coming to stand behind Dickon. "Not that he knows it, of course."

"The Targaryen wolf made a fool of me. It was not a victory," Dickon retorted.

"Not a victory? And yet if you had not attacked, where would the north be? United under the Beggar Princess' cause, led by the Targaryen Wolf and Sansa Stark. You changed the course of history, my lord. And now you hold Winterfell, and the Ironborn—men who cannot even be united on which brothel to raid—are united under you."

"I do not know why they are," Dickon admitted. Ramsay laughed, and Dickon realized the Bolton man was kneeling at his feet.

"No one could have watched you walk from the burning Sept that night and not follow you, Lord Tarly." He was kneeling at Dickon's feet, and Dickon stepped back, embarrassed and angry.

"That was a personal matter—"

"—aye, a personal matter that you resolved like a man. Your father abused and shamed you, and you showed him you would not stand for it."

"I am a kinslayer," Dickon argued, shaking his head. "I should never—"

"—It is not kinslaying if it is in self-defense. No true father would treat his son the way your father treated you, my lord. You are no kinslayer; you are a man of self-respect and strength, and the Ironborn and all northmen admire self-respect and strength. Sir Gregor Clegane should fear to meet you. Look at yourself, Lord Tarly. You are no sweet southron boy anymore."

Ramsay got to his feet and turned Dickon to face the dim looking glass, which he had been avoiding. A sinewed man with a thick scar over his eye and stubble over his cheeks looked back at him, his face gaunt and his eyes shadowed and haunted. His hair had grown long, too long.

"I should cut my hair," he said suddenly, touching the lank locks, still damp with his night sweat.

"Aye, I will do it for you, my lord," Ramsay said.

Dickon bathed as Ramsay prepared the shears. "How much shall I cut?" Ramsay asked him, coming to the bath. "Northmen do wear their hair long," he added.

"I am no northman," Dickon reminded him. He thought of Jaime Lannister's thick gold hair that caught the light as he threw his head back to laugh; he thought of the Targaryen wolf's dark hair, pulled back and coming free of its tie, he thought of even Loras Tyrell, that pretty boy with the long chestnut curls. "Cut it all off."

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Jon hadn't slept well. He'd caught bits of sleep, with flashes of dreams of a white stag, in between waking for hours at a time, overheated. After months of sleeping in the cold, covered in fur-lined
blankets and huddling for warmth, it had been an unseasonably balmy night, and his heavy furs and thick wool were suddenly far too heavy. Spring would soon be on its way. Around dawn, he finally gave up, kicked off the covers and climbed over Gendry, Tormund, and Beric, and crawled out of the mouth of the tent.

Last night when he had gone to sleep, the ground had still been muddy and grey, but the world Jon crawled into was the palest lilac and ivory. Tiny spring flowers—crocuses and snowdrops—carpeted the forest floor all around their tents. At this early hour, the forest was still, save for a light wind through the trees. Jon got to his feet and walked, on bare feet, through the flowers, looking at the new world around him in wonder.

He walked for a while, relishing the feel of new life under his feet, and the fresh silence of the morning. These days, a moment alone was a rare thing for him. He had been glad of it, especially in the beginning, but as someone who had always preferred to be alone, it was beginning to drain him.

The snowdrops made him think of a thing he had been trying to bury: his wedding. Sansa had worn pins that looked like snowdrops in her hair, and now it seemed that miles of snowdrops stretched out before him, and he stood in the center of a grove and allowed himself, for the first time in months, to think of her.

Davos had occasionally offered to write to Brienne, but Jon never took the offer. It was too dangerous, and besides, the less he thought of her, the better. He needed the wound to heal, and he knew from when he had been separated from the Starks that thinking, wishing, hoping would only lead to a wound that festered and never healed.

Sansa would bloom no matter where she was planted, and he was sure that even by now she would have met so many men who would fall for her, do anything for her. And she would love one of them back. Jon pictured him, a faceless stranger with his hands on his wife. He was not allowed to hate him, or to feel jealous, or to feel regret, even though the thought of another man's hands on her, another man's lips on hers—no.

*Enough,* he told himself fiercely. *It is over.*

And besides, he reminded himself, it was foolish to let himself feel so much pain for a passion borne of mere days together. He had wanted Sansa, wanted her fiercely, but all lust burned out eventually. No flame could burn forever. He had loved the possibilities that a life with Sansa offered, but there was no way he could have come to truly love Sansa so quickly. To imagine that there was some great love between them was the folly of a boy. He was not a boy anymore.

"Jonny boy," called a sly voice, and Jon saw Anguy approaching their camp, with a rolled-up newspaper in his hands. "Look, we've made the paper!"

"Finished!" Sansa stepped back from the dress form to admire her handiwork, then turned to beam at Podrick, who was in the corner, buried under paperwork. "What do you think, Mr. Payne?" she asked teasingly, slinging an arm around the dress form and swishing the heavy skirts playfully. Podrick looked up and turned bright red.

"It, uh, it's a dress, Miss Stone," he stammered, and knocked over a stack of papers, the bakery's accounts scrawled over them. In a flurry of papers and stammered apologies he scrambled to pick everything up, and Sansa bit back a smile and turned back to the dress.

"Mrs. Flowers will look lovely," she said to herself, tracing a hand over the stomacher. It had taken
Sansa carefully folded the modified dress, wrapping it in brown paper, and tying it with string. She left the drawing room, which had been turned into her dressmaking studio as well as the office for the bakery, and donned a heavy green woven cloak. In the hall, with the parcel under her arm, she passed by the locked door and paused, listening. No noise. The Ghost of the Bear and Maiden Bakery was either asleep—the Ghost had adopted catlike sleeping habits, and thus slept more or less all day—or else was in the yard, thrashing about.

The day was the warmest yet, unseasonably warm, and when Sansa stepped out onto the street, she looked to the paddock nearby and gasped with delight. The paddock was blanketed in palest lilac and white. Unable to stop herself, she wandered to the paddock and knelt at its fence. Snowdrops and crocuses, fresh and delicate as new life, reached up through the sodden ground, and her breath caught.

Snowdrops. She was blindsided with feelings that she had been working so hard to tamp down for the last three months, and she abruptly stood, and began walking quickly, as though by walking she could escape the maelstrom brewing in her heart. *Don't think of him don't think of him don't think of him,* she told herself fiercely, clutching the parcel so tightly she was probably crushing her handiwork. 

Miss Alayne Stone has no husband, and has never met any man named Jon Snow. And you are Miss Alayne Stone, resident dressmaker of Mole's Town, now. There is no reason to think about Jon Snow. She clenched her teeth until the thought of him passed and the searing pain in her chest abated somewhat, and then, once the coast was clear, frantically immersed herself in the present moment.

Mole's Town was unusually lively, with its citizens venturing out to enjoy the unseasonable sunshine and warmth, and Sansa ran into many of her customers as she made her way through town to the printer's shop. They all waved and greeted Miss Alayne Stone, and Miss Alayne Stone smiled and laughed and waved back, while Sansa Snow reeled with pain.

The print shop—and its owners—had quickly become a large part of Sansa's daily life in Mole's Town almost immediately. Unaccustomed to being so remote from the rest of society, she had been relying on newspapers to keep apprised of current events. And Sam Flowers—who she strongly suspected was operating under a fake name, like her—also had the most impressive collection of books that she had ever seen outside of King's Landing.

It also happened that, thanks to his printing business, he had an extensive knowledge of local gossip, and as a result, had been an important resource for her in her current quest. *Perhaps he'll have some answers today,* she told herself.

Flowers Printing was very near the town square, with a black lacquered front and deep windows that were nevertheless difficult to see through, due to the piles of newspaper and heavy equipment placed in front of them. Unable to suppress a smile, she let herself into the shop.

"Mr. Flowers?" she called, peering around the messy shop, but she was answered by the familiar creak and stamp, followed by Sam's breathless rambling and his assistant's occasional muttered reply.

"It reminds me of the legend of Robin Hood, have you read it?" Sam was panting as he fed paper into the press. His assistant Olly, a young, sulky boy, shook his head and pulled the lever. "Ah, a
tragedy! You would love—Miss Stone!” Sam abandoned his post, knocking over a stack of folded pamphlets spectacularly as he turned to her, his round face flushed and damp and his brown eyes—so oddly familiar—bright. "What a pleasant surprise!"

"I have Mrs Flowers' dress," Sansa explained, holding up the parcel. "Hello, Olly," she greeted politely, though as usual, Olly had nothing but a sulky look for her in return. Sam came over to her excitedly, reminding her strongly of a very large, very friendly bird flapping his wings.

"Oh, I'm sure Gilly will love it," he said eagerly, looking like he very much wanted to open the parcel himself. Sam had an unexpected knack for stitching, Sansa had learned very quickly, and as it went had read perhaps every book there was on the matter. "Let me fetch your payment and your paper. Isn't it a lovely day outside? I spent all morning in the meadows with little Sam, picking flowers and teaching him about them." Sam paused in the middle of rummaging through a mess on his desk, looking concerned. "He had more interest in digging up worms, but he's young yet," he conceded, and resumed his rummaging. "Here we are. Two gold dragons for the dress, and here's your paper," he said proudly, handing the coins and paper to her. Sansa took the paper, examining its front.

"Brotherhood without Banners?" she read as she stuffed the coins into her purse. "Brigands of justice?"

"Yes, haven't you heard? They're a roaming gang of former brigands, led by King Robert's ghost," Sam explained excitedly, pointing to the article. "Their latest act of vengeful justice was to rob General Clegane of the money he stole from the Cerwyn clan, when he attacked and burned their home on the day of the Red Wedding. This is actually my second printing of it; I sold out of the first set immediately this morning!"

Sansa's mouth went dry and she cleared her throat. The north had taken to referring to her wedding as the Red Wedding. The Red Wolf, of course, was still missing.

"O-oh, yes, I heard about that," she said lightly, making a show of peering closely at the paper. "King Robert's ghost? Really, Mr. Flowers, it all seems a bit sensational," she teased. "Who did this drawing?" The article was accompanied by a drawing of a motley crew of men, led by a man with the antlers of a stag, and then she felt a shudder run through her whole body. *Find the white stag before the young wolf is grown...* She had been dreaming of a white stag for weeks now...

"Why, Edd—"

The door was flung open and a tall, slim silhouette darkened the print shop's doorstep.

He was sinewy, with grey hair and mean little black eyes, dressed all in gleaming black down to his polished black boots and black leather gloves, and a mouth set into a permanent grimace of disgust, as though he had detected a foul odor and was unhappily trying to determine its source. Two of his men, also dressed in black, followed him into the shop.

"M-mr. Thorne! I did not e-expect t-to see you!" Sam greeted, backing up and knocking over a large stack of newspapers. Sansa's belly lurched as Alliser Thorne, commander of the Mole's Town Watch, rested his greedy gaze upon her throat, then her breasts, then her mouth, then finally her eyes. His gaze always left her with a greasy, sickened feeling.

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"You didn't? But surely you intended for a visit from me, what with this nonsense you've been publishing," he said in an oily, sweet voice, as he snatched up one of the papers featuring the Brotherhood without Banners, and unfolded it before Sam. Sam audibly swallowed. Sansa noticed that Olly was missing. Sam's knees were trembling, his eyes looking disturbingly wet. Sansa turned
to Alliser Thorne.

"I didn't know the Town Watch had time to read," she remarked sweetly.

"I will thank you to be silent, woman," he retorted, hand going to the holster with his pistol, as he took a few ponderous steps closer, looking about the shop meaningfully, before cornering Sam.

"B-but it's th-the news," Sam stammered, bewildered. Sansa tried not to roll her eyes in frustration. The more Sam cowered, the crueler Mr. Thorne would be. "I-I'm not saying I s-support them. S-sir."

"No? And yet you use such flattering language for a band of vigilante hooligans—"

"—It's a story," Sansa cut in exasperatedly, and Alliser Thorne turned to her with hate-filled eyes. "Like Robin Hood," she added, nodding to Sam. "Look at the drawing that accompanies it; no man has stag antlers," she reasoned quickly. "I think they're quite brave and gallant. They remind me of the tales of Prince Aemon the Dragon Knight," she added, and watched Alliser Thorne's eyes flash with dislike.

"Prince Aemon did not exist," Mr. Thorne said, "he was a story for children." He held up a newspaper and turned back to Sam. "The Brotherhood without Banners, however, does exist, and is a dangerous guerilla group that has attacked the Crown. Their actions will not be romanticized in print in this town. Is that understood?"

"I-I u-understand, yes," Sam stammered, bowing needlessly to Thorne, but Sansa felt a flare of curious rage as she watched Thorne rip up the paper before them. The scraps fluttered to the dirty floor, and Thorne turned sharply on his heel to leave. He paused before Sansa, and looked her over witheringly.

"It is an unfortunate thing when a woman feels the need to be so vocal. Such women are best reined in by a husband."

"Oh, is it illegal for a woman to be unmarried?" Sansa asked innocently, cocking her head to the side.

"It should be," he said, and then continued on past her. The Town Watch slammed the door on their way out so hard the windows of the door shattered.

For a moment they stood there in shock. Olly crawled out from beneath the printing press, shaking, and Sansa's entire body seemed to shudder with rage as she turned to Sam.

"That man—" she began, but Sam was dusting himself off and going back to the printing press, though his hands were shaking. "What are you doing?"

"I believe in freedom of the press," Sam informed her, his tone forcibly casual, though his voice was high and strained and his hands shook terribly as he attempted—and failed—to feed the paper into the press, sweat dripping from his brow. Sansa stared at him mutely for a moment, and he paused and turned back to her with a wry smile, though his mouth was twitching. "I'll never be a soldier, or a fighter. If a robber broke into the shop, I'd scream and cry and just hand everything over," he explained. "I'll never wield a sword properly or be able to fire a rifle without crying. But this—" he waved to the printing press, "—I can do. The world is changing, and the more people who read papers, the less people like M-Mr. Thorne or K-King Joffrey can terrorize and c-control us," he finished, holding his wobbling chin high, his eyes bright and round cheeks flushed.

"You are a true knight," Sansa blurted, overcome with emotion, and Sam promptly burst into tears.
"Oh, there there," she said ruefully, embracing him and offering him her handkerchief.

"I do have a bit of news, by the way," Sam informed her in a low voice, as Sansa made to leave. Olly was paying them no mind, so Sansa stepped closer. "But it might be a false lead. Gilly met a man from the Riverlands yesterday at the market, and got him talking." His eyes grew misty. "She's so brilliant," he swooned.

"Yes, she is," Sansa said hurriedly under her breath, her blood pounding in her ears. "What did she learn?"

"Well, apparently, Stark stormed the Crag before King Joffrey's men caught him," Sam began excitedly. Sansa fisted her shaking hands. To Sam, this was merely an interesting tidbit of history—but to her, it was the last movements of her brother before his execution. "And he spent a bit of time there."

"Enough time for a wedding?" Sansa pressed. Sam sighed.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Gilly didn't want to push too hard."

"How did she learn it to begin with?"

"Well, he was talking loudly about the Red Wedding," Sam said, "and so she just sort of mentioned how sad it was that none of the other Stark children got married, and sad that Sansa Stark is still missing. She's been doing that every time anyone mentions the Red Wedding, but usually people just agree with her and move on. But this man told her that he'd heard Robb Stark got married, but insisted that it was a lie, and that Robb Stark would never have dishonored his family by marrying while they were all being held captive in King's Landing. And he said the rumor got started because he was wounded at the Crag, so he spent some time there."

"F-fascinating," Sansa forced out, desperately trying to rein in her emotions. She was grateful that Mrs Flowers—Gilly—was not there; Sam was rather oblivious to subtle emotions, but Gilly was an expert at reading others. "The Starks are truly such an interesting family."

"They really are. I do hope Sansa Stark turns up soon," Sam said, shaking his head sadly. "I'm so glad you're chronicling their history, Miss Stone. I can't wait to see the finished product." He beamed at her.

"You'll be the first to read it," Sansa promised. "Well, thank you for everything. I'm going to go home and read my paper," she said cheekily. Sam bowed to her and returned to his post at the printing press, and Sansa realized Olly was staring at her. She forced a smile at him, then turned and left Flowers Printing, her heart pounding. She walked back to the Bear and Maiden Bakery in a fog, barely noticing anything around her.

Ever since the wedding, she had been unable to stop thinking about the innocent comment one of the clanswomen had made: that wedding was just as lovely as your brother's! It had haunted her, and with so many other thoughts that she was trying to avoid, she had become obsessed with it, but had had no way of safely investigating until she had met Sam, who had waxed poetic on the rich ancestral trees of the northern clans, and she had seized the opportunity, knowing it was likely her only chance.

Back at the bakery, the front had closed for the day, as it was late afternoon now. The Bear and Maiden Bakery was a white building with black shutters closer to the edge of town, and attached behind it was an older stone house, in which Brienne—and now Sansa and the ghost—lived. Sansa let herself into the yard between the bakery and house through a little kissing gate, and squinted up
at the house in the fading light. She saw the face of the ghost at his window, though he fled almost immediately, leaving the window dark and empty.

Inside, Brienne was cooking supper.

"Alayne," she greeted—for they had agreed to never use her real name, not even in private—without turning round from the stove.

"Have you heard of the Brotherhood without Banners?" Sansa asked, dropping the paper onto the little table. Brienne glanced over her shoulder curiously.

"Yes, actually—a young man who came into the bakery this morning asked me what I knew of them. He had one of those newspapers with him," she said in surprise, nodding to the paper on the table. "He seemed to find it all very amusing."

"Well, Thorne doesn't," Sansa informed her, shedding her cloak. "He came into Mr. Flowers' shop when I was there and ordered him to stop printing the story."

"It must be disturbing to hear that a band of guerilla upstarts has more honor than the Town Watch," Brienne said loftily. Then, her face darkened. "Go tell him that supper will be ready soon."

Sansa looked to Brienne in surprise. In the last month, the ghost had begun to be strong enough to feed himself, but they had merely been leaving a tray for him outside of the room that he haunted. He would talk to Brienne, but not Sansa, which made for awkward suppertime. It had been easiest for everyone to just deliver his food and leave him alone.

"He won't talk to me," Sansa protested, wiping her hands on her skirts. Brienne snorted as she stirred something.

"If he wants to eat, he will," she said vengefully. "He's no better than us, and if he wants to continue to eat my food and take up space in my house, he will have to learn to contribute to the household."

Sansa took the newspaper and went to the stairs. Podrick had left for the day, and so her office was empty save for the scattered scraps from Gilly's dress. Across the hall she lingered outside of the ghost's door.

They had not interacted since a week after the night they had saved him, when Brienne had chopped off his hand—to stop the infection from spreading—and Sansa had sewn up the remaining flesh. The memory of that night made her shake. They'd been riding for hours when they'd spotted him falling off a runaway horse, delirious with fever. Brienne hadn't wanted to stop, but Sansa had known him at once, and had insisted. In the falling snow, she had held his head in her lap, stroking his hair and whispering, as Brienne had set his useless right hand upon a stone and grit her teeth and swung her sword. The noise had been horrible, and the smell of the rotting flesh had made them both sick. Hours later when they had arrived at Mole's Town, they had cleaned the festering wound with whiskey and, with shaking hands, she had sewn the stump, crying and telling herself it was just like mending a dress. It had been a week before he had shown any signs of being lucid, or been able to hold a conversation, and the only thing that had stopped him from simply killing her when he realized what she had done was that he was so weak he could not even stand unaided, for the fever had so thoroughly ravaged him.

And now...he would not look at her, would not speak to her, would not even acknowledge her.

She knew why.
If he had not let her go that morning, he would never have lost everything. It did not matter that Brienne had been the one to swing the sword; it was Sansa who had truly taken his hand from him.

It took three tries but she knocked on the door, softly, and then cleared her throat.

"Excuse me," she said softly. "Brienne says that supper will be ready soon."

No response.

"And," she tried again, "if you want any, you should join us."

She waited, picking at her nails, and then made to go back downstairs, but the door opened a crack, and her ghost was at the door.

Two months of being bedridden and weak had aged Jaime Lannister. His hair, though still thick, had grown long, and had lost much of its lustre, and the hollows beneath his cheekbones had sharpened. Even his illness and misery could not dampen the man's beauty and power, though, and even now, bandaged and dressed in rags and sickly and pale, the sight of him still took her breath away.

"I'll take my supper up here, like I always do," he informed her, his voice rough from disuse. Sansa bit her lip.

"She said—"

"—I know what she said," he snarked. "I can hear. You didn't cut off my ears, did you? At least, you haven't yet, but I suppose if I get a scratch, I'd better keep close watch or you'll come at me with the scissors!"

Her belly lurched and she looked away, blinking furiously.

"W—we were trying—"

"—To save my life, yes," Jaime Lannister breathed scathingly, opening the door a little wider. "And what a life this is."

His room was empty—Brienne used it primarily as another storeroom. He had a simple cot in the corner, and the wooden sword with which he was practicing, with his left hand, was leant against the wall.

"Brienne is keeping you at great risk to her personal safety." Sansa shot back, her eyes filling with tears. Every time she thought of that night—gods, it was too painful. "You can leave any time you wish."

"Yes, and crawl, unarmed and weak, through hundreds of miles of men who want me dead. You're right, Mrs. Snow—I can leave any time I wish."

"I tried to tell them," she insisted, even as tears were spilling. "Believe me, General, I—"

"—I'm not a general anymore, Mrs. Snow," he reminded her with awful, searing sarcasm.

"And I am not Mrs. Snow," she hissed back, her fists shaking. "I am—"

"—In the eyes of the law, you are Mrs. Snow, and I'm going to call you that until the day I die," Jaime interrupted. He stepped forward, and Sansa reflexively stepped back. "After all, I lost a hand
He was angry. So angry that his shoulders were rising and falling, his lovely green eyes acid-green with rage. The effort of speaking with her flushed his pale cheeks.

He was a far cry from the man she had thrown herself at eight years ago, the man who once had held her upright as they danced, the man who had given her his cloak, and certainly a far cry from the man who had dueled with Jon Snow and could have killed him if he wished. He had to lean against the door frame, due to his weakness, and was already short of breath.

"I'm sorry," she insisted. "You know I would never have wished it."

"But it happened. It does not matter what you wished. My life is now over so yours could continue, so—"

"—I never asked you to let me go!" she exploded. "I don't even know why you did!"

"I don't know why either," Jaime scoffed. "It was one of my worse ideas, I will grant you that. Perhaps I am as stupid as they say. I've always been called the dumb Lannister, did you know that?"

"I've always been called the dumb Stark," Sansa countered. "Yet I'm the only Stark still alive, and you're the only Lannister with any honor left."

"Yet Cersei sits in the Red Keep and Tyrion sits with the pretty, stupid Targaryen princess, and I lay in squalor with no title, no right hand, no weapons, and no gold. Look what my honor has bought me."

"I would rather have honor than gold," Sansa countered, hating the hot tears streaking down her cheeks. "I would rather be you than Cersei or Tyrion."

"Then let me grab my sword, and I'll take your right hand, Mrs. Snow," he said sweetly. "And we'll see how far that honor gets you."

"I brought this for you," she said tightly, throwing the newspaper at him, which he still caught with ease. "If you want supper, it will be downstairs." She turned on her heel and left, her face wet with tears.

Downstairs, Brienne was doling out stew into bowls, and she looked at Sansa and paused when she saw the tears on her cheeks.

"That horrible fool," she said calmly, setting down the bowls. Sansa wiped at her face furiously.

"No, it's me. I shouldn't be so—" she began thickly, but Brienne was scowling and storming up the stairs.

"—Shouldn't be so kind? So understanding? So gentle? Really," she seethed, disappearing and leaving Sansa in the kitchen alone. She heard shouting, and a slammed door, and then Brienne was coming down the stairs, nose in the air.

"Well?" Sansa prompted tentatively. Brienne sat at her bowl.

"If his royal highness is too good for my stew, he can starve," she said shortly, and the two women ate in angry silence.
Sansa washed the dishes, per their routine, as Brienne went back into the bakery to prepare for the next morning, and then Sansa retired to her room, weak with exhaustion.

It had been a harder day. Perhaps it was because she had seen the snowdrops. She locked her door, and lit a candle, and went to undress. She never wore jewelry, but she did keep her pearl snowdrop pins and the Targaryen clasp in a little carved box on top of her vanity, and though she had not looked at them in many weeks, she went to the box now and sat before it, and slowly opened it up.

The Targaryen clasp, made of pewter, was heavy and had grown tarnished, and the snowdrop pins were crushed and stained from her trek to Mole's Town, but she had kept them anyway. She held them up to the dim light, and clapped a hand over her mouth to stop a sob.

Don't think of him don't think of him don't think of him—

She dropped the pins onto the wood and pressed her fingertips to her eyes. There were moments when life was simply unbearable, and this was one of those moments.

She undressed, and caught her reflection in the silvered glass of her vanity. I must be the oldest virgin alive, she thought with black humor. She stared at her naked body. Would any man ever touch it? Would any man ever see it? Sometimes she thought she might simply die of loneliness. She wondered if it were possible. Jon had told her that she should meet a man, marry a man, but how could she? It would always be too dangerous.

Sansa slipped into her nightdress, and braided her hair. Just go through the motions, she told herself, as she had been telling herself for so many years. When would she be alive, when would she be living? She stifled another sob, hating herself for the sadness. So many people had sacrificed so much to give her this new life. It was so selfish to cry. It was so selfish to be sad.

There was a scuffling noise, and she froze, before turning round slowly.

The newspaper, bearing the story of the Brotherhood without Banners, had been shoved under her door, and a ridiculous mustache had been drawn on the cartoon of King Robert's ghost. Thank you, Mrs. Snow had been written across the top in wobbly, unsure penmanship.

"So what's next?" Jon pressed.

Gendry was polishing a rifle methodically, the steel gleaming in the firelight. Davos and Tormund were carefully writing letters in the dirt, copying Beric's instructions. Anguy was restringing his bow, for no reason that Jon could see other than an excuse to touch it.

"Heard the Ironborn joined up with Dickon Tarly," Anguy remarked.

"Old news," Davos snorted. "They attacked us together at the Red Wedding, remember?"

"I don't get it," Gendry blurted. He rarely spoke up, so everyone looked at him in surprise, and he shrugged, self-conscious under the weight of everyone's gazes. "Why would they join Tarly? He's southerm and a loyalist."

"Supposedly a loyalist," Anguy reminded him. "I hear he's looking awful northern these days," he explained with a sly smile. He glanced at Jon. "He's chummy with the Bolton boy and Theon Greyjoy. Heard you knew the Greyjoy brat."

"Not well," Jon replied, shaking his head. "Theon was much closer to the Stark children than I was, and he only ever had disdain for me."
"Well, they're terrorizing Winter Town lately. Mainly the brothels," Anguy said with a shrug. "Could be we take them down."

"Risky," Beric assessed, shaking his head. "Jon and Davos can't show their faces in Winter Town, and we know Tarly wouldn't mind another crack at killing Jon."

"Fine. Doesn't matter to me," Anguy backed off. "I also heard today that the Town Watch in Mole's Town is a problem. Harassing ladies, and the like. Controlling trade, too."

"Sounds ambitious," Beric said, just as Tormund said, "sounds fun." Beric glanced at Tormund witheringly before continuing. "We need more information. How close to the Crown are they? Who's running it?"

"I can do a bit of gossiping and poking around," Anguy muttered, toying with the string of his bow. "I'll go tomorrow."

"I'm hungry," Gendry said, getting to his feet. "Hunting time."

"It's so late," Davos countered, squinting up at Gendry. "Don't shoot your own arse off."

"He could do it," teased Anguy. Jon got to his feet, taking his own bow. He had felt restless all day, like he was trying to hide from someone searching for him. Moving around and hunting would be a welcome distraction.

"I'll go," he told Gendry, stepping over Tormund and Davos' dirt lessons.

"Take your sword," Davos said without looking up. Rolling his eyes, Jon took his sword and set it on his belt.

The night was warm and the woods were welcoming. They walked through the grove of snowdrops and crocuses in silence.

"D'you wish we were going after Tarly?" Gendry asked suddenly. Jon glanced at him, then looked down to navigate a patch of bramble.

"I don't know how much longer we can ignore him," Jon said after some thought. "If we really mean to help people, I mean."

"I meant do you wish we were going after him," Gendry insisted.

It was rare for he and Gendry to discuss personal matters, which was perhaps the biggest reason that they had become friends so quickly. Gendry only knew what everyone else knew about Jon's history, and while Tormund and Anguy had rankled and teased, looking for more information, and Beric had probed as well, Gendry had never once asked him. He had never even made a reference to Jon being Targaryen, or having supported Dany; he had never asked him about Sansa. Likewise, Jon did not ask Gendry about his Baratheon heritage, even though he looked exactly like King Robert when he had been young and was a known bastard of King Robert's. The others had made the joke many times that Jon and Gendry were the two people with the greatest claim to the throne in Westeros and also the two people with the least interest in it, and in that, the two of them had found an ultimate sort of compassion. Neither of them wanted to think much about their pasts, or how different their lives might have so easily been, had they not been fathered by men who thought they were kings.

"He attacked us because he thought it was right," Jon finally said. The woods grew darker around them. They were near a stream where they often fished and bathed, and Jon could barely hear the
flow of water. "I can't fault him for that."

"...I suppose." Gendry said nothing more of the matter, and Jon was relieved. For a long time they walked in silence, pausing to listen occasionally.

Near the stream, they each paused once again, holding their breath, straining to listen beneath the sound of the stream. And then...Jon and Gendry turned to each other at the same time, Gendry's bright blue eyes wide. Jon nodded mutely. He had heard it too.

Voices.
I...am really nervous about this chapter. I decided to cut a lot of things in order to just get to the meat, and it's a big turning point for Sansa in particular, so there was a lot of character work here. Also, TW for nonconsensual content. I know it's in the overall tag but I figured I'd give an additional heads up for the chapter.

General Clegane had been nicknamed 'The Mountain' for good reason. The man who darkened the entrance of the Great Hall filled up the entire doorway. The decorated scarlet uniform, which so improved other men, seemed superfluous on General Clegane, like putting medals on a mammoth. He was, Theon reflected, a man born in the wrong time. He had been meant to wear mail, meant to sling a warhammer. His jaw alone was wider than Theon's thigh.

Dickon Tarly was slouched in the chair that Eddard Stark had once occupied, at the head of the Great Hall, with Ramsay Bolton beside him. Dickon too was a broad man, and in the last few months any signs of sweetness or southron culture had melted from him. He had even cut his hair brutally short earlier that morning, so short that his pale scalp was visible. It had further transformed his face from one of the boyish prince that Theon had met on the moors a few months ago, and had revealed planes and angles that had not been visible before, and accentuated the bruise-like circles beneath his sherry-colored eyes and the dark hollows beneath his cheekbones. He was dressed like a northerner too, in a drably-colored coat that was for utility, not for decoration. Theon watched him work his square jaw as his eyes took in General Clegane's entrance.

The whole hall had gone silent as the redcoats filed in, in perfect unison, their polished black boots clicking on the weathered stone in a deadly rhythm, their rifles against their shoulders, their white breeches oddly bright in the dim light of the hall.

Dickon did not rise immediately, and Theon studied Ramsay, whose eerie blue eyes were trained on Clegane in fascination. Dickon and Clegane were staring each other down. There was a disturbing flatness to Dickon's gaze.

At long last, Clegane dropped into a bow. Dickon's eyes widened imperceptibly; he had not been expecting that.

"Lord Tarly of Winterfell, presenting Acting General Gregor Clegane," announced one of the redcoats. Dickon slowly pushed himself to his feet and bowed shortly before Clegane—it was a disrespectful bow—before dropping back into his seat. The actions appeared dismissive, but Theon thought Dickon looked a bit sick.

"General Clegane...welcome to Winterfell. I heard General Lannister is still missing," Dickon remarked, as Clegane straightened.

"That is one among many things I have come to discuss, Lord Tarly." He had a voice like rocks breaking.

Eddard Stark would have been prepared with supper and discussed the matter over meat and mead,
Theon remembered, but Dickon had offered no comforts to the royal army.

"Then discuss it," Dickon suggested listlessly. A few of the Ironborn hastily stifled smirks at scowls from the redcoats.

"Lannister is missing, and a northern rebellion is imminent. We must stamp out this problem before it grows." Clegane gestured to one of his men, who presented him with a scroll of parchment, bearing the Baratheon seal. He passed Dickon the scroll, who took it and ripped off the seal, scanning it quickly. "King Joffrey has heard of your efforts in halting the Red Wedding. Your efforts will not go unrewarded. He names you Warden of the North and begs that you aid us in stomping the rebel forces, finding General Lannister, and ending the Brotherhood without Banners."

"I do not know the Brotherhood without Banners," Dickon admitted.

"They have robbed my army, and are causing trouble throughout the north. They are believed to be led by Beric Dondarrion, and a bastard of King Robert's, and the traitor son of Rhaegar Targaryen."

Theon watched Dickon's gaze dart about, his left hand twitching where it rested on the lord's chair. "His Majesty thought it fitting that you aid us in this endeavor."

*Rhaegar Targaryen... all of Theon's life, that name had blown through rooms like a cold wind. Everyone shivered at it, yet Theon had always wondered why that name inspired such fear. After all, Rhaegar had been a prince and had dropped everything for a northern woman...he sounded more like a lovesick boy than a man to be feared.*

"What would you have me do? My forces are not significant," Dickon said at last.

"Winterfell is the key to the north," Clegane replied. "Your father would have aided us."

The look that Dickon gave Clegane was cold as death, and a shadow of the man who had emerged from the burning Sept emerged now, and Theon felt fear again. He was sitting straighter now, a vein throbbing in his forehead, as he leaned forward.

"My father is dead."

"Yes, and the Crown has offered its condolences for your loss," Clegane said. "A public alliance will discourage the rebels, and in return for this, King Joffrey gives you Rhaegar Targaryen's son to execute as you see fit. Until now he has been the property of the Crown. And," Clegane continued, "King Joffrey also offers you Sansa Stark, to execute as you see fit. She has bedded the Targaryen; now she is a traitor too."

Theon watched Dickon swallow, his eyes turning shiny, briefly, in the dim light. His breathing was ragged. Theon wondered if Clegane saw this, saw how his words were received. He looked too dumb, too brutish, but on the other hand, he had to possess some measure of cleverness, for he was acting general now.

"As I see fit," Dickon confirmed slowly. "Both the Targaryen wolf and Sansa Stark."

"As you see fit."

Dickon considered for a moment. The whole room held its breath, waiting, but it was Ramsay who spoke.

"Gossip travels fast, Lord Tarly," he reasoned in that musical voice. "The whole north knows how
the Targaryen wolf bested you. You'll never live that down unless you strike back."

"And just this morning you said I had changed the course of history," Dickon said slowly, turning to Ramsay, his gaze now burning. "So which is it?"

"My lord, do not mistake me," Ramsay said sweetly, "I know the nobility of your deeds—but the savages do not. They are uneducated, incapable of reason. They do not respond to nuance, they respond to blunt strength. If General Clegane overthrows the rebellion without your support, it will be said that you are less of a man for it. You'll never be respected as Warden of the North."

Ramsay knelt before Dickon. "You must show them your strength, as you have shown your strength before..."

Dickon was at a loss.

"You will give me your answer tomorrow, Lord Tarly," Clegane interrupted. "We will wait outside your walls."

"If you do not take on his offer, you will have insulted the Crown," Ramsay was saying as he handed Dickon a cup of wine. Dickon took it with a weak hand, slumped in the lord's chamber as he was, so thoroughly drained from his meeting with Clegane that he felt he had been training for days. He'd been unable to eat, unable to even bear the sight of food, and now was lightheaded and limp. The wine was sour and cold, but he drank it greedily, feeling it trickle down his chin. He wanted to be numbed.

"I don't want to," he said bluntly, laying back onto the pillows, heavy and helpless. Even his tongue felt heavy, and Ramsay felt very far away, even though he was sitting at the edge of the bed, close enough to Dickon that they were touching. His head hurt, gods it hurt. He pressed his fingers to his forehead, willing the throb to subside. The wine was already taking effect, dulling the pain a bit. He felt something on his leg. Ramsay had placed his hand there, and was moving it against his leg in small circles. "What are you doing?"

"You don't like it?" Ramsay pulled his hand away. "I was told your father liked to be soothed by his men--"

"--Don't touch me," Dickon snarled. "I am not my father."

"No, you're not." He placed his hand there again, pressing on his inner thigh, and Dickon struggled backwards in horror.

"I said, don't touch me," he said, as the room spun. Ramsay held up his palms.

"I am sorry, my lord," he said earnestly. "Your body is sore from all that training. I was just trying to help. Yet you react as if I had done something...filthy." His eyes widened. "...Is it that you are hiding some--"

"Leave me be," Dickon said, and, wide-eyed, as though shocked, Ramsay left the chamber.

He was not his father. He did not like that sort of thing.

But, he thought, feeling the cold wind come in through the open window, he had never been with a woman, either. Everyone else he knew had. Even Ramsay, foul and ugly and dirty as he was.
Even Sansa Stark had been fucked, he remembered thickly. He'd seen her legs twined round the Targaryen wolf's hips, he'd seen the blood staining the bed. The room had smelled like desire and blood when he'd burst in. The memory of it created a dull throb between his legs, a pesky, irritating pain that angered him. Dickon's hand went beneath his breeches, to his own length, and he was hard. Dizzy, he unlaced his breeches and moved his hand against his hardness, remembering the scent so clearly it was like he was there again, remembering how Sansa Stark's dress had been falling off her pale shoulders, remembering how her legs had been wrapped round the Targaryen wolf's hips, her heels digging into his legs so hard it looked like it hurt. He moved his hand faster, his mouth dry as he gasped, thinking of the Targaryen wolf breaking away from her, not even afraid. They had to have been fucking for the second time already; the wolf's breeches had still been laced, and he had seen his hardness straining as he had pulled away from Sansa. Did he fuck like a savage, Dickon wondered, did savages fuck differently? Was that why Sansa Stark hadn't gone back with him? He had thought he was being a hero, but perhaps it really did come down to who she wanted to fuck more. He grew angrier, moved his hand faster, harder, imagining stabbing the wolf, tossing him to the side easily, and then pushing Sansa back onto the bed, ripping her stupid tartan dress off, hearing her cry as he entered her. He could fuck like a savage too; how hard could it be? He imagined pounding harder, her legs wrapped round his hips, but then he kept seeing Ramsay's face instead of hers, and then the Targaryen wolf's face, and how it had looked as he had drawn his dirk against him. No, Dickon thought desperately, as he spilled into his hand, thinking of the Targaryen wolf.

Bronn kept going back to that moment when he had watched Jaime storm out of the inn, consumed by his problems.

He'd thought it best to leave Jaime alone. After all, he had known Jaime Lannister for decades. He knew the man's moods, knew when to prod at him, knew when to back off.

Whoever had taken Jaime was either highly skilled in hand-to-hand combat—and there were only a few men who could best Jaime—or had taken Jaime completely by surprise. Jaime had said that the Targaryen wolf was the best swordsman he had ever seen, but it made no sense for the Targaryen wolf to travel south and capture or kill Jaime after the raid.

But the whole north was out for Jaime's blood; the list of people who might've captured or killed Jaime seemed to grow daily. And as the weather warmed and the tensions grew in the north, it seemed more and more likely that Jaime was gone.

Sandor had been asleep but stirred as Bronn stoked their little campfire.

"Want some rabbit?" Bronn held up the rabbit he was roasting, and Sandor groaned and slung an arm over his eyes.

"I fucking hate rabbit," he grunted, voice slightly muffled.

"Rabbit hates you too," he parried lightly, and felt another annoying twinge as he thought of how Jaime might have made the same joke.

Missing Jaime was like having a bloody hangover all the time, a dull throb and feeling of nausea that never quite seemed to lift. He had floated through life without ever missing anyone, but perhaps he had just spent too many years around the man.

"Should probably be looking at night," Sandor mused. Bronn squinted into the woods thoughtfully.

"I'll give it a few hours," he said with a shrug. "It's early yet. They won't be asleep yet."
His last idea was perhaps his cleverest, but he knew if this didn't work, then realistically, there were no options left. He couldn't outrun the royal army forever—he'd found many of his own wanted posters in Winter Town—and they were running out of places to look.

There was just one group of people who might know where Jaime Lannister was. The only question was how to get them to help. Jaime Lannister was no friend of the north, and therefore was no friend of the Brotherhood without Banners—but if the rumors were true, then one of them owed Jaime his life.

The rumors were hard to believe—not only that the Targaryen wolf had split from the Beggar Princess, but also that Jaime had saved his life, by letting him and the Stark girl go. And yet it explained all of the things that had thus far been inexplicable: the Targaryen wolf's escape, Jaime's strange mood after the raid, the Beggar Princess' sudden disappearance...

And so they had spent the last two weeks attempting to track the Brotherhood, mostly based on the rumors they picked up from wayside inns and pubs. Their efforts had led them just south of some dump known as Mole's Town, into this jumble of forest. Bronn was just wondering where they might try looking tonight when he heard a rustle.

"Just heard—" Sandor muttered, not moving a muscle, but Bronn interrupted.

"Heard it too. Why don't we sing a little song, see what they do," he suggested quietly.

"I don't sing."

"You do now. Let's sing Rains of Castamere, for Jaime," he suggested sardonically. "We all know how that one goes, don't we?"


"And who are you, the proud lord said, that I must bow so low," Bronn began lightly, his eyes trained on the darkness.

Jon and Gendry crept along the bank, closer to the voices. Across the stream they saw the glow of a small fire, and the two men paused, squinting into the distance.

"Just some travelers," Gendry murmured under his breath. "Leave it alone."

"Wait. Look at their horses," Jon breathed.

The destriers, tied by the campsite, were magnificent; they were the sort of horses that you did not see up north. They were warhorses, but they looked weakened. They weren't meant for traveling, weren't meant to feed on whatever could be scavenged. Gendry's bright blue eyes widened.

"Redcoats? Can't be. Might've stolen redcoat horses. Bloody stupid if they did; they'll never make it too long."

One man was slender, with long, lank dark hair pulled back at the nape of his neck. The other was lying down by the fire. They had rifles, good ones, and swords, too.

"You're right," Jon finally said. "Best leave it alone." They turned to creep back into the thick of the woods, back to their own camp, though the idea of the two men so close to their own camp made Jon nervous. Few people traveled through this wood; why were they here?
They broke out into a song, and Gendry froze mid-step.

"Only a cat of a different coat," began the one lying down, in a slurred, gravelly voice.

"Is all the truth I know," finished the slender one, his voice far more musical.

"What?" Jon nudged Gendry, and Gendry shook his head frantically, mouthing something, but in the dark, Jon couldn't see.

"The Rains of Castamere," Gendry finally hissed, as the two men sang together, "a coat of gold, a coat of red..."

"Castamere?" It sounded familiar.

"...A lion still has claws..."

Jon arched his brows at Gendry, who shook his head fiercely and took a step to run...

...and a twig snapped.

The singing stopped.

"We've got some visitors, sounds like," the slender man said loudly. "Come on, don't be shy."

"Run away from the camp," Jon directed under his breath, and they broke into a run.

The woods were shadowed and silvered in the moonlight as Jon ran, the trees blurring around him, Gendry behind him. Jon had always been fast, but Gendry was strong, not swift, and he heard him falling behind. He glanced over his shoulder, but Gendry had disappeared, so he ducked behind a tree, drawing an arrow as he went.

The forest was silent, save for the wind whispering through the bare branches, as Jon tried to still his breathing. He heard a scratching and looked round, pointing his drawn bow, the arrowtail tight between his fingertips. There was a shadow behind another tree; he knew it was Gendry.

"Boo," came a voice in his ear, and Jon let the arrow fly out of surprise. He dropped the bow and drew his sword and rounded on the slender man behind him, but to his surprise, the man was unarmed, and ducked back with quick grace, into a small grove. "Easy, boy, easy," he said, holding up his hands.

Jon kept his sword pointed, driving the man backward. He heard a dry chuckle behind him, and glanced over his shoulder to see Gendry aiming his rifle at the other man. In the moonlight, he saw the man was horribly disfigured: half of his face was like melted wax.

"Some Brotherhood," the disfigured man snorted. "What, you don't got legs for running?"

"I don't know that I'd be making jokes with a gun pointed at me," Jon said to him. But the man was staring at Gendry, and Jon watched his friend's eyes widen as he took in Gendry. Gendry's eyes looked even brighter blue in the moonlight, his face filthy and hair wild, as they darted between the two men, taking in their stares.

"King Robert's ghost indeed," the man said softly, staring at Gendry. "He's Baratheon, no doubt."

"And that one's a Stark," the disfigured man said, jerking his chin at Jon. "Think we've found your Brotherhood," he said to his friend, who was grinning.
"Been looking for you," the man said now with a sly grin. "Desperately. Need your help, as it happens. We're looking for General Jaime Lannister."

"You and the whole north," Jon replied, stepping forward, so that his swordpoint touched the man's chest. "Why should we help you?"

"Because you owe him your life, you dumb cock," the disfigured man said.

Sansa had awoken with a heaviness weighing her limbs, and for a long time she had simply lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering why she felt so drained. She'd got to her feet slowly, and had gone to the window to look out over the street and the paddock, and then she had remembered.

The snowdrops from yesterday still dotted the paddock like bright stars.

If there were a potion she could have consumed, or a magic spell she could have uttered, like the ones in the stories she had read as a girl, that could make her forget him, she would have taken it at once, in that moment.

Her dreams had been fragmented shards: Jon's lips on hers, fierce and hungry; a little boy named Robb and snowdrop pins, stained with blood; and her running, leaving bloody footprints in the snow; the white stag shimmering in the dark trees before her. And then she had seen a dark silhouette with a crossbow pointed at the white stag—and then it was pointed at her—and then she had found herself kneeling in the snow, holding a squalling baby with grey eyes in her arms, and when she had looked up once more, a wolf was coming toward her, and the wolf had her brother Robb's eyes, and it was crying too, and the white stag was gone and she was to blame for everything.

It was just a nightmare. She had had them for years in King's Landing, and she remembered how they had filled her with dread for the rest of the day, and the dread would mount as night approached once more, like she was about to go to bed with a terrible, violent man.

She was supposed to be happy. And sometimes she could convince herself that she was, but what of days like this? Perhaps she might have had nightmares no matter what; perhaps she was doomed to have an unhappy life, filled with dark dreams and empty of love.

"Miss Stone?"

Podrick's tentative voice came through the other side of the door and Sansa jumped, startled, and hastily snatched her dressing gown.

"Y-yes? Sorry, Mr. Payne—I am not dressed yet," she admitted, going to the door. "I overslept a bit, it seems."

"Miss Tarth needs my help in the bakery, so I can't accompany you to the market," he said. His voice was always far stronger when he didn't have to look at her. She had heard Jaime imitating his stammer round Sansa to Brienne with awful precision many times; Brienne, who was good, never even smirked at his mimicry, but sometimes Sansa had had to bite her lip to stop from smiling, even if Jaime couldn't see it.

"That's fine, Mr. Payne. I'm sure I can carry a few bolts of fabric myself," she said.

Podrick went back to the bakery and Sansa dressed hastily in a blue plaid skirt with a deep blue wool bodice that laced up, and a green and blue shawl that she had woven herself, crossed over her shoulders and bust. The Targaryen clasp would have been the perfect size and weight for such a
shawl, to be pinned at her waist, but of course, it would have to remain in her jewelry box.

She had spent so many years perfecting the art of leaving her nightmares in her bedroom, and so Sansa finished dressing, and braided her hair, and left her room looking every inch the lovely if distant Miss Alayne Stone the dressmaker, who wanted no man and whose blue eyes and frozen smile gave away nothing.

"Does the ghost want today's paper?" she asked through Jaime's door, hoping her voice did not quaver too much. She was met with silence and she rolled her eyes, but Podrick was leaving the office at the end of the hall, and dropped a sheaf of papers when he saw her.

"H-he's outside, with Miss Tarth," Podrick explained, his face flushed, as Sansa helped him gather the papers.

"Outside? But he's not allowed during the day," Sansa said, getting to her feet and handing Podrick the papers. Podrick, who had a kind and handsome face and really ought to have had a little more confidence, avoided her eyes but smiled slightly.

"Miss Tarth's put him to work," he muttered, trying not to laugh, and Sansa found herself grinning. She went to the hall window that overlooked the yard.

Jaime, dressed in the plainest of loose shirts and breeches, was furiously attempting to shift grain from a wheelbarrow to a barrel with one arm; his right arm was still bound in a sling against his chest. She watched him furiously kick at the wheelbarrow and overturn it; he stalked away, his bright gold hair catching even the early morning grey light. Even filthy, crippled, and dressed in dirty linen, he looked more handsome than most men did in their best coats. "I-I think it'll be...character-building," Podrick said lightly from behind her. Sansa looked back to him in surprise—he was rarely so glib with her, though she often heard him making muttered jokes to Brienne as they worked.

The hint of friendship, of familiarity, galvanized her, and she set out into the street with renewed spirit. This is my life, now, she told herself, refusing to look at that bloody paddock with all the stupid snowdrops. I am Alayne Stone, and many people have sacrificed so much to give me this.

And yet... to let go of Sansa Stark—of even Sansa Snow, that pale girl in tartan with snowdrops in her hair—was painful, like watching a favorite childhood toy drop off a cliff, gone forever.

No, she told herself, holding her chin high. It is not like losing a favorite possession. It is like having a rotting hand hacked off. Just as Jaime Lannister would have to learn to use his left hand, so would she have to learn to be Alayne Stone. It was the only way to survive.

The only question was, what was she surviving for?

The market was already in full swing as Sansa reached it. Stalls and even a few tents had been drawn up overnight, and grimy peasants, and bonneted housewives, and road merchants milled together between the stalls, shouting arguments and bartering for every last bit of silver. Sansa's man was in the center of it all, magnificent colours amid all of the grey and brown.

"Miss Alayne Stone, a jewel among rocks," Salladhor Saan greeted as she approached his stall. The handsome Lysene man, slim with wispy white hair that contrasted with his dark skin, greeted her with open arms. He was dressed in jewel-like green silk, with a matching jaunty cap on his head. Other men would have looked absurd in such an ensemble, but even his fine silks could not detract from his aura of danger. "I have brought something special, just for you," he informed her, turning to the bolts of fabric behind him.
The bolt he withdrew was of a rosy raw silk, and its luster took her breath away.

"How much? I have three customers off the top of my head who would be stunning in that, and there is a town ball coming up," Sansa breathed, coming round behind the counter of the stall to touch the fabric. Salladhor laughed and pulled the fabric just out of her reach.

"My lovely lady, it is yours for nothing—if you promise only you will wear it," he said slyly. Sansa flushed. Sansa Stark would have loved to wear a pink silk gown, and Sansa Snow even might have been intrigued—for what might her husband think of such a gown?—but Alayne... Alayne did not go to balls, or wear beautiful dresses. Alayne made other women beautiful. Sansa smiled at Salladhor.

"It would look horrible with my hair," she told him, plucking at the thick auburn braid over her shoulder. "It is meant for a woman with black hair, or a fair blonde," she insisted, reaching out to stroke the fabric longingly.

"Perhaps it is too childish. You are no young maiden; you are a woman of experience," Salladhor agreed, making Sansa flush at his insinuation. "What of this? Just for you."

The silk was deepest red, and all too familiar. The red silk of fire and blood, the red silk of weddings, of Targaryen dragons, of Jon Snow's cloak against her bare shoulders. Sansa's mouth went dry and she shook her head.

"It's red, Mr. Saan," she insisted. "I cannot wear red, it won't go with my hair at all."

"On the contrary, Miss Stone," he said slyly, "I think red might suit you best of all."

The day suddenly seemed cold, and Sansa was afraid.

"I cannot take it, Mr. Saan," she said. "Besides, what use do I have for silks?" She tried for more gaiety. "I don't go to balls; my customers do."

"You are the loveliest woman alive, Miss Stone. If you don't go to balls, then why have them at all?" Salladhor countered. "Take the red. A woman in red is always unforgettable. Your blue eyes are always so sad, and no woman is sad in a red dress." And he shoved the bolt into her arms. "Now, what else? The others you'll have to pay for, but the others are not so special."

With shaking hands, Sansa folded the bolt more tightly and placed it in her basket. It was just enough for a dress, she thought, and unbearably heavy. "Where is your man? The silent one, who looks at you with such desperation," Salladhor asked suddenly, seeing how she struggled to hold the fabric.

"Mr. Payne was detained by his boss, I'm afraid," Sansa joked.

"That is just as well—this gentleman has been lingering, looking for an excuse to catch your attention. Perhaps he can play the part of Mr. Payne." Salladhor snapped his fingers, and Sansa turned.

He was slender, perhaps her age, with a crossbow strapped to his back, and clever, swarthy eyes, dressed in a frayed hunter green coat and a short, hunter green cloak, intended for utility. At Salladhor's snap, he tore himself from the throng of customers round the fish stall, reflexively touching the bow on his back as he walked. She thought of her dream and pushed it away. Miss Alayne Stone had no such dreams, of shadowed hunters and white stags.

He had the look of a hunter; even without the crossbow she would have thought he should have a
bow. His lean lines reminded her of one man, but Miss Alayne Stone did not know that man. "This fellow saved my cart from bandits yesterday as I traveled here," Salladhor informed her. "Anguy, can I ask you to protect my wares further, to Miss Stone's shop?"

"Anything for a lady," Anguy replied slyly. He took the red silk from Sansa with scarred hands, and their fingers brushed, and Sansa pulled back abruptly, feeling her face grow warm. "Is that all?"

"No, I need far more than that. Everyone will be wanting a dress for the town ball," Sansa replied, turning back to Salladhor, feeling the Lysene's man's incisive gaze far too well. "I'll need at least two bolts of that blue silk," she began, pointing to the bolts, clearing her throat, and hoping to distract from her flushed cheeks.

After she had paid and Salladhor had wrapped up the bolts of fabric, Sansa turned to Anguy, whose face was nearly hidden by the parcels of fabric. "I'm very sorry," she said wryly, "but I have one more stop to make here. It's just a social call; it will only take a minute."

"Take all the time you need, Miss Stone," he said from behind the fabric, "it is not every day I get to walk behind such a lovely woman."

"Sadly, you can barely see her," Sansa parried, looking to the stack of fabric, and he laughed, as she felt a ripple of pleasure at his words, inappropriate though they were. Slender, quick men with dark eyes had always been a weakness of hers. But who would Miss Stone prefer, she wondered? Would she find this archer delightfully dangerous, or would she remain cold to his flirtations?

She did not know, so Sansa turned away and scanned the market for her next stop.

Anguy followed her, wending through the marketgoers, to the very edge of the square, where Gilly always set up shop. She was huddled in a heavy cloak today against the wind, and Sansa watched her hand over a little glass bottle to a customer and accept a gold dragon. And then, surreptitiously, she passed the man a piece of folded parchment, so quickly that Sansa would have missed it had she not been watching.

"Miss Stone!" Gilly greeted as Sansa approached. "I love the dress," she told her brightly. "And Sam loves it too," she added, blushing a bit. Her brown eyes fixed on Anguy and she looked to Sansa questioningly.

"This is Anguy; Mr. Saan enlisted the poor fellow to be my pack mule, I'm afraid," she explained. Anguy peeked round the stack of parcels and nodded politely at Gilly. Gilly merely smiled shortly at him, and turned away quickly. "Is Mr. Flowers' door repaired?" Sansa asked, deciding to ignore the strange behavior. It is like she knows him...".

"Not yet, we need the glass fitted," Gilly replied distractedly, needlessly rearranging bottles of herbs and concoctions, though Sansa realized she was arranging them over stacks of paper.

"What is that?" Sansa pressed under her breath, angling her body so that Anguy would have a harder time seeing and hearing.

"Just something for Mr. Flowers," Gilly said in a high voice. "Nothing to—"

"Are they pamphlets?" Sansa asked, looking more closely. Gilly sighed and snatched one, reluctantly, and shoved it under Sansa's shawl.

"Don't look at it here," she insisted in a low voice, and abruptly pasted on a smile as a customer came to the stall. "I will see you later, Miss Stone," she said loudly over her shoulder. Biting her
lip, Sansa turned away, and tucked the pamphlet into the little purse sewn into her skirts. She
opened her mouth to tell Anguy that they could walk back to her shop, but Anguy's attention was
drawn to the head of the square, at the dais at the foot of the Sept, where there was some
commotion. Slowly, marketgoers were turning to look as well.

A ragged man in a filthy waistcoat had climbed onto the dais, holding the branch of a heart tree
above his head.

"King Joffrey has burned the godswood in King's Landing! He wants to burn the north!"

"He's a brave fellow," Anguy observed, as Sansa went to stand beside him, squinting at the man.
She had seen him wandering before, usually drunk. Had he been cleanshaven he might have been
handsome, and there was always something strikingly familiar about him, though she'd never got
close enough to see.

"He's cut the heads off the wolves!" the man continued, and a shiver ran through Sansa. She
thought of her brother's eyes, but that soon faded when she saw movement behind the man. "He
has raped the north while we sit, placid as lambs for the slaughter!"

"He needs to be stopped," she said in horror.

The Town Watch were coming from the Sept, descending the hill to where the man stood, all of
them on horseback. Thorne, looking especially polished today, was watching the man with those
beady eyes, a hand at his belt where his pistol was. There was a swooping sensation in her gut, and
she was walking before she knew it, pushing through people, with Anguy following hastily. "They
will kill him," she said under her breath.

How many thousands of times had she seen this play out? With her father, her mother, her brothers,
hersister? With so many people whose names she would never know? Joffrey made sport of
execution, and encouraged others to do the same. And the north was hungry: the grim faces were
not laughing at this man, just as they had not laughed at the men that Joffrey had executed.

"What's your plan?" Anguy demanded, following her.

Something had her in its grip. She thought of the red silk, of the crying baby in the woods, of Jaime
Lannister crippled and desperate, of thousands of flags bearing the red wolf. She was shaking as
she went up to the dais, and climbed up, reaching the man before Thorne did. Everyone was staring
at her.

"Jory," she blurted the first name that came to mind, and the man, crazed and shaking, looked to
her in shock, and she realized now who he was. Perhaps she had known it all along. "H-how dare
you?" she yelled, so that everyone could hear. The crowd fell silent. "D-drunk again," she
stammered furiously, her face overheated and her tongue thick in her mouth. "And now you're
making a spectacle of yourself," she added, and she raised a shaking hand and slapped him.

He was weak; he fell back, at Thorne's polished feet.

"Do you know this man, Miss Stone?" he asked icily. All eyes were on her and she felt their
combined weight as she raised her gaze to meet Thorne's.

"He is a drunk, Mr. Thorne," she told him coldly. There was a ringing in her ears; she could not
look away. At his feet, Jory Cassel struggled and coughed. "I-I knew him as a girl, and expected
better from him," she added, hoping her voice sounded disgusted enough. After all, it was not a lie.
She had known him. Jory was looking at her, desperately. Thorne's eyes narrowed, and she heard
someone step to her side. It was Anguy.

"Aye, you've given him too much of your coin, Miss Stone," he said quickly, disgustedly, and he kicked at Jory's legs. "He's just drunk again, sir. Best leave him to soak in jail for a night or two."

"Ah, is that would you would do, were you commander of the Town Watch, boy?" Thorne asked, arching his brows. Anguy, to Sansa's horror, grinned.

"Oh, no, I'd drink and whore all day if I had that kind of gold, sir," he said cheerfully, and the men behind Thorne snickered, though they stopped abruptly at Thorne's furious glower. Sansa felt sweat dripping down her back as she watched Jory struggle to his feet. She could not breathe. As he got to his feet, swaying, his horrified brown eyes met hers. He knew her, he knew exactly who she was. She wanted to scream, wanted to leap forward and tackle him to the ground and stop him from speaking another word. He was drunk, too drunk to think, and if he called her by her name...

"Get him a cell for the night," Thorne suddenly said nastily to one of his men, and two men, a skinny one with large ears, and a stocky one with a thick neck, came forward to drag Jory off. "Enough of this nonsense," Thorne proclaimed in a loud voice. "Back to your business," he ordered the marketgoers around them. After a moment, the crowd thinned, as Sansa watched Jory be dragged off. She thought she might be sick.

Thorne was staring at her.

"This is the second time I have found you in the thick of trouble, Miss Stone," he observed. "You lead a busy life."

"No, just a social one," Sansa replied, and she heard Anguy snigger.

"See that it doesn't happen a third time, Miss Stone." His beady eyes flicked to Anguy, then back to her, lingering on her neck. Her shawl had become loose in her haste to get to the dais, revealing too much of her skin.

Thorne stepped off the dais, barking orders at some of his minions, before swinging up onto his fine horse. The rhythms of the market slowly returned behind her, and Sansa let out a shaking breath of horror.

"That was well brave, Miss Stone," Anguy remarked lightly. He freed up one hand and placed it on the small of her back, leading her down from the dais. His touch was sure, steady, and her skin prickled at the touch.

"I-it was foolish. I don't know what's gotten into me," she admitted in shock, walking mechanically through the market. People glanced at her curiously and her face burned.

"Kindness, I should think," Anguy replied.

They walked in silence for a time. Sansa saw none of the street as she walked quickly, lost in a fog of memories.

She had not seen Jory Cassel since her father's execution. He had let out the most horrible strangled scream as the axe had dropped, and had been led away, all fists and teeth and wild, angry eyes, and she'd not seen him again after that. He had been a clansman and utterly dedicated to her father; he had been one of the few to stick by her father's side no matter what. She had thought him dead, but it was him, she knew it was him. She pressed a hand over her mouth, her lips trembling.

What had happened to him? How had he got away from King's Landing, and how was it that Jory
Cassel—one of the strongest, most sturdy men she had ever met—was now a ranting, raving drunk? The world seemed so unbearably cruel. He had seemed like a knight from a fairy tale to her, once upon a time.

This is Joffrey, she thought. She had seen the heads come off of each and every one of her family, had watched their heads rot upon pikes, slaves to the elements; she had been sold and abused and beaten and humiliated. The north had been fractured and raped, torn asunder.

They came to the bakery suddenly; Sansa had barely known where she was going.

"Snowdrops," Anguy remarked, looking at the paddock in surprise, and Sansa went to the kissing gate of the bakery.

"Yes, they are lovely," she said flatly. Anguy followed her.

"I love spring, but I'll miss the snow," Anguy said, pausing to stare at the flowers.

"I won't," Sansa said, a little too fiercely, and Anguy looked at her in surprise. "Snow means no one needs pretty dresses," she explained a bit lamely, before gesturing for him to follow her. "Thank you for everything," she said now, feeling a little ashamed. The yard was empty, luckily, and Sansa decided the front of the bakery was the safest place to lead Anguy. Who knew where Jaime might be, after all. She led him into the bakery through the back door. Brienne was helping a customer, and Podrick was gleaming with sweat, his shirtsleeves rolled up, as he kneaded dough behind her. He looked up in surprise when Sansa entered with Anguy.

"It was more of an adventure than I might have thought," Anguy replied. "This town barely needs the Brotherhood without Banners, as long as they've got you, Miss Stone."

He set the parcels down on a low crate, and Sansa walked him back outside, to the kissing gate, feeling Podrick's eyes on her as she shut the door once more.

"Do they really exist?" she asked, as they lingered by the gate. Anguy's eyes were dancing.

"Probably just a story," he said dismissively. "Like Robin Hood."

"It's a nice story," she said, wrapping her arms round herself. "People need stories, I think. It gives them hope." She laughed, covering her face. "I'm sorry. You must think me very strange. Today has been a very strange day."

"I don't think you're strange at all," Anguy replied. Sansa dropped her hands, and met his eyes, and there was a flutter of anticipation. "I think Mr. Saan's right—I think you should wear the red."

"O-oh, no—" she began, flustered, but Anguy was walkin backward, nudging through the kissing gate.

"Nothing like a beautiful woman in red," he called, and he turned round the corner and disappeared.

Bothered, flustered, and embarrassed, Sansa went back into the bakery. Podrick was picking up her parcels of fabric.

"I-I'll carry these," he said, lifting them up. Sansa followed him across the yard, to her office, wondering if she had the same effect on Podrick that Anguy had on her. If so, she felt even worse for him. It was terribly upsetting. No wonder he dropped things all the time.
In her office, after Podrick had left, Sansa sat on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, staring into space in utter shock. What had she done? She kept seeing Jory's wild eyes, seeing the way he swayed...the man who had once worn the Stark tartan with pride was now shouting in the streets. And when she closed her eyes, she saw, again and again, the way he had looked after her father's head had been cut off, heard the strangled, wild, animal noises of rage he had made.

She shifted and heard something crinkle; she reached into her pocket and pulled out the crumpled pamphlet. She'd forgotten about it completely. The front of it was simple, with only a title and a simple drawing.

*Reason: The Argument for Independence*

Beneath it was a simple drawing of a stag.

"Red silk?"

Jaime was standing in the doorway, and Sansa hastily stowed away the pamphlet, her heart pounding. He was dressed in a cleaner shirt, and he had trimmed his beard...or someone had done it for him. The sling holding his right arm was fresh, too.

"The town ball," she explained. "Everyone will be wanting dresses for it."

"Ah, balls. The only thing I don't miss about being alive," Jaime said sardonically, and Sansa's face grew hot as their eyes met. He was remembering it too, the same night that she was remembering.

"What's going on?" Brienne appeared behind Jaime, covered in flour, wiping her hands. "Podrick said you came back with a stranger."

Sansa thought of Anguy and wished that Jaime's eyes were not so very all-seeing.

"Mr. Saan insisted I have help carrying the fabric," she explained, gesturing to the red silk spilling across the floor.

"A handsome stranger?" Jaime cottoned on immediately, and Sansa got to her feet, surreptitiously hiding the crumpled paper in her dress.

"A stranger," she said simply. "I really should get to organizing these."

"Jaime will help," Brienne said, and both Sansa and Jaime looked to her in horror. "You can't just moan and thrash about the yard with a wooden sword forever," she informed him crisply, turning on her heel. "You'll work just like the rest of us. And I'll be back to check and make sure you're working."

With that threat, she left them alone together once more.

"...I suppose you could help me measure what I've got," she finally said, breaking the angry silence. She knelt on the floor, spreading out the red silk, and Jaime knelt opposite her. "Just hold that end in place..."

Once upon a time, Sansa Stark would have died at the chance to be alone with Jaime Lannister. But that girl was gone, and Sansa was overwhelmed by the morning she had had. There were simply too many things to feel at once, too many things that made her hands shake. Jory, the stag on the pamphlet, Anguy's advances...

"You always liked to dance," Jaime said suddenly, after they had been working for a half an hour.
"Yes," she agreed mildly, unfolding a bolt of raw blue silk. "I did."

"Does your husband like to dance?"

"Please, stop," she said quietly, spreading out the fabric.

"I'll take that as a no. He seemed a bit sulky, frankly," Jaime mused, holding the end of the bolt in place as her hands stretched out the marked tape.

"Cersei liked to dance," Sansa blurted suddenly.

Over the silk, their eyes met. To her shock, Jaime's eyes narrowed into knowing crescents as he tilted his head, looking at her with amusement.

"Ah, the wolf does bite back after all," he said softly. She saw him run his tongue over his pointed canines. Even his teeth were beautiful. "Not very hard, though. You're not the first person to make accusations and you won't be the last."

"They're not accusations if they're true."

"I suppose they're not."

"You don't deny it, then?" she asked breathlessly.

"I've never denied it, actually. No one has ever outright asked the question."

"Did you father Joffrey?"

There was no hesitation.

"Yes," he breathed, eyes dancing. "And Myrcella, and Tommen, and more if I could have. Not that I care much for any of them."

"Do you miss her?"

This time he did not answer right away. She watched him swallow.

"...Yes."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes."

"Joffrey shouldn't be on the throne," Sansa said. "He's not King Robert's heir."

"I've never given a fuck who sits on the bloody throne," Jaime said carelessly. "If Rhaegar had lived, Cersei would have wed him, and she'd still have my sons, and your husband would be another poncy prince in line for the throne. And the rumors would still fly, and the north would still be angry, and no one would agree on who should be king. It makes no difference."

"But Joffrey is a monster."

"Yes, and a fool. It's a dangerous combination, I grant you. Rather Targaryen in nature," he mused. "He got my stupid impulses and Cersei's wrath and now the godswood has burned and King's Landing will likely burn too. Fire and Blood, aren't those the Targaryen words? I ask because you've married on--"
"Stop it!" Sansa insisted furiously. "You're just bullying me out of boredom, and I've had enough of your nonsense!"

"Oh, have you? Years ago you seemed rather fond of my nonsen--"

She reached her hand out blindly, angrily, and he caught her wrist in his left hand in a death grip with such ease, even in his weakened state. A flare of heat ran through her and she snatched her hand away and got to her feet in a rush. Memories, of being a young girl, breathlessly waiting for Jaime Lannister in the darkened halls outside of the ballroom, swirled in her mind's eye.

"I was scared and alone, that night. I had just watched my entire family be executed," she began tightly, "and you had been kind to me. I was a foolish young girl, and I am sure you found me absurd, but to me that kindness was all that was keeping me sane. I apologize for my actions."

"I didn't find you absurd."

Sansa turned back round to face him in shock. Jaime was still kneeling on the floor, looking thoughtful. "I understood you completely," he admitted. "I know what it is, to be an outcast. I know what it is to have your back burning with the hateful gaze of everyone at court. But at least I chose my own path. You were just a child. You had never chosen a thing in your life, not even what dress to wear."

_We are heading for ruin, _Jon had said, _so desperately, but I chose this ruin. You did not._

"Women rarely get to choose much at all," Sansa replied quietly, and she saw Jaime's lips twist into a smirk. "What? Is that so funny?"

"It is," he admitted. "Cersei has said the very same thing, too many times."

"Did you ever...tell anyone? About me, I mean."

"Of course not. Why on earth would I? You were fifteen and drunk and sobbing and telling me that if I only married you, you would do whatever I wanted. Not exactly a conquest."

"I thought being married was the only way I could stay alive." Her fists tightened.

"I know you did. And if you'd married me, you would be married to the father of the person who executed your family. Instead, you're married to the man Joffrey is most likely to execute next. What lovely irony," Jaime mused, shaking his magnificent head.

They worked quietly again, for a long time. Sansa thought of herself, fifteen and drunk, sobbing into Jaime Lannister's very confused arms, begging him to help her in the darkened hall. She thought of Jory Cassel, desperate and drunk; of Dickon, gripping her upper arms and kissing her; of the lovebite on Daenerys' neck and the darkness in Jon's heart.

She thought of the white stag, of Sam printing the papers even after being threatened by Thorne, of the Brotherhood without Banners, led by King Robert's ghost. She thought of Jon's hand being bound to hers, she thought of the searing, single kiss they had shared. And one word kept coming back to her, like breathing.

_Independence._

"I met your wife today," Anguy informed him, dropping down before the fire. Jon's gaze snapped up; he felt everyone looking at him. "She is kind—and clever." There was a warning in his voice as
he dumped out loaves of bread and fish wrapped in delicate wax paper from his pack, and everyone descended upon the pile hungrily, even Bronn and Sandor, who had made themselves so at home so quickly that it had infuriated both Jon and Gendry last night when they had brought the two men and their horses to the camp. Beric had known both of them, from his time in King’s Landing, and had welcomed them nearly without question, and the rest had simply followed suit.

"Aye," Jon finally forced out, his heart pounding like he'd sprinted.

"Clever lasses don't live long," Anguy added, and Beric nodded. Jon felt Gendry and Davos staring at him, but Tormund was the one to speak, as he spiked three of the fish on a spit and held it over the fire.

"Well, she's made it this far," he said with good humor, but no one laughed.

"She's made an enemy of the Town Watch commander," Anguy continued, tearing up a loaf of bread and passing half to Jon. His insides had been writhing with hunger but he could not seem to eat, and he stared helplessly at the bread. "And she's got some dangerous friends." Anguy paused, his eyes dancing. "Lovely tits, thou--"

"Keep your hands off her," Jon snarled, moving to stand, and Gendry reached out and grabbed his shirt, pulling him back down.

"I touched nothing," Anguy said innocently as Jon reluctantly settled back down.

"The boy's missing his wife, Anguy, be kind," Beric said, chuckling, and Jon scowled.

"I'm not a boy," he snapped, but their two newest members were laughing at him.

"Only a boy would say that," Bronn countered, and then everyone was laughing at him again.

They stayed up late, talking round the campfire about Jaime Lannister, but Jon could not focus. When the campfire was mere embers, and everyone had shuffled into the tents, Jon stayed awake, haunted.

_Clever lasses don't live long._

"You want to go to Mole's Town?" Gendry's voice was soft in the night. Jon stared at the remains of the fire, not looking at Gendry.

"No," he said at last. "Let's get some sleep." And he stomped out the fire.
Thanks for all of the wonderful responses to the last chapter. This took me a bit longer than usual because RL obligations hit me in the face, but hopefully I can resume my regular schedule.

The sentiments expressed herein may not yet be fashionable among that class for which fashions hold such weight. Given enough time, perhaps these words will be whispered behind trembling ladies' fans at court, the lace handmade by some maid to match their gown, only to be discarded in a day, the lace dirty and forgotten; atop their fine horses, as they kill for sport, never eating the game they shot, lords may joke between each other: revolution, independence!

But for those of us who do not have maids to make us lace, or servants to run after us, darting between the grasses to pick up the game we shot, we do not have such time. We cannot wait for fashion.

For we have waited too long to ask why we are ruled. The consequence of our complacency has been distilled into one boy. We ask if he bears the right to rule us. We, the unsettled sheep, looking for a wolf we could like more—we shall be slaughtered all the same. Kings may only obtain their power through violence and abuse, and they may only maintain it through violence and abuse. Like Robert before Joffrey, like Aerys before Robert, a king tells us he shall protect us, and we burn all the same. It stands to reason that no king is a protector of the realm, and no king is a lover of mankind.

Whispered in the gutters of Flea Bottom, shouted from the lips of drunken men in Winter Town, we talk of revolution and independence, and we shrink back from the words for fear that we will burn. But if we shall burn if we rise, and burn if we lay down, let us not be frenzied sheep waiting for slaughter, but become wolves once more.

-The White Stag

Sansa had read the pamphlet so many times that night that she could have stood up in the town square and recited it from memory. She slept with it beneath her pillow, the words ghosting on her lips. But become wolves once more...

When she slept, she dreamt of her father, kneeling for the axe, and when the axe fell, his head did not roll, and when he lifted his gaze, it was Robb, looking at her with those blue eyes so like her own, and he was crying. "I'll kill them all! Gods be good, I'll kill them all!" he sobbed as he knelt, and the axe fell once more, and it was her sister's head that rolled away, stopping at her feet, but it was already decayed, like it had been on the pike for a week, and Sansa screamed and screamed, and closed her eyes, and when she opened them once more she was in a forest, and her mother was holding her.

"I didn't mean to live, I wanted to be dead with all of you," she told her mother as she sobbed into her shoulder, and her mother would not speak, but only stroked her hair and held her. When Sansa pulled back, desperate to see her mother's face up close, a line of red appeared at her mother's neck, and she screamed as her mother's head rolled off her shoulders and landed in the dirt with a
sickening *thump*, and as her mother's headless body collapsed, she saw a silhouette in the distance, in the trees. *Find the white stag,* the wind breathed, and the silhouette began to run, so she ran after it, and the wind was screaming, *mother, mother, mother...*

But she could not find the white stag, and she lost the silhouette in the darkness as she ran deeper into the forest.

Trapped in a hunter's trap, Jory Cassel writhed, begging her to release him from the trap. "*It hurts, please, why don't you care?*" he choked, but when she went to free his leg, it turned into a dragon, and Jory was gone, and the dragon turned its scaled head to look at her, its gaze lingering, and then suddenly it turned, and it was flying through the trees, chasing something, but when Sansa tried to run after it, something trapped her ankle, sharp teeth piercing the flesh, and when she screamed and writhed to face it, it was the wolf with her brother's eyes, filled with anger as he shook her ruined ankle in his jaw, and she screamed—

"Sansa! Sansa!"

She was drenched in sweat and shaking, and Jaime Lannister was kneeling beside her bed, gripping her shoulder with his left hand in a painfully tight grip, his eyes wild and his hair mussed from sleep.

"W-what?" she breathed, realizing her face was wet with tears. She couldn't stop shaking, even in his death grip, and she felt she might be sick. "I-I don't—"

"—You were screaming loud enough to call the bloody Town Watch to us!" Jaime explained breathlessly, finally relinquishing her shoulder. It throbbed where his fingers had dug into the flesh. He sat back on his heels as they each caught their breath.

And suddenly the coursing terror of the nightmare was lost, water through cupped hands, nothing more than pieces of parchment in the wind. She could already barely remember the nightmare, save for its worst visions, and she could not recall what had scared her so terribly. And she was now sitting in her shift, soaked in sweat, with a man in her room. It was barely dawn yet, but bright enough that all of her—truly all of her—was visible.

"Gods!" she squeaked and yanked her covers up around herself. Jaime rolled his eyes and got to his feet.

"Modesty, yes, that is the moment's greatest concern," he drawled, turning away from her. There was a knock on her door, and Jaime froze. Even he had no illusions about the consequences of being caught in her room when they were both undressed, particularly in her current condition.

"M-Miss Stone?" Podrick's voice came through the door. "Miss Tarth told me that she heard shouting, are you alright?"

Wide-eyed, Jaime turned back to Sansa, and Sansa cleared her throat.

"Yes, Mr. Payne, I-I was just ...having some trouble with my corset," Sansa replied a bit lamely, watching Jaime pinch the bridge of his nose in disgust.

"Ah. R-right. Well, then," Podrick said, and they held their breaths, listening to him walk away again. After they heard his footsteps on the stairs, Jaime let out a breath.

"You are absolutely useless under pressure, did you know that?" he hissed. "Just having trouble with my corset," he mimicked in a high-pitched voice, rolling his eyes.
"Well, what would you have said, oh brilliant general?" Sansa hissed back furiously, balling her hands into fists.

"Literally anything else! You could have pretended you didn't know what he was talking about, you could have said 'oh, maybe it's General Lannister'—literally anything else would have been less absurd! What, has your corset got teeth, now? Is your corset on fire? Why would anyone scream uncontrollably when putting on a corset?" He scoffed with disgust and stormed out of her room, leaving her to stew in her horror.

Sansa let out a shaking breath and fell back against the pillows, and heard a crinkling sound. Confused, she pulled the pamphlet from underneath the pillow. She'd forgotten about it, but now the words came back to her.

*Let us not be frenzied sheep waiting for slaughter, but become wolves once more...*

It was a reference to her family, that much was clear. And it was signed by the White Stag...*Find the white stag...*

She had resolved to tell no one of the red woman's strange predictions, had resolved to forget about Jon Snow, but now...Had she found the white stag? Who was the young wolf? And what did this mean for Jon's fate? She thought of Jon's hands on her after the red woman had made her prophecy, thought of how she had been led to be bedded by Jon right after the red woman had been thrown from the wedding...and yet the bedding had never come to pass, and all she had now was a hair-thin white scar on her upper thigh, dangerously close to where he might have touched her, had he truly bedded her.

That ache came back, the ache that seemed to come at night before she slept and in the day just after waking up, a secret, shameful ache that made her think of Jon, but Alayne Stone did not want Jon Snow, and Alayne Stone did not care for Jon Snow's fate.

She rose and bathed, thinking of wolves and trying to remember her dream, but the fragments were drifting further. Her mother had been in it, and she had felt her mother's hands on her hair, and there had been a dragon...

...And Jory! There was a swooping sensation in her gut as she recalled Jory's face yesterday. He'd be in the town jail, still, most likely. She dressed more hastily. She had no appointments until later today, so she might be able to see him before he was thrown out of jail and disappeared into the grim bustle of the town for a while.

Jaime had considered skiving off work, but when Podrick had begun pacing outside his door, clearly trying to work up the nerve to ask why he'd not shown his face in the bakery yet, he decided that listening to the moron pace back and forth was more annoying than just doing the work.

"You'll be scouring the ovens today, since you were so unsuccessful with the grain yesterday," Brienne informed him coldly as he descended to below the bakery, where most of the work was done. Podrick followed on his heels, looking like a very anxious puppy, and it irritated him. Everything, really, irritated him.

"Thank you, my lady," he said caustically, stalking past where the giantess was working, to the empty oven behind her, which had a bucket of water and a few rags at its foot. He thought she might supply a retort, but Brienne ignored him.
“Did you speak with Alayne?” she was asking Podrick. Jaime tried not to freeze up as he knelt by the bucket to soak one of the rags. The ovens were deep; it would be difficult with only one hand, and beside that, his body still screamed with fatigue from yesterday's efforts with the grain, though he'd rather die than admit that.

“Aye, she was having trouble with her dress, ma'am,” Podrick replied. Jaime began scrubbing slowly, holding his breath, waiting for her reply.

“Trouble with her dress?” Brienne asked suspiciously. “Well, as long as she's well now.”

“She seemed so, ma'am.” Podrick went to take Brienne's station at the other oven, taking one of the long-handled trays and shuffling unbaked loaves into its heat. Brienne went upstairs, presumably to prepare the shop for the day, leaving the two men together.

He could not believe that Brienne would be so thick as to buy such a ridiculous lie. Sansa's screams had woken him from sleep and scratched straight to his bones, splintering his very soul. He had only heard such anguish on the battlefield. As blunt and without finesse as Brienne was, she was highly competent—he could only guess that she was pretending to accept the lie and would investigate later.

Podrick, however, was an idiot.

_Podrick, however, was an idiot._

_The fool was probably so delighted at the thought of Sansa's corset unlaced that he couldn't think much else_, Jaime presumed, trying to fight back a snigger. Honestly, the boy's affections for Sansa were as profoundly desperate and so thoroughly unrequited as if he were a leading character in one of those depressing Myrish tragedies, the ones that ended in suicides all round.

Jaime was half-inside the oven, furious at how much he was panting and soothing himself by recalling some of Podrick's more pathetic moments in front of Sansa, when he heard the bumbling fool behind him.

"W-why were you in Miss Stone's room this morning?"

He paused, and looked back over his shoulder. Podrick was red-faced and sweating from the heat of the ovens, his shirt sleeves rolled up, and his hands fist ed.

"What, are you Mrs. Snow's protector now?" he asked dubiously.

"Yes," he said shortly, "I-I am, and so is Miss Tarth. Why were you in her room?"

"Because she was screaming like a banshee, you fool, and I didn't lose my bloody hand just to have her stabbed in her sleep." Jaime realized that Podrick was not convinced, and he was biting his lip, looking like he was about to either wet his pants or punch him. "Is this a joke?!" Jaime demanded furiously, pulling out of the oven. "Why does the entire world seem to think I want to rape Sansa Stark?!"

"She's a married woman, Mr. Lannister, sir, and—"

"—Mr. Lannister?!” he asked incredulously, throwing his head back and laughing. "Have you lost your mind, boy? I'm Gen—"

"—I don't care," he interrupted, his eyes bright and his voice wavering. "I know who you are. I served in your army."

"You did?" He was genuinely surprised. Jaime narrowed his eyes, studying Podrick more closely.
He didn't look remotely familiar...

"I did. I still have my musket, and the scarlet uniform," he said. "And the sword." He looked away. "D-don't go in Miss Stone's room anymore."

Jaime snorted.

"Or what?" he asked gamely. "You'll bake me to death? Drown me in grain?"

"I was going to use the rifle or the sword, actually," Podrick replied, and he went back to loading loaves of bread into the oven.

He was a deserter, then, for why else would an officer of the royal army be living in a dump like this, baking bread and lusting after married women? Even with his ridiculous stutter and sad-puppy-demeanor, back in King's Landing he could have had any woman he liked, so long as he wore the scarlet and gold.

Brienne came back before long, looking pale and grim. She was holding a sack, and without speaking to either of them, she went to a loose floorboard in the corner and hid the sack.

"Town Watch?" Podrick guessed, wiping the sweat from his brow. Brienne stomped on the floorboard to secure it, and Jaime saw a puff of white expelled from the floor.

"Is that salt?" Jaime interrupted, peering at the floorboard.

"The Crown has seen fit to levy taxes on salt," Brienne explained shortly. "Luckily I had some advance warning just now. Thorne won't be here for a few hours." She stomped on the floorboard again until it lay flush with the other boards. "That ought to do it," she muttered. "I can't hide all of it, of course."

"That should be enough for a few weeks," Podrick said.

"I think so. We'll have to be careful, of course. We'll reduce our goods for a few weeks," Brienne thought aloud. She looked to Podrick, whose face was screwed up in thought. *Looks painful,* Jaime thought with some desperate amusement, but his stomach had turned. He'd never paid thorough attention during his father's economic lessons—that was the business of Tyrion and, to some extent, Cersei—but he knew enough to know that a levy on salt was very dire news indeed.

"We can withstand about three weeks at half output," Podrick finally said. Brienne grimaced.

"We'll be buckling our belts a bit tighter for the while." She left once more, and Jaime hastened to follow her up the steps and into the yard.

The sunshine was watery and weak, and the wind was harsh. Jaime had always liked this weather best; it made him want to go riding and hunting. He grabbed Brienne's shirt in his fist.

"They will look for hidden wares," he said quietly, and she turned to look back at him. Her eyes were really the only pretty thing about her, and Jaime met her eyes now.

"I'm sure they will," she said calmly. "Which is why we will need to find some housebound chores for you in the meantime. I was just about to do that now. I'm sure Alayne will have some work for you."

"If Joff—if King joffrey," he corrected hastily, "is introducing a levy on salt—" He halted, unable to express his panic fully. *Rebellion.* The word that had ghosted through the halls of the Red Keep,
floating like a spectre above every council meeting... Jaime thought of the grim-faced northerners dressed in the Stark tartan, and thought of the Brotherhood without Banners. "—This tactic has been tried before," he finally continued. Brienne nodded.

"Yes, by King Aerys," she recalled.

"You've read your history," he approved, and Brienne snorted.

"I lived it. Barely, I suppose. I was only a little girl when Aerys reigned," she admitted.

"Then you know that this is not likely to end in peace," Jaime pressed.

"Perhaps it shouldn't," Brienne simply said, and she turned and left him standing in the yard.

"Lannister could go back to King's Landing, if he's still alive, but you two can't," Beric pointed out. They were sitting around a campfire, having cooked breakfast, as they debated their next move.

"We did work that one out," Bronn snarked. "And even if we do find him, getting him back to King's Landing will be no small task." He turned to Jon. "Would any of the Beggar Princess' force have kidnapped him?"

"No. Your garrison slew most of them," Jon replied, thinking back to that chaotic morning in the snow. "The only people even remotely capable of taking down Lannister were already on their way to our outpost by that afternoon, save for Grey Worm, and he would never have bothered."

"Bothered?"

"Grey Worm is pragmatic," Jon explained, remembering the Unsullied leader. "Deviating from the escape plan and traveling so far south just to kill one man would serve little purpose. Daario might have done it—he's more vengeful—but he was with Dany the whole time."

"He would never have done it anyway," Davos disagreed, shaking his head. "He likes an audience, that one. If he'd gone to defeat Jaime Lannister, he would have wanted as many eyes watching as possible."

"What did he say that morning, lad?" Beric asked now.

It seemed as though it had happened a lifetime ago. The sequence of events was blurry; he struggled to recall how he'd gotten Sansa from her room to that grove, and much of the journey through the Barrowlands was blurred together, too. But certain details—the scarlet of Lannister's coat against the white snow; the sound Sansa had made at the thought of returning to King's Landing; the clang of their swords; the feel of Sansa's hand in his—would stay with Jon forever.

"He told us that Petyr Baelish had bought Sansa from the Tarlys," Jon began slowly, "and he made a few jabs about my father, and then he challenged me." Jon felt everyone's eyes on him, and he avoided their gazes. "I don't think he ever intended to kill me or take Sansa."

"You think he planned to let you escape?" Bronn's voice was intent, his eyes hungry.

"I don't know if he consciously had," Jon admitted, shrugging, "but there were too many times he could have killed me, and he didn't take any of them. It doesn't sound like him to just miss an opportunity."

"No, that wouldn't be him. If he had wanted to kill you, you would be dead," Bronn agreed. "But
"Aye, we agreed on it," Jon admitted, remembering how he had met Lannister's green eyes and there had been an instant sort of comprehension between them. He had known what the man intended, had known what he must do, and in the moment he'd not questioned it. It had seemed perfectly fitting. "It wouldn't make sense, otherwise, for us to have escaped. So I wounded him in the leg, and he told us to go."

"The whole north wants him dead," Beric reasoned now, a warning in his gentle voice as he looked to Bronn. "The odds of him still living---"

"—Are small. Yes, worked that one out, too," Bronn replied. "Listen, we'll do whatever you like for this...cause...of yours, if you'll see what you can dig up about him."

"We're likely to run into the royal army," Davos said, looking between Bronn and Sandor. "We've already had one run-in with them."

"Didn't go too well for them, as I recall," Tormund interjected now, between picking at his teeth, and the men laughed.

"But if they see these two, they're dead," Davos continued.

"Well, it's not like the army'll treat us too nicely, either," Anguy pointed out. "We're all dead, if they see us."

"If they can catch us," Gendry said cheekily, and Sandor snorted.

"Wasn't too hard to, as I recall," he mimicked. "You're not much of a runner." He turned to Jon. "And you're no archer, either. Nearly took your own man's eye out with that bow."

"Snow's weapon is the sword, it's true," Davos conceded.

Jon felt Bronn studying him.

"Yes, Jaime said he was the best swordsman he'd ever seen," he said quietly.

"He could have easily killed me," Jon disagreed.

"Jaime Lannister's been killing men with swords longer than you've been alive," Bronn countered wryly. "He's never praised anyone's skill with a sword before, besides me at least, so you must be good. I'd like to see for myself."

"Perhaps we can get into some trouble. There's the Town Watch in Mole's Town, there are the bandits hiding out in Queenscrown," Anguy began, looking skyward as he tried to recall all that he'd heard. "Those are the closest to us. Clegane's at Winterfell last I heard; might want to avoid moving south until we know their plans."

"Aye, the bandits that attacked Saan," Davos recalled. "Wasn't necessary to help him; Salladhor can hold his own," he said wryly, and Anguy shrugged, but looked to Jon with a glint in his eye.

"Worth it. Gave me an excuse to meet Mrs. Snow," he said. Jon stilled his features, trying not to let Anguy's heckling rile him up. It was far gentler than anything Daario had ever said, so it wasn't too difficult. "You know what they call us in the Mole's Town paper?" Anguy asked suddenly.

"The Brotherhood without Banners?" Beric asked sardonically.
"No. I mean, they do call us that, but that's because we asked," Anguy dismissed. "They say we're like Robin Hood and his band of merry men." He pulled out the paper he'd been carrying from his pack. It was creased, now, and he passed it first to Gendry, who passed it to Jon without even glancing at it.

"Don't you want to see?" Jon asked, taking the paper. Gendry flushed.

"Can't read," he confessed.

"Why not learn your letters with us, lad?" Davos asked in surprise. Gendry scowled.

"I've tried," he said, digging in the dirt distractedly, "but never could get it right."

"Do the letters get mixed up, or look backwards?" Bronn asked suddenly. Gendry looked at him with wide eyes.

"Aye, how'd you know?"

Bonn shrugged.

"I know someone else like that." He looked to Jon. "Come on, I want to see the swordplay that even Jaime Lannister praised," he said, getting to his feet. "And if I'm going to be one of Robin Hood's merry men, I'll need a bit of practice. It's been months since I last swung my sword," he said, drawing his sword from his belt.

"Now?" Jon asked in surprise.

"Now, yes," Bronn said with a smirk, his sword glinting in the light.

"I wouldn't mind seeing how rusty you've gotten," Beric remarked, earning a scoff from Bronn. Bronn watched Jon Snow, the infamous Targaryen wolf, regard him carefully, his eyes narrowed.

"Taking an awful long time to fetch your sword. Not scared, are you?" Bronn said, to cover up his own nerves.

The boy was no archer, Sandor had been right, but Bronn had seen Jaime's face when he'd talked of his swordsman ship. Glancing warily back at Bronn, Snow got up and retrieved his sword from his own bundle of things. It wasn't a good sword, and it wasn't quite the right weight for him, he could see that much. He watched the Baratheon bastard boy's bright blue eyes following Snow's movements as he unsheathed the sword. He'd learned that the Baratheon bastard had been a smith, for a time, and he was looking at Snow's sword with a smith's critical eyes. He'll need a better sword than that, Bronn thought, but he said nothing as he stepped back away from their camp circle and into a freer area, the leaves crunching under his boots.

"I'm not scared, no, but this makes no sense to me," Snow finally said, approaching him.

"Bonn's jealous, boy. He used to be the only person Lannister ever praised for sword skill," Sandor said. Bronn shot him a look.

"If I'm going to be one of your bloody merry men, I need a bit of practice, is all," Bronn countered. And before Snow had even found his footing, Bronn dove in.

He'd always been fast, and lighter on his feet than Jaime. Snow reacted quickly, blocking his jab. He had a similar style to Jaime—this was a man who had grown up learning to fight, who had been
properly trained from a young age, and who greatly respected the art of swordplay. But he had the same quickness, the same decisiveness of movement. It was an instinct that you couldn't teach. It was a killer's instinct, of knowing when to duck and when to push forward. He was slender, too—that helped with a sword—and in the beginning his movements were fluid and reserved as his grey eyes took in Bronn's habits.

Clang. The first time their swords really crossed, the sound rang out throughout the trees. The force almost pushed Bronn back. The boy had seemed so fluid but the strength of that block showed his footwork had been stronger than he realized.

Bronn moved faster, becoming out of breath. Three months of eating nothing but rabbit hadn't helped his physique much, and he was beginning to feel it as their swords clashed more and more. The boy had youth on his side, but there was no denying that Jaime had not been lying: he was good. Really good.

"Are we done? We're going to wound ourselves accidentally. We should be practicing with wooden —" Snow began, almost irritably, as he ducked a slash of Bronn's sword, but Bronn pressed forward, the clashes coming more rapidly.

He couldn't predict his movements, either. Snow was a bit like him, then, as well—fluid, good at reading his opponent and adjusting to their style. He thought of the rush that Jaime must have felt as their swords had crossed. Jaime had always loved a good challenge. It was such a rarity for him.

Jaime had been right: he was not like Rhaegar, not like his father at all. Rhaegar had been all show, all dramatic flourishes and pretty footwork. He had been good, but he hadn't been deadly. Jon Snow was deadly.

He was urging Snow backward, between two trees, and Snow had resorted to only blocking the blows, not even putting forth any offensive moves. Bronn was beginning to sweat, and it felt good. Gods, it felt good. Fatigued though he was, there was nothing better than a good duel, and all of the fears, all of the frustration, seemed to flow through him and into his sword hand, giving him strength even as he began to weaken.

And then Snow made a mistake: he was backed into a tree, and when he went to raise his sword, Bronn could see what would happen immediately: the weight was wrong, the length was wrong, and therefore the balance wasn't right.

Bronn took the jab, expecting to pin Snow by the fabric of his coat to the tree, but his sword hit the solid wood and the force thrust him backward; Snow hit him with the butt of his sword so hard that Bronn let go, panting in surprise.

He'd tricked him.

Sweating, Bronn looked at Snow, studying him carefully. Snow was barely out of breath, his grey eyes unreadable.

"He is good," he admitted, and he heard the others begin to laugh, but Snow was not laughing. Without taking his eyes off Bronn, he wrenched the sword out of the tree.

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The Mole's Town Jail was connected to the Town Hall and was positioned in the town square, below the Sept. The jail was guarded by one of the Town Watchmen who had dragged Jory off. He was skinny like a young boy, with large ears and bright eyes, and as Sansa approached the
entrance, his gaze fixed on her with interest.

"I've come to pay a visit to one of your prisoners," Sansa explained, holding up the basket full of bread and cheese.

"Can't bring food in, miss," he replied, eying the basket, looking hungry.

"Oh, this isn't for any prisoner. This is for you," she said sweetly, handing him the basket. "To share with your fellow watchmen, of course," she added sternly. "Would I be able to have fifteen minutes with one of the prisoners?"

"Which 'un?" The watchman was already stuffing bread into his mouth, chewing vigorously. Sansa tried not to look too disgusted at the mashed-up food visible in his open mouth.

"His name is Jory, though he might have been too drunk to tell you his proper name," Sansa said, trying to sound angry and disgusted. "He was the fool shouting nonsense on the dais there yesterday morning," she added, gesturing to where Jory had stood.

"Oh, 'im!" The watchman swallowed his food audibly. "I'll take you down there, we're to release him this afternoon."

"Thank you ever so much, sir," Sansa said graciously, and she watched him fiddle with a large, weighty set of keys for the black lacquered door behind him. The heavy door swung open with a creak, revealing crooked stone steps. Narrow windows in the stone let in slats of white light, which seemed blinding as they descended into the darkness.

The cells were all full, to Sansa's surprise. It was mostly men, but a few women, looking weary and scantily-dressed, peered at her through the thin bars. Some men whistled and catcalled as they walked along the corridor, and the watchman ordered them to be quiet, but his voice was hardly compelling, and it had no effect.

At the very end of the corridor was a padlocked, solid door. There was only one tiny opening in the door, at eye-level.

"He's not in there, is he?" Sansa blurted out in horror, and the watchman laughed.

"Oh, no, that cell's for the ones that hang," he chuckled as Sansa suppressed a shiver of fear. "He's in here. Jory, is it?"

Jory was in a cell at the very end. The place smelled of vomit and worse, and he was curled up in the corner on some hay. "I'll wait here, miss. Don't want to leave a pretty lady alone with these ones," the watchman said, but Sansa flashed him her most brilliant smile—though it was so dark she wasn't entirely sure he could even see it.

"Oh, but you can't leave your post," she reasoned. "Guarding the jail is the most important job—surely Mr. Thorne has entrusted it to you for a reason."

"Aye, he has, I'm the cleverest, but—"

"—And I would never want to divert you from your job," Sansa said warmly, and for good measure, she placed her hand on his arm. "I'll only be a few moments, and if I get any trouble, I'll just call for you. What was your name?"

"P-Pypar," he stammered. She would have bet her Targaryen clasp that he was blushing. "Just Pypar, miss."
"Pypar. I'll remember that. A handsome name," she told him.

"T-thank you, miss, I'll just—" he coughed, clearing his throat. "Scuse me. It's not every day I get to escort a lovely woman down here. Not that you're being put in jail, or that you should be," he added hastily. "Um, right, I'll just leave now."

He left, and Sansa waited until his black cloak had disappeared up the steps before turning back to Jory.

"Jory," she said softly. "It's me. Alayne Stone. You used to work for my father, remember?" she said carefully, enunciating each word. The figure in the darkness shifted forward and coughed, before shakily getting to his feet and coming to the iron bars.

"Alayne," he breathed.

He looked even worse than he had yesterday on the dais. His hair was filthy, his coat stained, and he looked grey as stone. He seemed ill, more ill than a few square meals and good sleep could cure, and he gripped the bars, his gaze roving over her hungrily. "Aye, it is you." And his eyes grew wet, to her shock.

Once upon a time she would have never believed Jory even could cry. He had been the strongest and most handsome of the clansmen, his lips always twisted into a wry grin, his eyes twinkling with some joke. He had once joked with her sister, had teased her brothers, had wrestled with other clansmen, had been caught many times during Gatherings in the corners of Winterfell, taking this maiden or that maiden's chastity. He had seemed invincible. "You look like your mother, but more beautiful," he said sadly, "though she'd've killed me to say it." And they laughed together, a laugh full of so much unexpressed agony.

He reached a grimy hand through the bars, and Sansa could only take it, and lace her fingers through his. He gripped her hand tight, clenching his teeth.

"It is just me left," she told him, and he nodded mutely; he could not bring himself to speak. "And my cousin," she added. The words could not be damning, they were so vague, and yet they could not be too careful. "You remember him."

"Aye, a sad boy," he finally said. "But a hell of a fighter, and kind, too."

"Yes," she breathed, and now her own eyes were wet. "So much time has passed," she whispered. Jory's grip only tightened.

"I saw you in the streets before, sweet girl, and thought I was seeing ghosts," he admitted miserably, his voice so quiet she had to lean closer to hear. "I see your brother in my dreams, even now."

She had so many questions. But now was not the time. She heard footsteps on the stone steps, and her heart began to race.

"I have a dress shop. It's attached to the Bear and Maiden bakery," she told him in an urgent whisper. "Come visit me, and I will help you."

"You're too good," he said sadly. "You're just like your father, you love too much. Aye, it is the curse of your whole family."

"Miss Stone," Thorne's voice came from the end of the corridor. Sansa looked back to Jory, breathless.
She didn't know why she said it.

It was so stupid.

She should have just waited.

"Did my brother marry?" she whispered, even as Thorne's footsteps came closer.

Jory nodded, once.

The blood rushed from Sansa's head and she stepped back in a near-swoon of shock, and felt an iron grip on her shoulder, precisely where Jaime had gripped her just that morning.

"Yet again I find you in places you shouldn't be, Miss Stone." Thorne righted her, and Sansa stepped out of his grip, her skin crawling. His thumb had been far too close to her breast, and it made her sicker than the smell of the prison did.

"It is well within my rights to visit a friend when he has been imprisoned," she said coolly, straightening her shawl self-consciously under his beady, probing gaze.

"This friend of yours has been caught distributing anti-Loyalist propaganda and is a known, vocal supporter of the Brotherhood without Banners," Thorne said, turning to Jory, who was gripping the bars of his cell so tightly that his knuckles were bleached. The look of fury in his eyes made her think of her father's execution once more, and then of the pamphlet, folded into her purse.

...Become wolves once more...

"Distributing propaganda? Most of Mole's Town cannot read, Mr. Thorne," Sansa pointed out. "He may as well be distributing books in High Valyrian; no one will know what they say."

"And yet some of them will," Thorne countered, turning back to her. He nodded to the cell behind her. "Do you see that cell, Miss Stone?"

"No, I do not. It's a bit dark," Sansa bit out, and in the corner of her eye she saw Jory reel with horror at her tone, shaking his head. Thorne's eyes glittered as he stepped closer.

"Allow me to show you," he said, and he pushed past her, his arm grazing her breast, to open the cell with a key from his belt. With a heavy, ominous clank, the door unlocked and swung open.

It was the grimmest cell of all. A hole in the ceiling let in the elements. There was no hay, no beds, no benches. Merely stone and sky. Thorne gestured for her to enter, and, holding her chin high, Sansa walked into the cell. She heard the click of his boots on the wet stone, and then the clank of the door, shutting them in together.

"I have seen the cell. May I leave?" she asked acidly, turning to face him. Thorne stepped closer, his gaze hungry.

"Look closely, Miss Stone. If your friend Jory continues to distribute propaganda, and continues to support the Brotherhood without Banners, this is one stop on his way to his fate." Thorne's eyes glittered, his voice silky. "Do you know why we have this cell?"

Sansa swallowed, never taking her eyes from his.

"It's for the ones that hang."

His thin, patrician lips curved slightly.
"Aye, it is. Have you ever seen a man hang, Miss Stone?"

"No." She thought of her father's head rolling in the dirt and felt weak, felt like dropping to the ground and sobbing.

"We have a particular ritual for the men we hang, in Mole's Town. We whip them first. They usually beg for death, and quickly, too."

...Become wolves once more...

"King Joffrey must be terribly impressed by your ...imagination," she said softly. His eyes flashed, and his gloved hand twitched at his belt. He worked his jaw, staring at her.

"I have received praise from the Crown, yes," he admitted stiffly. "We have hanged rebels and so-called revolutionists before, Miss Stone, and we will do it again."

"One hopes you won't run out of townspeople," she said. "I would like to leave." She made to push past him, but in a flash of movement, he had gripped her once more, tearing her shawl from her and pushing her against the wall. His breath was stale and she let out a cry of horror, frantically pushing at his chest, but he gripped her wrists in a painful, bruising grip.

"Who was your brother, Miss Stone? The one who married."

"W-what?!" she gasped, attempting to writhe away from him. "Get off me, sir—"

"—and why do you know a man who has only ever worked for the Stark clan?" he asked in a deadly whisper, his breath hot on her neck.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about! Do not touch me, sir—"

"Mr. Thorne?"

The door had creaked open, and Pypar appeared, holding the empty breadbasket, his eyes wide. "I-I heard a struggle—" he stammered, backing out of the cell, and Thorne released her.

Shaking, Sansa bent down to pick up her torn shawl, and avoided both Thorne and Pypar's eyes.

"I would like to leave," she said once more, holding her chin high. She did not look at Jory's cell as she passed, but heard his strangled yell at Thorne as he cursed him, cursed him in such a thick Northern accent, with words that only a clansman would have known. Sansa, for her part, blushed, and thought it best that Thorne did not know what Jory had called him. Had he known, Jory's neck would be in the noose within moments.

The sunlight was jarring after the darkness. Sansa wrapped her torn shawl around herself, blinking to adjust to the bright sun as the wild wind whipped at her hair and dress, and ducked into an alley nearby and crumpled against the wall, clapping a hand to her mouth.

The pale, washed sunlight seemed to highlight the grime that the redcoats' tents, breeches, and horses had acquired after being on the march so long. Dickon looked out from the hunter's gate at their encampment, watching the canvas tents billow and puff in the high winds.

He could have summoned Clegane to the Great Hall again, and it was likely what he ought to have done, but when Dickon awoke that morning he had had a strange thought: that he should not let Ramsay be a part of this negotiation. And so it was Theon Greyjoy, whom he did not respect but
still thought was highly clever, who accompanied him to Clegane's tent. They'd had to sneak past the Bolton clansman, who had still been asleep after drinking all night with some of the redcoats.

They walked the long passage between the two neat lines of tents. Most of the men had been drinking all night and so the encampment was quiet. At the center was a larger tent, taller than the rest, and bearing the Crown's seal. A redcoat was stationed out front, looking like he'd much prefer to be asleep in his own tent, his face cast a little green. Another drunken fool, Dickon reflected.

"We're here to speak with General Clegane," Theon said, looking like he was privately amused by some joke. The redcoat looked uneasy at Theon's smile.

"Here?"

"Here. Now." Dickon moved to push past the redcoat, but the redcoat panicked and flung himself in Dickon's path.

"N-no, Lord Tarly. Let me wake the general myself."

The redcoat took a moment to gird himself before going in. A few moments later, he poked his head out of the tent, looking especially pale. "The general will see you now."

The inside of the tent was lavish, with red silk draped everywhere, everything trimmed in gold. General Clegane was shirtless, facing away from them, standing over a basin. The sheer size of his back was jarring; his shoulders seemed simply too broad to be possible, and without the clutter of the scarlet uniform, his size was even more obvious. He turned, slowly, his brutal face still dripping with water.

"Lord Tarly," he greeted, his flinty gaze resting on Theon. "Where is the Bolton boy?"

"Asleep, passed out, it doesn't matter," Dickon replied. "I've come to give you my word: I will help you however I can—"

"—General—" Another redcoat came in, bearing an opened raven's scroll, but halted abruptly, his eyes flicking to Dickon and Theon. "—Excuse me, Lord Tarly," he said, offering a bow as he backed out of the tent. "General, when you have a moment, I've received word from Lord Baelish..."

"A moment," Clegane told the redcoat, and they were left together in the tent once more. He looked at Theon and Dickon appraisingly, then went to a large chest where he retrieved a shirt.

"We ride north tomorrow at dawn. There is an outpost that has been known to provide food and shelter to the Brotherhood without Banners."

"We will be ready."

It had been rather anticlimactic, Dickon thought as they left the tent. Theon was uncharacteristically quiet, and he kept glancing back at the redcoat with the raven's scroll, even long after the man had disappeared inside Clegane's tent, as they walked back to Winterfell's hunter's gate.

Sansa had walked back to the house in a daze.

Robb had been married.

He had barely been a man grown, and yet, at some point, he had married.
Why had no one told her?

Whom had he married? Why had he married? It could not have been more than a year prior to his execution. When had he had the time? Why would he have done it?

All afternoon, she was tormented by questions, and by waiting for Jory to show up, but dusk came and went, and there was no sign of him. Eventually she gave up staring at the street from her office window, and retired to her room. She numbly undressed before her mirror. There were bruises on her wrists and arm from Thorne, and she was as pale as ivory.

She had some herbs from Gilly that were intended for deeper sleep, and she chewed the bitter leaves now. She did not want to think, she did not want to dream. Images of her own wedding kept coming back to her. Had Robb been married in a Sept? Had he bound his hand to another's? Had mother and father known about it? And where was this woman now? Probably dead, Sansa thought dully, as her eyelids grew too heavy. *I wish Jon were here,* she thought distantly. *He's the only one left who could know how I feel.*

In sleep, she dreamt of her wedding.

She awoke hours later, slow and thick with sleepiness, her wits dulled and her mouth dry, and that same dull ache between her legs that had been building for weeks now, that ache that she felt every time she woke up. She shifted, trying to lessen the throbbing. It was halfway between an ache and an itch.

The room was too warm. She got up, stumbling a bit, still dizzy from the sleeping herbs, and opened the window to let in some icy air, the wind blowing into the room and toying with the hem of her shift. As she walked, she felt dampness between her legs, and for a moment thought she had gotten her moon's blood, but when she lifted the hem of her shift, it was not moon's blood.

She lay back on her mattress, the ache worsening. When she rubbed her legs together, it helped a bit, but she could feel the thin scar on her thigh when she did that, and it made it all the worse as she remembered Jon's fingers there, holding her as he pressed the blade into her skin so gently.

It did not matter. She couldn't sleep anymore. She tossed and turned, her skin too warm and her body aching in places that had never been touched, but her head and her heart were a mess of fear and grief, too, and all she wanted was Jon. She wanted his lips on her skin, she wanted his arms around her, she wanted his voice in her ear. She wanted him to touch her, she wanted him to comfort her.

But she'd never feel his touch or hear his voice ever again. He might as well be dead, like everyone else she had ever loved. Perhaps he was dead.

What was she surviving for?

She thought of her brother's eyes before he had been executed, thought of the faceless woman he had married and, presumably, loved. She thought of Jory in the cell, a mere ghost of what he'd once been. She thought of Gilly hiding pamphlets, of Sam's bright eyes over the printing press.

Sansa got out of bed and went to her dress, where the White Stag's pamphlet was still crumpled in the purse sewn into her skirts. She smoothed it out on her writing desk, and read it once more.

*...Become wolves once more...*
They were going north in the morning, toward Queenscrown. Jon should have been sleeping, but Tormund's snores were keeping him awake. At least, that was what he told himself. It had nothing to do with the fact that Queenscrown was farther from Mole's Town, which mean he would no longer be so near to Sansa.

He had sworn to himself that he would give her up, that he wouldn't think of her, but his traitorous mind was torturing him. *She's made an enemy of the Town Watch commander,* Anguy had said. *She's got some dangerous friends,* Anguy had said.

Why couldn't she simply have a normal, safe life, as he had intended for her? Wasn't that what she had wanted, too? He'd given her the choice between a life of trouble with him or a life of peace without him, and she had seemingly chosen a life of peace without him. Yet here she was, causing trouble anyway.

It wasn't trouble that she did not want, clearly. It was him that she did not want.

And yet...had he imagined the flush on her cheeks as he had leaned forward to kiss her? Had he imagined how she had twined her legs around his hips—

*No. Do not think of it.*

The damned tent was too warm. It was the heat doing this to him. Furiously, Jon climbed out of the tent. The night air was icy but it was not enough. His blood was on fire. He snatched up his bow and arrows, and stalked into the woods, away from the tents, and blindly shot the arrows at each tree surrounding him, rapid-fire, until there were none left.

Her body had been so soft against his, each night that they had lay together as they had traveled through the Barrowlands. He had often wildly thought that perhaps they could have simply made a life in the Barrowlands, and never continued on to Torrhen's Square. He knew it was folly but he thought it all the same, in moments like this. And when he had pressed his lips to hers...

He ripped the arrows out from the trees, but he was not tired enough yet, and he stalked back to camp, and took up the axe that they used for chopping firewood. Tomorrow they would leave for Queenscrown and Sansa would be even further away. He kept thinking the thought anew, feeling the pain all over again, so he hacked into trees, pointlessly, over and over again, willing the thought to burn away, willing the grief to die out. *I am a fool, I am a fool, I am a fool.* He had already known he would never see her again; he had already decided it, so why did he feel this agony? He swung the axe harder, until he was dripping with sweat and gasping, his breath clouding in the air. At last he dropped to the ground, exhausted, yet more filled with grief than he'd been when he started.

*No flame can burn forever,* he told himself, as he always did. But when would it finally die out; when would this flame stop burning him?
They rose early, just before dawn. Jon had slept poorly, and when he woke it was hard to breathe, and he was irritable and terse as they packed up their camp.

"How far til Queenscrown?" Bronn asked as they saddled their horses in the purple dawn.

"We'll be riding a few hours, most like. Might as well stop by Mance," Beric replied, swinging onto his own horse. "It's on the way, and might be good to leave the horses there before we continue onto Queenscrown."

"Aye, that's why you want to stop there," Tormund sniggered. "S'got nothing to do with the pretty blonde maid." Tormund winked at Jon. "She'll be happy to see you, crow. Mayhap this time you won't leave her so lonely."

Tormund had taken to calling Jon 'crow' when he was feeling particularly cheeky, in reference to Jon's dark hair and his supposedly "sulky" demeanor. Jon insisted he was merely solitary; Tormund and the others called it sulky.

The last time they had stayed at Bael and the Blue Rose Inn, Jon had been followed and tormented by one of the barmaids who worked there, a stunning woman with honey-blonde ringlets and a sharp tongue named Val. She had defeated Beric, Anguy, and Davos in an arm-wrestling contest, after they had all had nearly their weight in ale, including her, and afterward, as cool as could be, she had sat on Jon's lap when he wasn't paying attention. It had surprised him so much that he'd fallen backwards off the bench with her, and the comments that had been made—by both the Brotherhood and by Val—on the incident were unrepeatable. Since then, Jon had endured regular teasing on the matter, and as a result had gone out of his way to avoid any mention of ale, women, blondes, and arm-wrestling. Unfortunately, these were among everyone else's chief interests.

"Ah, leave him alone; he's a married man," Bronn shot back as they set off, and everyone laughed. Bronn had picked up on Jon's marriage almost immediately and, like everyone else, had also begun teasing him about it almost immediately. Jon could not make his face form the right expression; the harmless joke was a punch to the gut, leaving him breathless with pain as they began to ride away from Mole's Town. Every strike of the horse's hoof in the dirt was another pang.

*I deserve this pain*, he told himself. *I took her home away. I do not have the right to long for her. Enough, enough. Let her go.*

"I did ask if you wanted to go to Mole's Town," Gendry reminded him in a low voice, angling to ride alongside him. They rode behind the others a bit.

"And I said I didn't," Jon said shortly.
"Aye, you said you didn't," Gendry conceded.

"I meant it," Jon insisted. Up ahead, Tormund was telling an extremely vivid tale of an encounter with one of the barmaids at Bael and the Blue Rose Inn, earning raucous laughter from Bronn and Anguy, and reluctant smiles from Beric and Davos. Sandor rode behind, looking half-asleep. 

"Then stop looking back at Mole's Town," Gendry said. "Or else just bloody go to Mole's Town, if that's what you want to do."

"I can't go." Even to Gendry Jon could not explain, he could not utter the words. "I shouldn't go," he clarified. "It wouldn't be right."

He had joined the Brotherhood because he wanted to make up for the wrongs he had committed in his life. He kept waiting for his good deeds to lessen the shame and lighten the guilt, but they hadn't yet. He was beginning to think perhaps he could not make up for his wrongs—they were too great and too many—so he had to make sure he didn't commit any more wrongs. And, without a doubt, to see Sansa again—when she had so clearly chosen a life without him—would be a wrong. He had ruined her chance at a happy married life in her childhood home. Even marrying her to save her from returning to King's Landing could not undo that fact. Nothing could undo that fact. Destruction could not be undone. Once burned, life did not return.

This was the price: for the years he had lay with Dany, for the lives he had taken with Dany, for the life he had been given by Dany, he would not pursue Sansa, would not act upon the longing in his heart.

"If it isn't right," Gendry said, looking doubtful, "then don't do it. But then, if that's the way, then really don't do it. Choose not to do it, and move on. You're a free man now, you can make your own choices. You're not being trapped."

"I was a free man before," Jon said. "Dany freed me."

"I reckon she believes she did," Gendry replied. "But iron's not the only thing that chains a man." Jon's mouth went dry, and he looked ahead.

"She let me go when I wanted to go."

"Or, perhaps you only were able to leave when you no longer feared death," Gendry shot back. "It's not freedom if there is nothing left to be taken from you."

"I've never heard you so certain on a matter," Jon remarked.

"I know what freedom is, because I spent most of my life without it," Gendry said stubbornly. "It might be the only thing I'm certain of." He paused, and Jon felt the silence grow taut. "If you wanted to turn around now and ride back to Mole's Town and live the rest of your life with your wife, do you think any of us would stop you? Would you even feel the slightest concern that one of us might not allow it? Be honest."

"No," Jon said immediately, feeling sick.

"And when you finally left Daenerys, did you feel there was any risk? Did you ever think she might come after you, that she might not allow it?"

Jon didn't answer. He remembered the moment he'd turned away from Dany, how he'd heard footsteps and had braced himself for attack, how she'd screamed for someone to stop him. "Would you have still risked it if you didn't know your wife was safe?" Gendry pressed. "You didn't leave
Daenerys until *after* you had ensured your wife was safely away from her, did you? That's no coincidence."

Jon opened his mouth to argue, but he couldn't find the words. He didn't know when he had decided to leave Daenerys. There hadn't been just one single point where he had made the decision. It had been an awareness, a choice he had made many times over in pieces, stone by stone.

"Dany wasn't—" he began helplessly. "—She would *never* have harmed Sansa, not intentionally." A bold lie; they all had harmed Sansa together. "She wasn't a bad person. And I had taken a vow to always be by her side. You can't just break a vow lightly. Vows mean something."

"Aye, and Beric's never asked you to make any vows, has he? I wonder why."

They were silent for a long time as the sun rose higher in the sky and the day grew warmer. The highlands stretched around them, rolling and tangled and trembling in the winds, but Jon took in none of it. He had the feeling of at last facing an enemy, a terrible snarling beast, that he had been running from for years. Lips on his skin, hands fist ed in his hair, pushing him down... He had told himself for years that he could have said no, but he'd also told himself for years that he had owed to Dany whatever she wanted to take from him. Was that really freedom? Had he ever really had a choice?

Where was the truth? Any interpretation was ugly and shameful. Was he a man who had wanted the sister of his father, or was he a man who had allowed someone to use his body? There was a word for it, lingering at the edge of his consciousness. It seemed impossible, that such a word could be used about him. If his body had responded to Dany's touch, even on that first night when she had come to his tent, so many years ago, then it could not possibly be said that she had forced him...had he not lay back down, had he not submitted to her? What had made him submit to her?

It had been awe and confusion...but most of all, he had submitted to Dany's first advance knowing that he owed something to her.

Had Sansa only kissed him because she felt she owed him?

It had not felt like it. It had felt as though her body was blooming just for him, and him alone, in that searing, perfect moment that she had kissed him back. But he'd kissed Dany back, too, that first night. He had felt her need and felt it was the thing he should do, and then his body responded to her touches, and he had not known what else to do. And it had happened again, and again, until he could no longer draw a line to mark where he ended and where Daenerys began; to mark where love ended and fear began.

What if he and Sansa hadn't been interrupted by Dickon? Would they have consummated the marriage in earnest, and if so, would it have been Sansa's payment to him for the safety he had offered her? The thought was unbearable, that Sansa might have felt about him as he had felt about Dany. He had loved Dany, still loved Dany, but it was a twisted, thorned love; it was not the love that Eddard Stark would have wished for his daughter to feel about her husband. It was not the love that Jon wished for anyone to have for him. He would rather be alone and unloved than be loved like that.

To owe someone was to be chained, and Sansa had been chained all of her life.

He would not go near her. He would not damage her further. He would not force her, in any way, ever. In marrying her he had wanted to free her, and in sending her to Mole's Town he had wanted to free her. To go back, to see her, to touch her, would be to take that away from her. It would undo perhaps the only good thing he had ever done in his life. It would be to cut down the only tree he
had ever planted.

This had to be his last goodbye.

They were coming to the edge of the Gift, and were far from Mole's Town, now.

It was time to stop thinking of Sansa.

If that flame never stopped burning, then he deserved to be scalded by it. Better to be burned by love than to burn for it; better to plant a tree and walk away than plant a tree and cut it down. He would not be to Sansa as Dany had been to him. He had left Dany to become a man of honor, and now he would be honorable. But honor was painful; honor tasted like defeat and loss and loneliness. Honor was a thin, young sapling against the burning need that consumed him. Honor was a pain in his chest that made it hard to breathe. What was honor to soft lips against his?

He reminded himself of the shy girl twisting reeds into a fishing net, of the sad girl building Winterfell out of snow, of the sweet girl who had danced among enemies with flowers in her hair, and the pain grew sweeter.

He owed her, if anything. She had reminded him of who he wanted to be. She had shed light on the path that he'd thought he had lost. She had reminded him that it was better to plant trees than to burn them down.

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The party was thick and noisy around her; Sansa had forgotten how overheated halls could quickly become during a dance. The red silk was heavy and damp on her skin. She had been dancing. The mask of lace was limp with sweat, and she happily accepted a cup of cold wine from some stranger, drinking it greedily. When she set the emptied cup down, she looked around for a less-crowded place, for she felt smothered by the dancers around her.

And in the corner of her vision she saw dark hair and a pretty mouth, and her heart leapt into her throat. He falsed through the room, appearing in flashes here and there between dancers, and Sansa blindly ran after him. Jon, Jon, Jon. She just needed to get to him, just needed to touch him, or she might die. Her head spun as she pushed through the crowd, calling his name, but her voice was hoarse and feeble, and no match for the laughing dancers and chuckling fiddles and the thump-thump-thump of the dancers' shoes on the wooden floor. Jon, Jon, Jon. The music was so merry but she had never been so sad, so desperate.

The room seemed never-ending; it seemed she had been pushing between the dancers for all of her life, with that slender dark-haired man in the mask and Stark tartan just out of her reach. She thought she might die if she did not find him.

He stopped, at long last. Jon, Jon, Jon. The room melted away as he turned to face her. She would know those lips, those eyes, anywhere. It did not matter that he wore a mask. He was the loveliest man she had ever seen, the man that made all other men pale in comparison. Jon, Jon, Jon. "Please," he said sadly, and she stepped toward him, blooming for him like a flower, but he pulled off his mask, so sadly, and then, suddenly, there were dead bodies at his feet, and he was holding a sword covered in blood.

Sansa woke with a gasp in her silent room. The window was open and the cold, fresh wind had scattered papers all over her floor. The dream was melting away, but her body burned and vague thoughts of Jon lingered like perfume. The drawing of the white stag caught her eye, and, her jaw set, she got out of bed.
Men, she reflected as she dressed, were so lucky. They could simply go to a brothel and sate their physical desires, and of course, this had to be a physical desire, and nothing more. Her body ached so her mind conjured up nonsense to match it. Alayne Stone did not want Jon Snow. Alayne Stone did not even know he existed.

But something else bothered her about the dream, and she couldn't discern what it was until she had dressed, all in plain grey, and walked into her office. She spotted the red silk—which she had been wearing in her dream—and recalled, distantly, a fragment of an image: Jon holding a bloodied sword with dead men at his feet.

For a long moment she stared at the red silk, remembering the red silk of her wedding cloak sensuous against her bare shoulders, remembering the blood on the dirk the night Jon had taken her. He hadn't just killed in her dream; he had killed in reality. She had seen him kill. He might even be killing a man this very moment, in honor of Daenerys' cause.

A sudden, explosive rush of anger possessed her: Sansa furiously tore the red silk from the shelf on the wall, and picked up her scissors, with a mind to hack up the red silk forever, but the door opened and she froze.

"Just wanted to thank you for not waking me at odd hours of the morning with your shrieking—oh." Jaime was standing in the doorway, soaked in sweat and holding the wooden sword that he practiced with against Brienne occasionally. His leonine eyes flicked to the red silk in her hands, then to the scissors, and then to her flushed face.

"A-aren't you supposed to be working?" Sansa stammered, clearing her throat and gingerly setting aside the red silk. Jaime regarded her rather warily, like she was a feral cat that might attack him.

"Can't. The new salt tax," he explained slowly, eyes trained on the scissors. Sansa set them aside, embarrassed.

He looked good even soaked in sweat. Maybe especially soaked in sweat. His shirt hung open slightly, chest slick and gleaming, and his hair was mussed, his stubble golden. One or two steps and she could fling herself at him. She'd flung herself at him before; what if she did it again? She was no longer a child. Had that not been his protest the last time? That she was too young, young enough to be his child, and too drunk, and too sad? Well, she was not young anymore, and she was not drunk right now.

Perhaps this was her descent into madness. She'd heard of women diagnosed with madness called hysteria; it was some sort of defect due to the uterus, she had heard, but this felt like no defect. It felt primal, natural. It felt as though to not be touched was the defect.

"Salt tax?" she finally asked, when the moment of madness had passed. She felt empty and cold and ashamed, and Jaime was looking at her like she'd lost her mind. But a new panic took hold as she fully understood his words.

"Yes, levied yesterday," Jaime replied, his eyes flashing. "I suppose every few decades we must endure this lesson anew," he snarked. "What exactly are you doing?" He nodded to the red silk, now crumpled on her sewing table, and Sansa sighed.

"Mr. Saan gave me the red silk for free," she admitted. "To make myself a dress for the ball coming up. But I look terrible in red, and there's no reason for me to go to a ball, so I was trying to think of how else I might make use of it."

"Yes, it certainly seemed you were merely contemplating dress designs," Jaime said sardonically.
"I'll leave you to your ...violent designs."

She was standing alone again, utterly ashamed. She folded the red silk—it would be a terrible waste to hack it up, and an insult too; none of this was Mr. Saan's fault—and went about tidying up her space. She felt silly, unbearably ridiculous and absurd, and the folded red silk seemed to taunt her. She even opened a window, but the room seemed airless even so. Everything clamored for attention: Jon would never touch her. Jory had not come by yet. Her brother had married. Jaime's slick skin and pretty teeth might drive her fully to madness.

She had to get out. She took her shawl and left, under the guise of visiting Mr. Flowers and Gilly. The White Stag's essay was folded inside her pocket once more. No more thinking of Jon, she told herself, keeping her gaze from straying to the snowdrop-covered paddock. How many times would she make this promise to herself?

As many times as I must, she decided, walking quicker away from the paddock. She saw the Sept looming over the town square as she approached Sam's printshop, but averted her gaze from that, too. Once upon a time, prayer might have soothed her raw, burning soul; but she was not sure she would ever be able to bring herself to set foot inside a Sept ever again. It made her think of Jon. Every damned thing seemed to make her think of Jon.

It was worse than it'd ever been. Perhaps it was the warming weather; sunshine and heat always seemed to send people into a heady, lust-driven frenzy. It was the only explanation for why King's Landing was so filled with sin. It had made her skin crawl when she had lived there, but lately there was something of that heat within her, too.

"Miss Stone," Sam greeted, beaming, when she stepped inside his shop. He was at his desk, scratching away at accounts, a little abacus set aside. Olly was nowhere to be found. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"You owe it to this." Sansa took out the crumpled, folded parchment, and set it down before Sam. His brown eyes widened. "I got it from Gilly at the market the other day. I think I've read it near a hundred times over." She watched his face carefully. "Who is the White Stag?"

Sam's eyes danced.

"No one knows," he said with relish, getting to his feet and drawing her to the back of the shop. "I periodically receive his writings from a man near Queenscrown." He opened the door at the back and showed her inside.

There was a little windowless back room, where Gilly worked. Dried herbs and flowers hung from the ceiling, and one wall was covered in shelves of little bottles. The room had a spicy, mysterious scent that was almost overwhelming, and when Sam shut the door behind them, it was near enough to make her faint.

"Miss Stone," Gilly said, looking up from where she was grinding herbs with a pestle. Their son, little Sam, was in the corner, dutifully stripping the leaves from some plant.

"You didn't tell me you gave her the White Stag's essay, my love," Sam said as he went to a cabinet. Behind a large crate of empty glass phials, he drew another carton, filled with pamphlets. "Look, here's all the other ones he's written," Sam explained, and Sansa knelt by the carton. It was filled with thin pamphlets, dating from three years back at the oldest.

"How d'you know it's a he?" Gilly teased. Sam scoffed.
"Gilly, my love, it's a matter of numbers. How many women can read and write, compared to all the men that can?"

"I can read and write," Sansa countered slyly. Sam arched his brows at her.

"Are you the White Stag, Miss Stone?"

"Maybe I am," Sansa said. Gilly was laughing. "You can't prove I'm not."

"I suppose I can't," Sam conceded. "But I'll have you know I strongly doubt you're the White Stag."

"Does the White Stag know you're distributing his essays?" Sansa asked, peering curiously at one of the pamphlets.

"I suppose. I agreed to print them, after all."

"But why?" Sansa pressed. Sam's chin wobbled again, his eyes growing bright, and Gilly wordlessly passed him a handkerchief.

"Because it matters, Miss Stone! The Crown only grows more tyrannical--"

"—Yes, with the latest levy on salt—"

"Yes, exactly," Sam continued passionately, "and everyone knows that swords don't change laws—quills do."

"Swords help," Gilly pointed out, but Sam ignored her.

"But where does it all go? What's the point of it all?" Sansa ran a fingertip over one of the drawings of the stag. *Find the white stag before the young wolf has grown..."

"It's not just pamphlets. There's a hunger for change—"

"—Leave her out of it," Gilly interrupted suddenly. "It's too dangerous."

"Leave me out of what?" Sansa asked dryly. "You can't not say it, now."

Sam hesitated, looking to Gilly, who was looking increasingly angry.

"There is an underground group, Miss Stone," he began, in a voice so quiet that it would have been lost outside. A pin dropping could have been heard. "And every week we meet, and make plans."

"Is Jory Cassel part of the group?" Sansa asked suddenly, and Sam's eyes widened.

"There is a Jory, yes, but his last name's not Cassel. But I always thought that he was faking his name. He always seems to forget it," Sam realized eagerly. "Well, anyway, we meet each week. The man who works in your bakery, Mr. Payne, he comes, too."

"Podrick?" Sansa asked in shock.

"Yes, he was one of the first to join!" Sam said, nodding vigorously. "Jory started it. We call ourselves the Direwolves, in honor of the Starks, the last northerners to stand up to the Crown. You'll know that from the history you're writing, Miss Stone."

"Yes," Sansa said faintly, feeling weak.
"Our symbol is the red wolf, for the Stark daughter who was raped by General Lannister," Sam continued. "She's still missing, and they say the Targaryen wolf ran off with her, only he can't've, because he was spotted with the Brotherhood without Banners," Sam continued in a near-gleeful rush, his eyes shining.

"He what?" She felt Gilly's eyes on her.

"Yes, the rumor is that he's run from the Beggar Princess and has now joined the Brotherhood! So he can't have the Stark girl. No one knows where she is. But anyway, her symbol is the red wolf, so we decided to adopt it, in honor of her."

It was too much.

Sansa sat back on her heels, feeling dizzy. Sam was oblivious to her distress, but Gilly's dark eyes saw everything. She cleared her throat, even as a flare of rage, so hot and destructive that it could have been lust, was rising within her.

He wasn't even with Daenerys.

He'd left too. He'd sent her away, under the guise of wanting to protect her from the dangers surrounding Daenerys, and then he'd left Daenerys anyway.

"Wh-where does this group meet?" she stammered, her face and neck growing too hot.

"Beneath the first floor of the Laughing Tree Pub," Sam replied. "We're meeting tonight, as a matter of fact. At midnight. You should join us! If you like what the White Stag's got to say, you'll love the Direwolves!"

"...I might," she hedged.

"You will?" Sam gasped. He took her hands in his pudgy ones. "See, Gilly, the pamphlets do work! Miss Stone only read one and she's convinced!"

"Yes. I'm sure it was the White Stag's doing," Gilly said doubtfully, and Sansa avoided her eyes.

"I might. It's dangerous," she said doubtfully, thinking of Jory in the cell. She thought of that other cell—for the ones that hang.

"Aye, of course it is, and I would never want to force you into joining, Miss Stone," Sam said hastily, at the look Gilly cast him.

Sansa left the printshop in a daze. She was afraid to look for Jory, afraid that by visiting the jail looking for him she would be damning him—and herself—further. But beyond that, she was filled with the most curious anger and pain. It was so burning hot that it was frosty. She felt like her skin was slowly turning to ice over fire.

Jon had barely given her a choice when he'd told her to go. He'd offered that she could either stay with him—and therefore with Daenerys—or she could start a new life, on her own. He had not made it seem like he had any plans to leave Daenerys, but clearly he had.

All this time she had daydreamed of what might have happened had they not been interrupted in the bedroom after their wedding. She had even felt his desire against her as they had kissed. And yet, he had so clearly cast her aside. She had been so foolish. He had not wanted her.

And why should she have ever wanted him, she thought, her hands shaking with anger. He had
stolen her one chance at growing old in her childhood home. She would never see Winterfell again, and that was his fault. She might've had a happy but empty life with Dickon Tarly, in Winterfell. They would have had children and she would have thrown her life into raising their children. Dickon might have even loved her, and she could have grown to love him.

_But Petry bought you from the Tarlys, remember?_

When had Petry bought her? Had Dickon always known he wouldn't be marrying her? Had she been a fool all along?

No one wanted her. It was like she was cursed. She had tried so hard to accept her life each time its shape had changed. She had tried to make the best of King's Landing, going even as far as to utterly humiliate herself by throwing herself at Jaime, begging him to marry her. Then when Dickon had become her betrothed, she had fantasized about making Winterfell her own again. And then, with Jon—

—it was too painful. That had been her greatest foolishness of all. She had wanted him, wanted him in the way that foolish girls wanted handsome men, wanted him in the way that all the cautionary tales had warned her about. And why? He had ruined everything for her, and then cast her aside so easily.

_But he gave you the gold... he wanted you to start a new life, a life of your choosing._

Everything within her was at war. She wished someone could simply tell her how to feel. As she passed by the paddock, she saw the snowdrops, and had she a flame she would have burned the whole field.

_Bael and the Blue Rose Inn was set at a crossroads off the kingsroad, surrounded by trees so covered in lichen that everything was blurred sea-green around the inn. It was set atop a small hill, the structure whitewashed, with stables behind it, a few horses grazing on the hillside. A sign swung over its door with a faded blue rose and a lute. Even as they approached, Jon could see Val returning from the well, her honey-golden locks gleaming in the late morning sunlight, falling to her lithe waist, and he flushed as he felt the other men look back at him._

"Caw caw," Tormund called under his breath, and everyone was chuckling. "They ought to change the song to the _Crow and the Maiden Fair._"

"The maiden fair with honey in her hair, the crow smelled the scent on the summer air, he sniffed and cawed and flew from there. Oh, I'm a crow, I'll never dance with a maiden fair," Anguy sang, between breathless laughter, but halted abruptly as Val came within earshot. The morning was cold but her feet, small and pretty, were bare. Her shawl had come loose, revealing quite a lot of her pale, heaving breast. Her clever eyes rested on Jon briefly, before she waved to all of them.

"Beric, it is good to see you," she greeted politely. "Mance was just saying last night that he'd not heard from you since you last terrorized Clegane and his men."

"Well, you haven't heard from Clegane either, have you?" Tormund roared, and she laughed, shaking her head, her lovely golden ringlets catching the sunlight.

"We need a favor, my fair lady," Beric told her, swinging off his horse. "We're making for Queenscrown and we'd like to go on foot."

"On foot to Queenscrown? Have you business with a few bandits there, by any chance?" she asked shrewdly, as the others followed suit. Jon led his horse behind the rest of them, looking down at
the ground, hoping not to catch her eye.

"Aye, just some common business," Davos laughed, and Anguy was laughing too.

"No swords or guns, absolutely not."

"But a few arrows, I suspect?" she asked with a wink.

"Perhaps a few," Anguy teased. Jon felt Gendry elbow him and he shot him a glower.

They led their horses to the stable. Val did not acknowledge Jon and Jon did not acknowledge her; Val chatted with every other man, even Bronn and Sandor, except him. Bronn in particular was matching her jab for jab, a gleam in his eyes. He was even more fascinated by women than the rest of them, it seemed, and yet, Jon wondered about that.

The inside of the inn was cosy. Mance was in the kitchens when they trooped in, and greeted Beric and Tormund, old friends of his, with embraces and laughter. Jon hung back, feeling out of place, as he often did. His gaze roved around the inn, and landed on a stack of folded parchment on one of the tables. The only word visible was 'independence', and beneath it, a drawing of a stag. He'd seen the pamphlets before; Mance was rather political and, as an educated man, highly fond of political literature.

"You've got a new scar." Val's voice was soft and low as she passed by him, holding a sack of flour. The others were laughing with Dalla, Val's sister and Mance's wife, who was currently busy teasing Tormund, who had once been her sweetheart. He felt soft fingertips on his jaw, and he flinched from her. He'd got cut on the face when they had raided Clegane's garrison at Cerwyn, and it was only just beginning to heal, a shiny pink line.

"Aye, I'll get a few more today, I think," he replied, not looking at her. Could they not leave soon? At this rate it would be dark by the time they reached Queenscrown. "Excuse me. I'll be outside. Left something in my saddle," he added, and he turned and left, hoping no one had noticed his exit.

The stables smelled warm and sweet, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he went to his own horse. Bronn and Sandor's enormous destriers could not even fit in the stables and were instead tied to a large beech nearby. He went to them, mindlessly brushing their sleek coats, and froze when he heard soft footsteps in the grass. Val had followed him.

"Tormund's right. You are a crow," she remarked, reaching him. She took the brush from him, their fingertips grazing. Her hands were small and pretty like a maiden's, but rough and calloused as a man's. He'd heard she could wield a sword better than most men, and it was not hard to believe. "Dressed all in black."

"If I dressed in grey would I be a dove?" Jon asked sardonically, and Val shot him a sly smirk.

"You know what the crow means, Jon Snow?" she asked suddenly. She didn't wait for his answer. "Some say it means death. But with the old gods, the crow is a symbol of new life. Of starting over."

"I suppose it can mean anything people want it to mean." He'd never had much patience for symbols. Feeling a sudden rush of madness, he snatched the brush back from her, and their fingers touched again. He turned away. "I was doing that," he explained rather lamely, feeling ashamed of his immaturity.

"The gods decide the meaning of things," she countered, stepping closer.
"And which ones are right?"

"The old gods. The first gods. The real gods," she shot back. Jon resumed brushing the horses, if for no reason other than to not look at her.

In Essos, they kept gods older than the ones who lived in the heart trees. The land was older, there. Sometimes in the ancient desert, with the heat rising and shimmering around him, for miles and miles on end, he had thought he could feel god rising up and swallowing him whole, drowning him in heat until he was dust among the desert.

"Everyone thinks their own gods are the real gods," Jon observed.

"And most would be wrong. Have you ever stood in a godswood, Jon Snow?"

"Aye, many times." He thought of Winterfell, thought of placing the pine needles in the snow next to Sansa's hands, turned red and raw from the cold, and he was in agony once more, that same tightness constraining his chest so he could not breathe. He turned his face away so Val could not see his pain. He'd felt the gods in the godswood, but he felt them too in the morning when he stood in the silent forest, when he dove into a stream, when he looked up at the stony cliffs over the sea.

"How can you stand in a godswood and not feel one with the gods?"

"I don't know. Maybe the gods left that part out of me when they made me," Jon said shortly. "Did you have a point, in following me out here?"

"You know my point, Jon Snow." And she took his hand, and he pulled his hand away, feeling sick, his heart thumping against his chest painfully. He felt Dany's hands on him, Dany's lips on him, all over again, and though he was in the open air he had never felt so trapped. "When you come back for the horses, I'll be waiting."

"I'm married."

The words were out in a rush, and Val studied him with interest.

"Only in name. I know the story," she countered. "And all men have needs. Where is your wife now, Snow?"

"She is in Mole's Town, and she will be my wife until she no longer wishes to be."

"If she can bear to be apart from you, and you from her, then she is hardly a wife."

"She is under my protection. She is my wife," Jon said hotly. "It is the only good thing I have ever done, the only honorable thing I have ever done."

"So much guilt, so much sorrow. You are truly sour," she teased, taking his hand again, and he snatched it back.

"Don't touch me," Jon snapped. There was a flash of hurt in her eyes, but before he could speak, he saw the others coming out of the inn over Val's slender shoulder. Gendry made a rather rude and suggestive hand gesture, smirking at him, and everyone laughed, and Val turned to look at them as Jon flushed. "I-I'm sorry," he added under his breath. He didn't quite know what he was apologizing for, and somehow he felt angry that he had to apologize at all, and angry that he even felt he should apologize. When a woman did not want a man, it was rape, but when a man did not want a woman... But that by itself was a joke, a concept that no one seemed able to comprehend, that he could possibly not want Val. She was as beautiful as Sansa, though in a different way. She
would have turned heads no matter where she went, even in the rags she wore, with dirt on her face and her feet bare.

What was wrong with him? Perhaps the gods had left that part, too, out of him when they'd made him.

"On we go," Beric said as they reached Jon and Val.

"Good luck on your venture," Val said lightly, stepping away, not looking at Jon. She was holding her chin rather high, and Jon felt sick and ashamed. He had hurt her; he'd not intended to. But to not hurt her would be to bring pain upon himself, and dishonor upon Sansa. He didn't want that, either.

"Aye, I expect we'll be back before nightfall," Beric agreed.

"Come along, Jonny boy, leave your maiden fair," Anguy ordered. Val laughed, a bit sadly, and walked back to the inn.

"Why bother looking so pretty if you're not going to make use of it, you dumb crow?" Tormund asked after Val was out of earshot.

"The crow smelled the scent on the summer air," Bronn began, his voice low and melodic, and soon everyone was singing once more as they began walking toward Queenscrown.

It was late in the afternoon when they reached the little inn that Clegane had been speaking of. It had a little sign over its door: Bael and the Blue Rose.

They'd only taken a few men for this venture. Clegane had brought Slynt, a frog-faced bald man; Trant, a red-bearded man with dark eyes that seemed to flick everywhere in suspicion; and Kettleblack, a hook-nosed man. Dickon had selected Theon and Ramsay.

He hadn't been able to look upon Ramsay. He wondered if the Bolton man suspected his betrayal; he wondered why Ramsay had touched him like that. The memory made him sick and filled him with disgust and shame, and made him think once more of the Targaryen wolf. He had never wanted a man to touch him, of course, so why had he thought of the Targaryen wolf when he had spilled into his hand?

It had to have been Ramsay's doing. The way he had touched him, his hand so high up on Dickon's thigh, had made him think strange, sick thoughts. Did Ramsay want to touch men? He had always seemed strange... Yet Dickon had seen him with the whores in Winter Town, and with that one sad girl that followed him around, tolerating his beatings and spreading her legs for him whenever he wished. Ramsay had more of an appetite for women than any man he had ever seen, perhaps even moreso than Theon Greyjoy, who never seemed fully sated.

He had gone with them to the brothels, but he'd never been able to do it. He still remained untouched, even though watching the whores in the brothels made him grow painfully hard. He always told them that he found northern girls unsightly, and it was partly true, with their drab faces and tangled hair, but he would have fucked anything in those moments of lust. Was he afraid? What was wrong with him?
His father would have liked the Targaryen wolf. Father had liked pretty men. Men like Jaime Lannister, men like Loras Tyrell. Slender, svelte men with pretty mouths and smooth skin and pretty hair. The idea of touching any of those men was nauseating, made him recoil in disgust, so why had he thought of the Targaryen wolf?

"Welcome." A man of slender build and middle height with clever eyes was waiting by the front door of the inn as they slowed their horses to a stop. He wore an apron spattered with blood and was holding a chicken in his blood-stained hands, the snapped neck in his fists as his eyes took in the redcoats. "General Clegane, is it?"

"Yes. We come for meat and ale," Clegane said in that horrible voice that still made Dickon shudder. He dismounted his destrier, and left it for the man to stable. The redcoats followed suit, and so did Theon and Ramsay, so Dickon did too. The man's gaze lingered on him, and Dickon pushed past him.

Inside was so humble that it would never have passed for an inn down south. Everything was worn and chipped, but it was warm and welcoming even so. The smell of stew was thick, but Dickon still felt disgusted by most food, and his stomach turned, though he could see the others looking around eagerly for the source of the scent. The door opened and closed behind them once more, and the innkeeper reappeared.

"We have no stableboy, I'm afraid," he said wryly as he passed by Clegane. "You'll have to stable your own horses if you wish to keep them."

"You'll stable our horses," Clegane said. "And you'll give us meat and ale."

"Aye, that is why we're here," the man said lightly. "Have a seat." But he made no move to stable the horses, and a knot of worry tightened in the pit of Dickon's stomach.

The door to the kitchens opened, and the loveliest woman that Dickon had ever seen appeared, holding a bucket. She was slender and lithe, but full-breasted, so full that her dress could barely contain her breasts, and her honey-colored hair reached to her waist. Every man looked at her with hunger, and she ignored them.

"Meat and ale for our guests, Val," the innkeeper said. She bit her lip and looked to them, her light lovely eyes taking each of them in, and disappeared back into the kitchens with the innkeeper.

"I would pay any amount to fuck that," Theon remarked, and they were laughing around him, save for Clegane.

"You serve the Crown, and the Crown never has to pay," he said shortly. He dropped onto one of the benches, and the rest of them followed suit. Pamphlets were stacked on the table, for anyone to take as he pleased, and Dickon watched Theon take one.

"Reason: The Argument for Independence," Theon read aloud. "Look, it's a stag. Reeks of Brotherhood without Banners, does it not?" He held up the pamphlet, and Dickon's mouth grew dry. He had dreamt of a white stag. Perhaps it had been a premonition.

"Stew and ale," came a woman's musical voice. It was the blonde, Val, pushing the door open with the curve of her lovely hip, bearing a tray of bowls of stew and ale. But she did not look upon them with warmth, and her voice was cool, and haughty. In silence, she went around the table, setting down ale and stew at each man's place. All eyes were on the lovely expanse of skin that only swelled with movement, with each breath.
"D'you read, beautiful?" Ramsay asked, holding up the pamphlet. Her eyes flashed and she turned away. When she brushed past Dickon to set a bowl of stew before him, her breast brushed his arm, and heat grew between his legs. It had felt soft. What would it feel like to grab it, to tighten his grip on the soft flesh?

"No, I do not," she said coldly, and she turned away, but Slynt reached out a hand and gripped her wrist. With surprising force, she wrenched her wrist out of his grip.

"You don't talk to a man of the Crown like that," he drawled, and he gripped her wrist once more. "Try that again, whore."

"I am no whore."

"Aye, 'cause we won't pay to fuck you," Slynt countered, and he yanked her back to their table.

"You won't fuck me." The word was unbearably erotic, coming from those sensuous lips. She backed away, and the door to the kitchens opened once more, and the innkeeper came out.

"Have you stabled your horses yet? There are bandits round these parts, men," he said, but his eyes were flashing.

No one spoke. The silence stretched on, unbearably, and Dickon looked to Clegane, who was staring down the innkeeper.

"You keep a lot of this rubbish, sir?" Kettleblack asked, holding up the pamphlet.

"I don't keep it, no. My guests often take it," he said slyly.

"Guests like the Brotherhood without Banners?" Slynt pressed.

"Aye, they've stayed here a few times," he conceded. Dickon felt sick. Lie, you stupid fool, he thought furiously. But whose side am I on?

"They're enemies of the Crown."

"I suppose they are."

They were walking back to Bael and the Blue Rose Inn in the late afternoon's dying pink light, giddy with their success. They'd taken back the wares that the bandits, led by a stupid and cruel man named Chett, had stolen from the Mole's Town merchants, and they walked with the loot in sacks over their shoulders. It had felt good to do it, and Jon had barely suffered any injuries. His swordsmanship was getting better, or else his opponents were getting weaker.

In the distance, he spotted the inn, and something was wrong, he knew it immediately.

"Look," he said, and they all stopped. "Look at those horses."

A half-dozen or so horses, half of them magnificent destriers laden with royal heraldry, were grazing in front of the inn. They should be stabled, Jon realized. Why are they not stabled? Instinctively his hand went to his belt, where his sword was sheathed. His heart hammered in his head like a war drum.

"Redcoats," Tormund breathed in disgust, his eyes taking in the horses as well, seeing the heraldry on them.
And then there was a gunshot, and the air was rent with a horrific scream. "Let's get them," Tormund began, and Anguy and Gendry made to follow him immediately.

"No," Jon said suddenly, moving to block Tormund's path.

He had seen this; he had lived this. He had done this, done all of this before.

They'd storm the inn. If the redcoats were causing trouble, there would be a fight. There would be death. And Mance's inn would likely be destroyed. Dragons plant no trees. "There's every chance the redcoats are there because of us," he explained, looking to Davos pleadingly, desperately. Davos nodded slowly.

"Aye," he agreed gravely. Jon knew that he too was remembering the raids in Essos, the violence, the bloodbath of Mereen, Astapor, Qarth. "We need to draw them away," Davos said, seeming to read Jon's mind.

"Aye, we'll draw them away, and Sandor and Bronn can get Mance and Dalla and the others to safety," Jon said. "We want to help, not harm; isn't that our mission?" he asked Beric desperately. "If we go in there, guns blazing and swords drawn, there can only be death."

"How will we draw them away, though?" Gendry asked, still staring at the inn, his face flushed with anger. "Every second we wait—"

"I've got an idea," Jon said.

"I'm going with you tonight."

Podrick had not noticed she was there, clearly; he dropped the barrel he'd been holding on his foot, swore an extremely creative oath, and then, red as the setting sun, turned away from her, leaning over to massage his foot.

"M-Miss Stone," he stammered, finally turning to face her, "you surprised me."

"I'm going with you to the Direwolves' meeting," Sansa told him. The evening wind blew a little harder, a little frosty, and she clutched her shawl around herself. Podrick had just been about to head home for the evening, she knew. He was wearing his coat, carrying his bag, but he hadn't been able to resist a little extra work before leaving. He stared at her with wide eyes. It was rare for him to actually look at her.

"How do you know about—"

"—Mr. Flowers told me."

For a long time he continued to stare at her. Then, to her surprise, he shook his head mutely, and led her beneath the bakery, to the extra ovens that they had. It smelled of yeast and fire and was almost too warm.

"Y-you can't just say the name out loud like that," he began in a whisper.

"But I'm going with you. And if you don't want me to go," she started on the speech she had been practicing, wringing her hands, "then it doesn't matter, because I'll just go without you anyway. But I thought I'd let you know, and that—" she paused, swallowing, "—we could go together." She flushed, realizing her mistake when his eyes widened. "A-as friends, of course. But Mr. Flowers told me you were one of the first—"
"—Aye, I was," Podrick admitted, looking away and rubbing at his neck. "Miss Stone, Miss Tarth said we had to keep you safe. Mr. Snow demanded it."

"Mr. Snow is off gallivanting around the country, pretending to be Robin Hood, so I don't particularly care what he demanded," she said coldly.

"But it's not safe—"

"—I don't care!" she exploded, and Podrick took a step back in surprise. "I don't want to be safe anymore. I want to be alive. I'll never be safe, not really, no matter what I do."

He was actually looking at her again, his brow furrowed. "You can't stop me," she added, her heart pounding, her voice far stronger than she felt.

He turned away, pacing, pushing at his hair. "So will you walk with me to the Laughing Tree?" she tried tentatively. He paused, looking fretful.

"Meet me in the yard at half past eleven," he said finally, and she reeled with victory. "And...w-wear a hood," he added, glancing at her.

"Why?"

"It's your hair," he admitted, turning away from her and going back to the steps. "Too memorable."
Sansa couldn't relax. She paced in her office, mindlessly tidying up, and then went downstairs to assist Brienne with cooking. Brienne was never much of a talker, but even so, Sansa felt the pressure of her presence as they prepared supper quietly. Did Brienne know that Podrick was involved with the Direwolves? And was this a betrayal of Brienne, and everything the woman had done for her, by joining the Direwolves and directly putting herself—and therefore Brienne—at risk?

She didn't know what to do. The older woman had her back to her as she methodically prepared dinner, and Sansa kept looking back to her, opening her mouth then closing it.

She had always been so well-behaved, so considerate of propriety, so afraid to inconvenience those around her. She had always behaved like a lady. This, however, was decidedly unladylike behavior, and the result was a gnawing guilt and unease. Brienne was already sacrificing so much for her; she deserved to at least know what Sansa's plans were.

But what if she forbid Sansa from going? The idea of languishing another night in her room, trying not to think of Jon, trying not to wonder about her brother's marriage, was unbearable. She had spent her whole life sitting idle because it was convenient for others; she could not bear to continue. And yet, no one had ever shown her as much true kindness and generosity as Brienne had. Brienne was not Lord Baelish, or Cersei, or Daenerys, or even Jon. Brienne did not have anything to gain from keeping Sansa. Hiding her here, giving her a room and a place of work, was entirely at personal risk. Sansa thought she might be sick. The chicken that she cut up was repulsive and turned her stomach, though she normally liked chicken.

"Brienne," she began in a tremulous voice, trying for a casual tone and utterly missing the mark.

"Hm?" Brienne dumped cut-up vegetables into a pot, not looking at Sansa. She could almost believe that somehow Brienne knew what she planned and was upset with her, but of course, the rational side of her knew that Brienne was acting no differently; she was merely as carefully focused on the task at hand as she always was.

"H-have you ever..." she began, her face growing warm, but she was interrupted.

Jaime had appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, looking murderous. Sansa cringed from his expression, but Brienne merely glanced at him.
"Ah, you've arrived at last. Better late than never. You'll stir the pot," she told him crisply, handing him an apron. Jaime caught it with his left hand, looking more sulky than she had ever seen him.

"J-Jaime," Sansa greeted in surprise, her heart sinking. She knew she'd not be able to get the words out with Jaime around, and worse yet, Jaime was too perceptive—he would sense that something was out of the ordinary, and would likely pick on her for it.

"Mrs. Snow," Jaime greeted sardonically, stalking past her as he shrugged on the apron and went to stand before the pot of boiling water and vegetables. "A riveting task," he said bitterly, taking a ladle from Brienne, who ignored him, supremely indifferent to his poor attitude, and went about slicing up bread.

"What were you saying, Alayne?" Brienne asked, a slight edge to her voice.

Sansa turned away, resuming cutting up the chicken with clumsy, cold hands.

"Oh, I don't remember now," she said with a shrug. She glanced back at Jaime, who was awkwardly holding the ladle with his left hand, scowling into the pot. They must have had some new squabble. It was the only explanation for his fresh fury.

They finished preparing supper in agonizing silence. Brienne and Jaime kept shooting each other murderous looks as they set the table. Sansa felt a bit like a child caught between two parents, though the idea of Jaime and Brienne ever parenting together was so ludicrous it could have been the plot of a highly entertaining farcical play.

"Appetizing," Jaime quipped flatly as they sat down before their bowls. "Nothing quite like chicken in dishwater to give a man strength."

"Well, as you hardly do anything all day, you won't need much strength," Brienne replied, jabbing into her chicken with far more force than necessary.

"Mrs. Snow," Jaime began in a dangerously cheerful voice, turning his lovely eyes on her, "Have you decided what you'll do with that red silk? Perhaps you can make a new wedding cloak—"

"Her name is Alayne," Brienne interrupted in a near-growl.

"Her name is Sansa Snow, per the law," Jaime countered. "Not that you'll ever have much experience with marriage laws—"

"—nor do you, or at least, you do not honor the marriages of others," Brienne shot back hotly, nostrils flaring and face flushed. Jaime had a worrisome, dangerous gleam in his eye.

"It always comes down to this," he said with hushed glee as he turned to Brienne. "You've been dying to bring it up. I can smell it on you, even through the sweat and yeast. Go on, ask—"

"—I am not dying to bring up anything. Your misbehavior is none of my concern or interest—"

"—Misbehavior!" Jaime exclaimed with a laugh of disbelief. "Gods, you make fathering a bastard king with one's sister sound like a schoolboy's offense, Miss Tarth—"

"—It is not for me to judge the severity—"

"—Oh, but you're judging anyway, everyone does, so why not just dive all in—"

"—You could at least show some shame for your—"
"—For my what, my misbehavior? It's been over two decades, surely I'm done repenting for that particular sin. At least I acted on my desires. Better to regret the things you did than the things you didn't. At least I did something with my life, before retiring to this utter dump, unlike you—"

"—I'm joining the Direwolves," Sansa exploded.

They fell silent.

Jaime and Brienne looked to her in shock, and Sansa let out a shaking breath. She waited for one of them to speak, but neither did. "They're an underground resistance group," Sansa explained now. "They meet weekly. I'm going with Mr. Payne to a meeting tonight."

She had thought Jaime might scoff or imitate Podrick, as he usually did whenever Podrick was mentioned, but Jaime remained silent. Sansa looked to Brienne desperately. "I can't keep doing nothing," she began. "I feel so useless, and I've felt so useless all my life, and I'm tired of it. My entire family has been executed for their beliefs—"

"—Yes, why not join them, and therefore undercut everyone else's efforts to keep you alive?" Jaime interrupted caustically, but let out a hiss of surprise when Brienne punched his arm without looking at him. Her lovely blue eyes were fixed on Sansa.

"Go on, Alayne," she said calmly. "What were you going to say?"

She toyed with her spoon, suddenly unable to look at Brienne or Jaime. Even their gazes were scalding.

"I...

How could she explain it? How could she convey how a lifetime of abuse and powerlessness had suddenly crystallized within her? How could she possibly make them understand the years of nightmares, of reliving her family's executions over and over again in her mind and in her dreams, of being pushed from this person to that, of being the pawn of everyone but herself? "...I've never had any freedom before."

The words were lame, too small, too simple. She tried again. "I've never been allowed to think for myself, to make my own decisions...I've never before had a life of my own choosing."

She thought of Jon, holding her, his eyes so soft, as he had said the words. *A life of your choosing*. He had given that to her, had he not? No matter what wrongs he had committed, she couldn't forget that he had risked everything to give her freedom—the very thing she had thought she would never have. But she didn't want to remember that; it made everything so messy, so confusing. He had slit an innocent guard's throat without hesitation, and then days later had upended his entire existence just to give her freedom. Was he good or bad? Should she be angry or grateful? Why was it that every time she managed to finally work up enough anger toward him to build a wall between him and her heart, her stupid weak heart tore it down again? "Jon wanted me to have freedom. That was why he did—well, what he did."

Brienne nodded slowly, but Jaime scoffed.

"Jon Snow gave all of his gold to you and Miss Tarth to keep you alive, you fool, not to give you freedom. Miss Tarth's told me enough to see it plainly. The Targaryens are headed for execution, Mrs. Snow, including your husband, and the more noise they make, the harder the Crown will work to silence them. If his head is still attached to his body before the year's end, I'll run off and elope with Podrick, for gods' sake. Even as much of a fool as he is, he can see where this is going,
"I don't want to just be alive. I want to live," Sansa insisted, feeling her eyes burn. She hated how she grew teary when she was angry. She had thought she had grown out of it, but perhaps she had merely become so practiced at hiding the truth of her heart—but she was out of practice, now. She felt as foolish and silly as a little girl.

"And I want to spend the rest of my days hacking and swinging a sword, and Podrick wants to bed you, and Miss Tarth here—well, I frankly have no idea what she could possibly want—and Princess Daenerys wants to be queen and Jon Snow wants to be a Stark, probably. I could go on, but you see that none of us ever get what we want."

"You could go back to the army, but you are too weak," Brienne said suddenly. She fixed her cool gaze on Jaime. "You're ashamed and humiliated and you cannot bear those emotions. You act like there is some greater force stopping you, but there is no force. It is only you, and your arrogance and ego." Brienne turned back to Sansa. "Mr. Payne already told me," she said, "and I approve."

"You what?!" Jaime stared at Brienne like she'd grown a second head.

"Alayne needs to make a life here. It's dangerous, yes, but she's smart enough to have survived this long, and Mr. Payne assured me that he would keep a close watch. You could do to learn from her, Jaime." Brienne blew on her food to cool it, ignoring Jaime's look of shock.

"Learn from her? How?"

"In moving on. Rising above one's circumstances."

"And what exactly would you suggest I do? The entire North wants my head, and the only thing I've ever done in my life was kill...with my right hand."

The silence was pressing, hideous, billowing. There was a new look in Jaime's eyes, a desperation that she'd not seen before. It gutted her, but Brienne seemed immune to it.

"For starters, you could choose to actually be a contributing part of this household. You've still got your left hand." Brienne finished her food and got up from the table. Jaime pushed his food away, barely touched, and went to stalk out of the kitchen, but Brienne grabbed his shirt and stopped him.

"Where do you think you're going? You're going to do dishes."

"If this doesn't work..."

"Did you have a better plan?" Jon snapped at Anguy, who rolled his eyes.

"Go for Clegane, first," Bronn advised Anguy. He rose from his crouch briefly to look over the bramble and study the horses in front of the inn. "I know that's his horse. Don't know who else'd be with him."

"One of those fucking Kettleblacks, probaby," Sandor said disgustedly, and Bronn snorted.

"You're right, I bet it's one of them. Hope it's the older one; he couldn't shoot his own foot off," the slender man agreed.

"See you all in hell," Anguy said cheerfully as he strapped his bow onto his back and began
climbing up the rangy pine tree effortlessly, disappearing into its greenery in his green coat. Tormund disappeared into the trees, where he would also be waiting to ambush.

"You're certain about this plan, Snow?" Davos asked, strapping on his own bow as well. Jon looked to Gendry, who shrugged.

"S'got to be us who goes in," Gendry said, nodding to Jon. "We're the ones everyone'll recognize quick enough."

"It gives them more chances to kill you," Davos countered.

"It's our fault they're there, isn't it? Mance is a known rebel, but he's never done anything to merit redcoat attention, save for his dealings with us. We're trying to be a force of good," Jon insisted, turning back to Davos and Beric pleadingly. "If the redcoats kill today, it's on us." Beric nodded slowly.

"Aye, it is. I think it's a good plan. Your mind's as deft as your blade, Snow. Mance has helped us many times; we owe it to him to think this through."

"Well, we're done thinking," Bronn said, rubbing his hands together. "Time to act, I'd say."

"Aye," Gendry said, and he checked his rifle one last time as Jon checked his own sword and dirk.

The two of them walked toward the inn's front entrance. Jon tried to think of every time he had ever been angry, trying to make his face turn red with fury. He had to really truly seem outraged for this (likely foolhardy) plan to work. But he'd always felt curiously calm before a fight; it had always been the way. In a crisis his mind was blissfully peaceful, and everything around him seemed to slow, just enough for him to see possible outcomes, determine the best next attack.

Think of Mance, and Dalla, and Val—dead because of you. Think of the inn burning down. Think of how scared they must be right now.

There was another scream, a terrible scream, a woman's scream of agony and fear. And a horrible, vile, sickening thought occurred to him, and his blood was on fire.

What if it were Sansa in there right now?

Jon kicked down the door with a yell of rage.


"Val, get Dalla," the innkeeper said over his shoulder. Val worked her lovely jaw, apparently reluctant, and made to leave, but Clegane got to his feet and reached out with surprising swiftness, grabbing her and tossing her aside, against the wall, as easily if she were a dog. There was a horrible, sickening crack as she hit the wall, and slid down, limply.

"Harboring enemies of the Crown makes you an enemy of the Crown, Mance Rayder," Clegane began, drawing his pistol, and he fired it, but Mance Rayder was too fast, and ducked just in time. There was a scream, and another woman had appeared, holding a rifle in shaking hands.

Everyone was on their feet, swords drawn, and the woman fired, hitting Kettleblack in the shoulder. He dropped to his knees with a shriek of pain, and then there was an explosion of noise.
It was havoc.

Clegane snatched the woman's rifle and hit her across the face with it so hard that a strip of blood spattered along the wall as she was thrown backward. Val was crawling away, shaking and bleeding, but Slynt and Ramsay descended on her, rolling her onto her back, grappling at her dress. The fabric tore as she screamed and kicked furiously, and her soft pale breasts were exposed, the skin flushed. Her fists were flying, and she hit Slynt in the face; there was a crack, she had broken his nose. But Ramsay was not to be deterred, and Dickon watched in shock as he tossed the woman onto the table and unlaced his breeches. The sight of it triggered something in Dickon; he felt as though he was forgetting something that he should have remembered. For some reason he thought of the Targaryen wolf pulling away from Sansa, and the smell of blood and arousal thick in the air, and Sansa's dress falling from her shoulders, and the wolf's desire plain against his breeches, his face flushed with need and his lips reddened from Sansa's kiss...

Rayder was struggling furiously, fruitlessly, with Clegane, just able to see as Ramsay was about to enter her.

The look on Rayder's face said it all. The man's face was the most horrific agony; it was more painful to see his face than to see the girl, Val, struggling and scratching, attempting to stop Ramsay. Theon was restraining the other woman, and Trant was on the other side of the table, attempting to hold Val's fists down and restrain her as she kicked and screamed. Her knee hit Ramsay's groin and he let out a grunt of pain as Trant reached down and hit her so hard in the face that for a moment she went limp. Dickon thought he might be sick; he had never seen something that felt quite so violent or so cruel. He fell back against the wall, paralyzed.

Ramsay paused, though, and turned a sly grin on Dickon.

"My lord," he began, stepping back from the girl, "why not have the first go? You said you hate northern girls, and though she is a northern whore, she could easily pass for a sweet southron slut. Besides, you've never bedded a woman before...have you?"

"I have," Dickon countered, his face growing hot, but even to his own ears the lie was thin and too obvious. Trant let out a barking laugh.

"Never bedded a woman?! Oh, poor lad, is it that you can't?"

Ramsay and Trant were laughing, and the girl was still fighting, but weaker now, and there was a rushing in his head, of horror and shame.

"Come on, Lord Tarly, give her a go," Ramsay goaded. "Before we loosen up her cunt." And he slapped her between her legs, so she kicked him, and Trant hit her again. And Ramsay looked at him, really looked at him, those eerie blue eyes so fucking knowing, and Dickon thought of his hand creeping up his thigh, and the hot seed spilling into his hand as he thought of the Targaryen wolf, and then he was walking to the girl, and moving to unlace his breeches, his breathing shallow and his mouth dry and his head spinning, the blood pounding in his ears. What did it matter? If he didn't take her, one of the others was going to, anyway. He wasn't hard, so he stared at her breasts, softer and rounder and larger than Sansa's probably were, and moved his hand against himself, trying to block out the sickening sounds of Clegane choking the innkeeper, but he accidentally looked into her blue eyes, and they were so filled with hatred and terrible, acidic terror, so he looked back at her breasts, his face burning with shame. Why couldn't he make himself hard? "She's going to be so tight," Ramsay whispered in his ear, his mouth almost on his skin, and Dickon ducked away, refusing to look at the Bolton man, still palming himself. He was growing desperate, willing to try anything, so he thought of the Targaryen wolf, but it didn't work, either, so he went between her legs, bumping against her sex, and clumsily grabbed her breast in his hand,
and she screamed and kicked wildly, but Ramsay was holding one of her legs down, and Dickon reflexively pressed the other down with his free hand. He moved his hand against her breast; he had never touched one before, not without clothing covering it, and he hated the warmth that shot down his body, but he was relieved, too, so he let go and reached to finish unlacing his breeches, desperate to just get it over with—

—and then the door banged open.

"Mance, you fucking traitor!"

A rifle went off, hitting a pot on a shelf above Mance's head, and shards of porcelain flew everywhere.

Everyone went silent for a moment. Silhouetted by the dying light outside, two men stood in the doorway.

At first, Dickon thought he was seeing a ghost.

King Robert Baratheon, as he had been in his prime, when Dickon had been only a small boy—for the man had decayed swiftly and thoroughly—was standing in the doorway, bright blue eyes blazing with fury as he aimed his rifle once more.

And next to him was the Targaryen wolf, dressed all in black, sword drawn, breathless with rage. There was a smear of dried blood on his cheek and he looked more wild and rough than when Dickon had seen him last, but his lips were just as pretty, and his grey eyes took in Dickon hovering over the girl, and Dickon realized that the wolf was about to take this, too, from him, and anger, caustic and burning, rushed through Dickon as he lurched forward, blinded by a thing he could not name.

Please play along please play along please play along.

It was so much more horrible than they might have guessed. The walls were spattered with blood, Val lay on a table, naked and bleeding, with Dickon Tarly about to unlace his breeches, Dalla was collapsed on the floor beneath Theon Greyjoy, and Clegane had Mance in a chokehold. Across the room in that silent moment, Mance's eyes met his. Please please please.

Almost imperceptibly, Mance nodded.

"I-I'm so sorry, boys," he choked, his voice thick with blood, his face turned scarlet. "I-I had to; you see now why."

"Oh, fuck," Gendry breathed, "you had them fucking waiting for us? You swore you were on our side!" He raised the rifle once more, aiming at Mance very slowly, and Jon knew what he meant for him to do. Jon turned tail, grabbing Gendry and dragging him out the door before he could fire, as though realizing they had no choice but to run away. "The Brotherhood'll get you for this, Mance!" Gendry screamed as they stole two of the redcoats' horses, launching themselves onto them just well enough to begin riding. The destriers, so much heavier and slower than Jon and Gendry were used to, screamed as shots were fired from the entrance to the inn. He could only assume that the others would get Val and Dalla to safety; all he could do now was continue with his part of the plan. He and Gendry rode fast and hard along the line of the woods, as far from the inn as they could get, the ground all thunder with the other redcoats giving chase behind them.

And then—a shot came too close—his horse screamed—the world blurred as Jon's stolen white destrier collapsed under him, a fountain of blood spraying the dirt as the horse died. He only
jumped off just in time—a split second longer and he would have been trapped beneath the horse and probably killed—and he stumbled a bit before breaking into a run. A bullet whizzed past him and hit a tree in front of him, and then there was a yell of anguish so guttural and primal that he reflexively looked over his shoulder.

Gregor Clegane's horse collapsed beneath him, the horse too small to bear his weight, an arrow in its leg, and Clegane was thrown to the ground, an arrow in his shoulder, dangerously close to his neck. As usual, Anguy hadn't missed.

But there was someone else on Jon's tail.

Dickon Tarly was riding for him, his face darkened with anger. Jon almost hadn't recognized him, the man was so utterly transformed from when Jon had seen him last, at his own wedding. He was broader than ever, yet more gaunt and pale than ever, his eyes so heavily shadowed they looked bruised. He looked like the Warrior himself—and he was coming after Jon with the intent to kill.

"Jaime?"

Sansa waited, holding her breath, standing outside Jaime's bedroom door.

"What."

There was no movement; she imagined he was lying on his bed, as he often was, staring listlessly at the ceiling. Sansa cleared her throat and looked down at the rust-red fabric in her hands.

"I-I thought—"

"—Spit it out; you're not bloody Podrick, are you? Is st-stuttering contagious?"

"That was cruel and not even clever," Sansa shot back through the door, fuming. "I was going to offer to make you a new coat, but if you're not even going to answer your own door, you must not need clothes."

She stormed down the hall and back into her own office, and threw the rust-red fabric into the trunk, then looked at the clock.

Five more hours.

The wait might kill her.

She had arranged and rearranged all of her sewing supplies; she had organized all of her fabrics by the customers most likely to want each one for the upcoming ball; she had even gone through Podrick's desk and tidied up his papers and supplies, though it hadn't needed much.

All of a quarter hour's work.

The red silk taunted her from its place in the corner.

She scowled at it, and imagined it scowled back at her.

Nothing like a beautiful woman in red, Anguy had said. Sansa wondered if she'd ever see him again. Probably not. It was probably for the best. She had felt far too silly around him.

Curiously, she went to the full-length mirror that her customers so often stood before, as she knelt beside them with a mouthful of pins, and held up the red silk against her body, holding it in place
as though it were a dress.

It was true red, and though it clashed with her hair, it lit up her eyes, making them bluer and brighter than ever, and made her skin seem more flushed and rosy. It was a surprise.

She almost even liked how poorly it clashed with her hair. There was something rebellious about it. It seemed so bold, so daring, in a way that she had never been. She had always dressed to highlight her features, always selected whatever gown looked best—not whatever gown she liked most. It had been a strategic choice: she had needed to look pretty for Joffrey, in order to avoid his anger, when she'd briefly been betrothed to him. And then she had needed to look pretty, and innocent, and as un-northern as possible, in order to attract a husband who might save her from King's Landing.

The Sansa Stark who had lived in King's Landing would never have chosen the red. It was far too provocative, far too carefree.

She turned this way and that, watching the silk swish lazily with the movement, the fabric sensuous and cool beneath her hands. It was precisely the color of the line of blood that Jon had made on her thigh when he had cut her—it was the color of intimacy, of sensuality, of lust, of rebellion. It made her think of weddings and the red woman and Jon's mouth on hers and a thousand red wolves snapping their jaws at tyranny. Her face grew warm. What if I did make a dress for myself?

"Last I saw, you were about to attack that silk, now it looks like you're about to fuck it."

Sansa dropped the silk abruptly, her whole body flushing at Jaime's choice of wording. He was standing in the doorway, staring at the red silk piled on the floor. "I hope you weren't planning on making me a coat with that."

"N-no," she stammered, then grew even warmer, remembering his cruel comments on Podrick's stammer. She narrowed her eyes at him. "I was only planning on making you a coat before you insulted Mr. Payne, anyway." She turned away from him and snatched up the red silk, folding it clumsily, feeling his gaze on her.

"Ah, I see. Now that he's taking you to your amateur rebels' group, you feel protective of him."

"No, now that you're well enough to join us for supper and upset the conversation, I just have far less patience for your unbridled cruelty," she snapped, stuffng the red silk back into the trunk. The rust-colored fabric she'd intended to use for him was at the top of the bolts of fabric, and she lingered, staring at it, for a moment. "If you apologized, however, I might reconsider." She straightened and looked back at him. Jaime was leaning against the doorframe. He'd been wearing the same shirt for so many days in a row that it no longer even resembled a shirt. For so many years she had only ever seen him in the glorious scarlet uniform, pristine and polished, all golden hair and bright white breeches and polished black boots...He stood so differently now, and she hated herself for how her heart ached. He has lost everything that matters to him, and has no hope of ever having a real life, she reminded herself. Of course he would be cruel. Hopelessness and powerlessness made people cruel. Their eyes met, and he cocked his head to the side, studying her.

"I'm sorry for not even being clever in my cruelty," he finally said.

She didn't think it likely that she'd get more than that. He was a lion, after all. Lannisters were known for their pride. She'd seen it in Cersei, the gods knew. Sansa bit her lip.

"Do you like this color?" She reached into the trunk impulsively, pulling out the rust-red fabric.
She watched Jaime's eyes rove over the fabric. His lips twitched, but he said nothing for a moment.

"Better than that red silk, or that pink nonsense," he finally conceded.

"Let me measure you. You can't just wear Brienne's old shirts forever," she said in a rush, turning to get her measuring tape. She heard Jaime scoff and thought he might be about to make a cruel remark, but he kept silent. He seemed uncertain, uncomfortable. "Stand in front of the mirror, and hold out your arms," she directed. Jaime did as told, and as he spread his arms, Sansa quite abruptly realized she would have to touch him.

This is my job, she reminded herself fiercely, as she hesitated beside him. Avoiding his eyes, she went to stand before him, and stretched the tape from one shoulder to the other in clumsy hands. This close she could smell his skin, and his shoulders were hard beneath her hands. She remembered, vividly, being fifteen and drunk and launching herself against that hard chest in the darkness of the hall, face wet with tears, begging and desperate. It was one of the memories that was most humiliating to her, and she certainly had many humiliating memories to haunt her.

Sansa cleared her throat. "I'm just—just going to measure your chest," she said, looking at his chest. She reached around to wrap the tape around his chest, and her breasts brushed his chest with the movement, and her face flamed. "Sorry," she muttered, pulling back and bringing the tape together again. "Just let me write that down."

She darted to her desk where she kept parchment, and clumsily scrawled the two measurements on the first sheet she could find. She returned to Jaime, still keeping her gaze averted, and set the parchment on the floor beside her before returning to awkwardly loop the tape around his waist. She was painfully aware of kneeling before him, and what her eyes were level with, as she knelt once more to write down the measurement.

"What will you do with my right arm?"

The tone in his voice made the room feel cold. He had never spoken so quietly. All shameful thoughts fled as Sansa straightened once more. He had dropped his arms and was looking at the place his right hand had once been; the cuff of his shirt merely sagged limply over the empty space.

"We can...pin it," Sansa thought aloud. She glanced at Jaime. "Do you mind if I..."

"No, go on," he said quietly, and held out his right arm. Sansa fetched some pins, and carefully folded the sleeve over.

"Like this," she explained, sliding a pin into the fabric. "We can sew the shirt beneath it shut, and make the cuff a bit longer and wider so it hangs over it, so it's less obvious."

"Thank you."

The room was airless; neither could look at the other. Sansa writhed with shame; it hadn't occurred to her that this might be a humiliating and painful experience for him, and she hated herself for her carelessness.

"You deserve real clothing," she finally forced out, trying to smile. He wasn't looking at her; his gaze was focused in the mirror, on the place where his right hand had once been.

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Jon Snow Jon Snow Jon Snow. The horse's strikes against the ground seemed to be saying his name, over and over again, in Dickon's mind. He watched the man leap from the felled horse just
in time to avoid being trapped by it; he heard Gregor Clegane being felled by arrows that came from nowhere; he cared for none of it.

Dusk had fallen and the light was flat. Dickon knew from hunting that this was the most difficult yet often the most fruitful time to hunt. The stags would leap between trees, nearly invisible in the low, flat light; dusk made everything blend together. But he'd always been good at hunting.

The Targaryen wolf darted off the road and Dickon leapt off his horse and plunged after him into the trees, which were so covered with blue-green lichen that it felt like he'd plunged into the sea. The snow hadn't quite melted in the shadow of the trees, and it crunched beneath his boots, and he was gaining on the wolf. He was an animal hunting his prey, and though the wolf was quick, he couldn't run forever.

In the darkness of the trees, Snow skidded to a halt and rounded on him, attempting to catch him off-guard, but Dickon was ready. Snow's sword clanged against Dickon's, ringing throughout the darkness, and Snow was thrown back by the sheer force of the impact. His pale face was barely visible, and his jaw was set in grim determination, giving away no hint of fear, and Dickon hated him all the more for it.

Their swords clashed again. Pale, virgin legs wrapped around Snow's slender hips, lips swollen from a kiss, his father dropping to the burning ground like a doll, dead forever; his brother's eyes as he'd embraced him for the last time, Father's face as he'd hit him, Sansa's soft lips against his; Ramsay's hand creeping up his thigh, and hot seed spilling into his hand as he thought of Snow's pretty lips.

Another flare of rage. Their swords clashed again; it did not seem to matter how hard Dickon struck, for the wolf always swung back, deft and fearless. He'd gotten better, more fierce, more swift, since the last time they had crossed blades. Dickon had thought he'd gotten better too, but it wasn't enough. He wasn't defeating the wolf. There was a crunching sound behind him, which he dimly registered as footfalls, but he could not focus. There was only Jon Snow and their swords, breaths clouding in the air, steel clanging against steel, ringing like death, grunts of effort, as Dickon pushed him deeper and deeper into the tangled woods. *I will kill him. It's all his fault...*

"Jon Snow," gasped a voice behind Dickon, and then Theon was beside him, panting and bloody, but aiming an arrow at him.

Snow fell back, and so did Dickon.

"Greyjoy," Snow greeted softly. His grey eyes roved between them, his gaze cold and calculating.

"Looking well, though a bit less Targaryen these days," Theon observed, drawing back the arrow just a little more, the bowstring creaking under the strain. "I suppose I owe you congratulations on your wedding to Sansa."

That brought some heat into his eyes. His lips twitched and the hand on his sword flexed, but he did not attack. His eyes flicked up and to his right, so briefly, like he was rolling his eyes at Theon. "She always was a pretty cunt. How was she? I heard Lannister used her dry. But I guess she must've run back to him—I don't see her now." Theon made a show of looking around for Sansa.

"Aye, she must have," Snow said levelly, but every line of his body was taut with something like rage. "And I suppose I owe you congratulations on joining the redcoats," he continued softly. "Robb would be proud—"

The arrow flew, slashing Snow's arm, but just then a horrible pain pierced Dickon's leg, and he let
out a grunt of pain and shock as, out of nowhere, arrows were suddenly pelting them from overhead, always just barely missing vital targets, and someone was laughing. Theon got hit in the leg as well, and dropped to the ground with a shriek of pain. Dickon stumbled backward, ripping the arrow out of his leg, looking around wildly for the archer.

And then an enormous man with a thick red beard was on them, discarding a bow and wielding an axe in his free hand.

"Forget them; let's get Mance," Snow told the man.

"Aye, that fucking traitor," said a voice from above. Dickon fell backwards, feeling warm blood seep between his fingers, and landed on his back to see a slender man dressed all in dark green crouching in the trees above him. He smiled down at him, a terrible smile, and saluted him.

"No," Dickon gasped, but another arrow hit him in the other leg, and he kicked and choked in pain.

"Yes," said the archer, and he climbed down and dropped to the ground, graceful as a cat. Snow was standing over him. He looked sad. He pitied him.

"Go back south. Go back home," he said softly. And then he was gone.

Podrick was lingering by the gate, dressed in a heavy cloak and a wide-brimmed hat that cast much of his face in shadow. When he heard the door click shut, he looked up, appraising her disguise, and, of course, Jaime's remark from supper came back to her. And Podrick wants to bed you... She was grateful for the darkness because it seemed to sap the intensity of the awkwardness, made them both feel more anonymous, less themselves.

Sansa had wrapped a scarf over her hair, in addition to wearing a heavy cloak with the hood pulled up. She'd donned her plainest dress, too: a dark green wool that was entirely forgettable. "I'm ready," she greeted in a low voice, her heart fluttering with excitement.

"We'll take a roundabout way," he informed her, offering her his arm awkwardly. Biting back a smile, Sansa took it, and they set off down the street. Her whole body was tingling, and she was possessed by the strangest urge to shout and jump, though she did not give away these urges as they walked together, trying to keep a leisurely pace so they wouldn't attract suspicion. There were so many questions buzzing around in her head, but she could ask none of them. She could not even make conversation.

And she wanted to, terribly. She wanted to understand how Podrick, perhaps the most unassuming man she had ever met, with his awkward stammer and shy eyes and round face, had come to be a part of the Direwolves. She wanted to know what he knew—about her family, about Jory, about all of it. But it would have to wait...and she had always been patient. But for some reason patience no longer came quite so easily to her.

As they wended their way through Mole's Town in the quiet darkness, arms linked, she wondered if they would be mistaken for a married couple.

What might it be like to be married to Podrick? They worked in companionable enough silence, each day; sharing an office with him was no chore. Most of the time she forgot he was even there. He was courteous, and kind, too, and clearly brave—brave enough to join a burgeoning resistance group.

It would be a natural enough union, she reasoned. And here I am already planning my next marriage, she thought with some sadness and humor. She felt she had spent half her life trying to
imagine being married to various men—weighing their good qualities against their bad ones, measuring her dreams against reality. But Podrick is not a suitor; and I do not have to marry if I do not want to.

Just remembering that fact lit a little flame within her, timid but bright. A life of my choosing, that is what this is. As they crossed the road to the Laughing Tree alehouse, a slanted stone building that felt forgotten, she squeezed Podrick's arm excitedly.

"Thank you," she whispered, as they reached the threshold. Podrick looked down at his feet, trying to stifle a smile, and opened the door for her with one hand as he prepared to take off his hat.

Inside was stiflingly warm, and still packed with men, in spite of the late hour, and the noise of so many people talking and shouting was oppressive as the heat, after the silence of the night. It was cramped and the rafters were bowed, but it was clean, and bright. The barkeep, a round, red-faced man in shirtsleeves, waved to Podrick as they entered, but Podrick merely waved back shortly and bypassed the bar, leading Sansa to a narrow hall in the back. It was dark and cramped, and a single door was at the end of it.

Sansa shrugged off her hood and unwrapped the scarf round her hair as Podrick knocked three times. The door opened a crack, and Podrick glanced around warily.

"The north remembers," he said in a low voice, and the door opened further, revealing Gilly, whose eyes widened at the sight of Sansa, but she wordlessly opened the door further for them.

The door opened to precarious wooden steps tacked against the wall, leading down below the bar. Feeling her way along the wall, Sansa followed Podrick down the steps. The room was buzzing with voices, but her view was blocked by the wall. As she descended, she saw an untidy room crammed with people on benches. She recognized most of them, even one or two of her own customers. The benches were arranged to face one wall, where Jory was standing, holding a glass of whiskey, before a banner with an embroidered red wolf. He brightened and waved when he spotted Sansa, and she felt her face grow hot as people turned to look at her.

"Here, sit with us," Gilly said, leading Sansa and Podrick to a bench near the front, where Sam and little Sam were seated. Sam beamed when he saw Sansa.

"Miss Stone! And Mr. Payne!" he greeted brightly. "I'm so delighted you've not come here alone, Miss Stone! You'll love it. Jory is brilliant, here, have some whiskey."

Sam poured her a generous glass as she took a seat on the bench between Gilly and Podrick, her arm brushing Podrick's. Whiskey made her think of Jon, of sharing the bottle of whiskey in the darkened, cold room. It felt like a lifetime ago, and perhaps it was, in a sense. She had been Sansa Stark, then. Since that night she had become Sansa Snow, then Alayne Stone. And that same strange mix of anger and empathy rushed through her again. Forget about him, she reminded herself. You are here now. This is your life. Actually live it. And she took the glass of whiskey from Sam with a bright smile, and turned to Podrick, and clinked her glass against his. Jory was rapping a bell he'd set on the mantle behind him, and the chatter quieted down.

"We're all here now, it seems. And we've a new member," he added, fixing Sansa with a fond smile. It gave her strength and confidence. "Aye, why not introduce yourself, and tell us why you've come?"

The room seemed so quiet, and suddenly so much bigger. Sansa cleared her throat and got to her feet, turning to face the room.
She had joined for the family she had lost, for the years of abuse she had endured, for the years of powerlessness and hopelessness. She had joined because she would never stop seeing her brother's eyes before his head was cut off, the eyes of a boy barely a man, fighting for a cause that had taken his father and mother just moments before. She had joined for the day that Joffrey had ordered her gown to be torn off her in front of the entire court, for all of the times that Cersei had lied, for all of the whispers and isolation and loneliness. But she couldn't say these things.

"I-I'm Alayne Stone," she told the room, her voice growing stronger, "and I've joined because I read what the White Stag had to say, and he put into words all of the things I've always felt, deep down. It made me realize that I wasn't the only one who thought this way."

"See, Gilly, the pamphlets do work," Sam hissed excitedly to Gilly, who ignored him, her eyes trained on Sansa.

"Aye, they speak to all of us," Jory was agreeing. "Why not raise our glasses to the White Stag? Maybe someday we'll know his name," he suggested wryly, and the room was filled with laughter as dozens of hands raised up glasses of whiskey.

"To the White Stag," they chorused, Sansa's voice among them, and she drank the whiskey, and it burned and settled in her belly like molten gold, and she thought of Jon, and his pain and his darkness. He, too, was a victim of the current regime. Who might he have been, had he not been branded the son of a traitor, had he not been forced into hiding with Daenerys? Once upon a time he had been a boy who would give everything he had to someone else, just to see them smile—and in many ways, he was still that same boy—but the regime, the Crown, had taken every opportunity for a happy life from him. He would never be able to have a simple life, all for being born to a man who had once been in line for the throne. If the North had been free and independent, he might have lived a happy, safe life with the Stark clan. They all might have lived. He might've grown up to be another Jory Cassel, carelessly handsome and filled with laughter, chasing giggling maidens through the gardens at clan gatherings, wearing the Stark tartan with pride. He might have even had a son named Robb.

And was it not so terrible an irony that, in chasing him down, the Crown had made of him an enemy that he would not have been otherwise? They had pushed him to Daenerys, therefore pushing him to support her claim.

And they have made an enemy of me, too, she realized. All of the things that Joffrey, and Robert, and Aerys have done to win their kingdom will be why they lose it in the end. She looked around the room, scanning the faces. There were no warriors here, no bloodthirsty demons. This was a room full of people who would not otherwise be enemies of the Crown. These were normal people, normal people who wanted to live.

"First order of business, Mr. Flowers?" Jory asked, taking a seat. Sansa returned to her spot in between Podrick and Gilly, already feeling lightheaded from the whiskey, even as more was poured into her glass. What drove Podrick to join the Direwolves? She glanced at him again, but he was focused on Sam, who had clumsily got to his feet, and was holding notes.

"The salt tax, the Town Watch, the Brotherhood without Banners—" he began, reading off a list, and Sansa's heart gave a shudder of surprise, "—are the main items on the agenda."

"What news of the Brotherhood without Banners?"

"One of their members has contacted me," Sam explained, setting aside his notes and looking extremely pleased with himself, "regarding Thorne's tyranny. Asking if we'd like them to get involved."
"That'll work out grand," deadpanned a man beside Sam, whom Sansa had not noticed before. He was narrow-jawed, with lank black hair, and a dolorous expression.

"They helped the Cerywyn clan, Edd!" Sam said indignantly, but the man, Edd, scoffed, shaking his head.

"The Targaryen wolf's joined them," he said. "Now Clegane'll want them even worse."

Murmurs about the Targaryen wolf began to rise. She kept her eyes trained on the floor. "It'll just draw the redcoats here, and that's the last thing we need."

"Aye, can you imagine how much Thorne will love that attention?" Jory snorted, and a few laughed, but Sam looked disappointed. Lips pursed, he scratched the Brotherhood without Banners off his list.

"I'll tell them no," he said sadly. "The salt tax, then?"

Sansa listened as various members discussed Thorne collecting the newly imposed tax, but her mind wandered. What will this even accomplish? she wondered, studying everyone as they talked, faces turning red with anger often. Awareness isn't enough. We could be sitting here for fifty years, still angry and still talking, and nothing will change.

A loud pounding on the door, four times, made everyone stop abruptly, faces frozen with fear. Jory made a gesture—a signal, she supposed—and there was a mad scramble. Edd mournfully retrieved a fiddle from its case on the floor and began to play it as everyone faced each other on the benches.

"Come on, let's dance," Sam breathed, and he jumped up, pulling Gilly to her feet, and led her into a dance with surprising grace, and leaving Sansa and Podrick alone on the bench. She threw back the rest of the whiskey in a desperate bid to still her trembling hands.

"Do you—"

"—I'm not much of a—"

"—oh, then—"

"—well, if you want—"

Podrick blushed red as the setting sun. Biting her lip to hide a smile, Sansa got to her feet and turned to Podrick.

"Will you dance with me, Mr. Payne?" she asked politely. Podrick briefly met her eyes, then looked away, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I—"

"—Mr. Payne's very graceful," Jory informed her cheekily, leaning into their conversation. "Go on, Payne, don't leave a lady alone when the fiddle's playing." But his force was too hard, his eyes too wide, his hands fisted.

Podrick looked like he would have happily melted into the floor at that moment. He got to his feet, reluctantly, and bowed to her shortly before linking their arms, and before he was ready, Sansa swung him into a reel, heady with fear and joy. The room had turned from a grim meeting to a rather raucous party in seconds; Jory had already torn down the Direwolves banner when she
hadn't been looking, and he joined them with another girl, perhaps a bit too young for him, but plump and blonde and, from what Sansa could recall, just his sort of girl.

It reminded her strongly of King's Landing, and how she had once lived such a dual life in her mind: half of her consumed with fear and pain, the other half so desperate to be happy that she would find joy anywhere, even in things as mundane as a dance, or in pretty dresses, or elegant embroidery. Her stomach was tied into knots in fear, fear that their meeting might be stormed, fear that she might be found out, and yet another part of her was drunk with joy. She loved dancing, loved parties. Podrick was an unexpectedly good dancer, she learned quickly, and they swung around the floor, forcing themselves not to look at the stairs in fear. It was like the very room was holding its breath.

And a flash of black on the steps. Thorne. The red-faced barkeep was behind him on the steps, his face inscrutable. Abruptly Edd stopped playing, and they all stopped dancing and talking. Sansa's face was flushed and she felt a drop of sweat trickle between her breasts; her dress was far too heavy for dancing.

Thorne stood on the steps, staring at her. The silence was ringing and agonizing.

"And what is the meaning of this gathering?" he asked to the silent room. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She thought, suddenly, searingly, of the cell in the Town Hall. For the ones that hang.

"It's my name day," Sansa blurted out suddenly, wildly. What have I done? she wondered in horror, as Thorne's eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Aye, it w-was my idea, Mr. Thorne," Sam stammered, stepping forward. "Miss Stone has told me often how much she loves d-dancing," he added lamely.

"It is nearly two o'clock in the morning. Surely it is not still your name day?" Thorne asked her, eyes glittering.

"N-no, I suppose it isn't anymore," she admitted, her throat unbearably dry.

"Then there's no need to continue the celebrations, is there?"

"No, sir, there's not," said the barkeep behind him. "It's time for you all to get out, lousy drunks."

No one moved for a moment. Thorne was looking at each of them, memorizing their faces she was sure. And after too long a silence, he turned, and climbed up the stairs again, leaving the barkeep there on the stairs, his forehead shining with sweat.

"You heard Marsh," Jory finally said with forced gaiety, and everyone began to shuffle to their feet. Sansa wanted to turn back to Jory, to speak to him, to ask him questions, but Podrick's hand was firm on her back, turning her away from Jory.

"Not now," he uttered under his breath, steering her toward the steps.

Thorne was on the street outside when they exited the alehouse, sitting atop his fine horse. Pypar was behind him, looking anxious, and Sansa briefly met his eyes over Thorne's shoulder before turning away hastily to walk with Podrick.

"And again I find you in the center of trouble, Miss Stone," Thorne said, and she and Podrick paused in their tracks.
"It is my name day," she reminded him. "Was, I suppose. Sir."

"Could I confirm that? If I asked the baker you live with what your name day is, would she answer correctly?"

"M-miss Tarth's terrible with dates," Podrick said immediately. "S-she can't even remember her own name day." A lie; details did not escape Brienne, but it mattered not. Sansa felt Thorne's eyes on her like slime; she longed for a bath. "G-good night, Mr. Thorne," Podrick said now, and he took her arm and pulled her away from Thorne's oily gaze.

They walked in horrified silence back to the bakery. The night seemed colder and more desolate. Podrick followed her inside. In the kitchen, he wordlessly got out two glasses and a bottle of whiskey, and poured them each a fair amount as Sansa dropped into her chair at the table. Only now did she realize her hands were trembling finely, so she fisted them. Podrick sat down across from her and slid one of the glasses to her; wordlessly she took it with a shaking hand, and downed it in one.

"Has that ever happened before?" she asked, at long last. Podrick was staring out the window.

"N-not in a long while," he replied, shaking his head. "Thorne's gotten worse. And we've n-never had so many people, in the past."

"He's a horrible bully," she shuddered, disgusted, and Podrick snorted. "What?" she demanded, looking up in surprise. Podrick shook his head, laughing slightly.

"A bully," he mused, his voice a bit thick from whiskey, "is a rather polite way to put it." He finished the last of his whiskey and got to his feet, taking both their glasses and setting them aside.

"You should stay here, for the night. It's late and Thorne's men might be looking for more trouble," Sansa said, getting to her feet shakily. Podrick nodded, his movements sloppy; even in the darkness she could tell his face was flushed. They were standing too close, she suddenly realized.

"Aye, I'll just g-get a cot—"

"—You're back."

Brienne appeared in the doorway, clutching a heavy robe around her, her face pale with relief. She spotted the bottle of whiskey on the table, and looked to Podrick, who mopped at his face.

"Everything's alright," he told her, "but Thorne broke up the meeting."

"I told him it was my name day," Sansa confessed. Suddenly the whole thing seemed so ridiculous and she wanted to laugh, but Brienne was not laughing.

"That was brilliant," Podrick laughed breathlessly, and Brienne rolled her eyes.

"Gods, you get drunk so easily, Pod," she snapped disgustedly. "Go up to bed, Alayne. I'll get this one a blanket...and a bucket."

Sansa stumbled up the darkened steps; the whiskey was hitting her hard and fast. She wandered into the office, turned silver from the moonlight, and went to the bolt of red silk. She dropped to the floor clumsily, her skirts billowing up around her, and held the cool fabric to her flushed skin. Was that Sansa Stark, or Sansa Snow, or Alayne Stone, who went to the meeting, who danced with Podrick, who stood up to Thorne?
Whoever that girl was, it was the sort of girl who would wear an audacious, provocative red dress—even if it clashed with her hair, even if it did not flatter her, even if it was too lustful, too bold, too outrageous—simply because she liked it, and because she would let no one tell her otherwise.

"I'm going to turn you into a dress," she told the fabric, holding it up and grinning. She folded the fabric, albeit a bit clumsily, and got to her feet.

It took a few tries to undress; several glasses of strong whiskey did not do much for her coordination. She felt heavy and sleepy and happy and... Drowsily she unlaced her corset and let everything fall to the floor. She'd put it away properly in the morning, she decided. In her sark, she stumbled to her bed and dropped on top of the covers, feeling overheated.

If Brienne had not come into the kitchen, would Podrick have tried to kiss her? It seemed a thing that any other man might do. She wished she could make herself want him to kiss her, but the very thought filled her with an unbearable sadness that she could not explain. She tried to think of him kissing her, holding onto her in the way that Jon had, but she squirmed away from it in an immediate sort of revulsion, and hated herself for it.

What of Jaime? Her mind, messy and unsorted, drifted to the awkwardness of touching him as she measured him. She had imagined kissing him before; when she had been fifteen and he had been kind to her, she had wondered what it might be like to be married to him, which had of course led to her shameful drunken moment outside of the ball that night, so many years ago. She closed her eyes, trying to picture it. He would be a good kisser, she just knew. There was a lazy heat unfurling within her, in the very pit of her stomach, that felt a bit like drinking whiskey, only smoother, sweeter. He was the right height to kiss her, too. And she had felt his hand on her bare arm only days ago, rough calloused skin against hers, his grip strong. It would feel good if he touched her.

Still overheated, she rolled onto her back. That sweet, terrible ache was back, and there was dampness between her legs. But she was feeling different tonight; she had never done so many rebellious things in one day. *A life of my choosing.* The thought made her giggle and then clap a hand over her mouth.

She didn't know why, but she reached down between her legs to feel the thin scar on her thigh, the scar that Jon had given her. And the memory of his hand on her skin was vivid, and sudden, and made something within her flutter desperately. It was all-consuming, it was so much different than linking arms with Podrick or even being held up by Jaime. She despised herself for the fluttering need. *Why do I still want him?* The heat and ache between her legs was unbearable; it was as desperate as a terrible itch.

Holding her breath, she tugged the hem of her sark up, staring up at the ceiling, feeling suddenly breathless. Her fingertips traced the scar once more, thin and raised, and the skin was slick, so she traced up higher, and let out a gasp of surprise.

The mere brush of her fingertips between her legs made shivers run along her skin, and for just a moment the ache had subsided. So she tried it again, this time a little harder. If Jon's hand had been just a bit higher, he would have been able to touch her like this... She shuddered as she moved the palm of her hand against herself, experimentally, her hips twitching upward at the contact. The room was too warm and she was drunk and longed for water, but that sweet ache was all-consuming.

Her traitorous mind had been plaguing her for months with ideas of what might have happened, had they not been interrupted by Dickon, and this was it: this perfect building pressure, this primal heat, this aching friction. Her hand was clumsy; she didn't know what she ought to be doing. *You just...do what you want to do,* he had said. She wanted to feel Jon's mouth on hers, she wanted to
bite into his pretty lip, she wanted his teeth to graze her neck and maybe even her breasts, she wanted to feel his rough hands on her skin, his naked chest against hers, and she did not know why she wanted it so badly; she did not know why she did not want anyone else to do those things. And for the moment, it didn't matter.

Her breathing was ragged, gasping, as she arched her back, curving a finger inside of herself, her other hand moving to her breast, and it felt strange, but good, so she did it again, and let out a whimper that was perhaps too loud. Jon, Jon, Jon. He might have touched her like this, had they not been interrupted, and the thought was so painful, and shameful. *I shouldn't want him,* she thought distantly, pleading to some higher power, but she didn't pray to the Seven anymore, and her mind was becoming clouded as something was building inside of her. It reminded her, absurdly, of the urge to sneeze, the way the tension gathered like the tautened string of a newly-strung bow down her body. She pressed her hand harder and pushed her finger in further and let out another too-loud gasp, her hair clinging to her forehead and neck and breasts in damp tendrils. And suddenly it was becoming too much; she knew she had to wait, had to not give in, but she didn't know why...she scrunched her eyes shut and gasped again, and bit her lip as she blindly slipped a second finger inside herself, still pressing her palm against herself, and it was happening too fast, but she didn't know what *it* was, and she was thinking of that perfect and complete shiver that had shaken her body when Jon had pressed his lips to hers, and then—

—the wave crashed and she let out a cry of surprise that died to a gasp—

—her door exploded open.

"Sansa—"

She froze, her body still trembling, dizzy with something like relief, as Jaime froze too. In the darkness, they both were still, as she tried to calm her uneven, desperate breathing, her hand and thighs slick and the covers damp beneath her, sweat dripping down her cheek.

Jaime turned and left the room, slamming the door behind him, and, horrified and ashamed, Sansa stumbled to her feet, pausing at her closed door.

On the other side, she heard Jaime let out a long, ragged breath.
Part II: Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

This originally was going to lead into another arc, but I realized I wasn't as excited to write that arc...and then I remembered that this is my story and I can do whatever I want SO I sort of rushed through a few things so I can get to a few things that I am really dying to write. As a result this chapter is still sort of rough, but I decided to just post it rather than completely rewrite it.

Thanks to everyone for the kind comments and kudos!

In the distance, Bael and the Blue Rose Inn was burning. They couldn't see the fire anymore—they'd run away from it fast as they could—but Jon could still smell it, the sharp scent of burning wood filling his lungs.

In the little grove, they'd not yet built their own fire, but the night was cold, and they were suffering for it. But they couldn't risk being seen by the redcoats.

Jon could look at none of them, for shame. Val, still bloody and shaking, was wrapped in his own thick cloak, sitting with Dalla, who was pale as death and hadn't spoken a word yet. Beric, Mance, and Davos were locked in low conversation, making plans.

It felt a bit like his time conquering with Dany, but the difference was that none of them seemed to think this was a victory. Even Tormund and Anguy were subdued, with Anguy mindlessly making arrows, not speaking to anyone, and Tormund pretending to sleep. Gendry was seated a bit away from the camp area, leaning against a tree, staring at nothing, his jaw set.

After they'd abandoned Dickon Tarly and Theon Greyjoy, they had run back to the inn, hoping to make it look like they were busy hunting down Mance—and therefore hoping that they'd draw redcoat attention away from the inn, thereby saving it. But what they didn't know was that Dalla had shot one of the redcoats in the shoulder, an act punishable by death. Bronn, Sandor, Davos, and Beric had been able to get Mance, Dalla, and Val out of the inn, as well as their own horses and supplies, but a few of the redcoats who had remained had torched the place.

They had done more harm than good. Now Mance had no inn, Dalla was wanted by the Crown, and Val...

She had always seemed so inherently comfortable in her own skin, but now she was withdrawn, wrapping his cloak so tightly around herself that it was like she wanted to disappear into it. Anguy had pointed out that she'd not been raped, but she still had been put through hell, directly because of their actions.

_Dragons plant no trees_, he recalled, and abruptly he got to his feet and stalked off into the woods with his bow and arrow. His arm throbbed from where Theon had hit him, but the burn of pain felt good; he deserved that pain. It sometimes felt that every step he tried to take towards being a better man simply ended up being another step towards hell. Each choice had been his own, so why did he feel like this fate was being forced upon him?
The woods were wilder here, the tangled mass as messy and matted as a lost dog's fur; Jon could barely walk one stride without having to maneuver, weaving through bramble, under fallen trees, over rock and stone. But the challenge was comforting, in its own way. He'd always been good at tracking, good at sneaking through the trees. To bob and weave through bramble was second-nature. For a little while, he floated outside of himself, consumed by the task of wending through the woods. Maybe he could just keep going, and disappear forever.

He soon came to a ruin of an old stone house, just barely visible in the darkness, the crumbled walls nearly grown over with frayed brown vines. He stepped through the doorway, leaves crunching under his feet. A few snowdrops poked their little heads through the dead leaves in the corners of the house's foundation. It had been a small home, barely enough space for four people, and it had been gone a very long time. He mindlessly kicked around, looking for any other signs of the people who had once lived here, but everything had either been taken or had decayed with time. It was really only stone left. Had this house burned, too? Was this the site of some past tragedy?

With a sigh he dropped onto the ground, leaning against one icy wall. His agony had finally immobilized him. He could not unsee what he had seen when he'd banged down the door of the inn: Val about to be raped, lives torn asunder, Mance's political pamphlets scattered on the ground like dead leaves.

He had thought he could save them. Why could he never help anyone? Sansa was the only person he had ever helped, but he'd been the one to make her suffer in the first place...all because he had believed he was doing the right thing by helping Dany. He always thought he was doing the right thing, and it always ended in pain...for him, for the people he thought he was helping, for everyone...

"You really do look like a crow."

Jon jolted with surprise. Mance Rayder was in the doorway, squinting at the ruin in the darkness. He looked round as he entered, with an air of pleasant curiosity, then dropped down next to Jon. "Whiskey?" He held out his flask, but Jon declined.

"I don't drink," he said, and Mance laughed, and shoved it in his face.

"You do now, crow. It's rude to turn down an offer of whiskey." Reluctantly, Jon took the flask and took a reluctant swig, thinking of Sansa's face when she'd taken the first swig of whiskey. Enough, he reminded himself, as the whiskey burned his throat. He passed the flask back to Mance, who took a long drink. They sat in silence; the trees overhead rustled but the night was quiet otherwise.

"I'm sorry. For everything," Jon said quietly. He heard Mance let out a soft laugh, but he couldn't bring himself to look at the man.

"I knew it was bound to happen. Dalla and Val did, too. Once we started distributing the White Stag's essays..."

"You shouldn't have given us shelter," Jon mourned, shaking his head.

"Why not? I knew the risks, crow. I believe in the Brotherhood," Mance countered. "And you did your best to protect us. Dondarrion told me it was your plan. It was a good plan, lad."

"It didn't work."

Mance held out the flask once more, and this time Jon took it without protest.
"We're alive, are we not?"

"Your livelihood is gone."

"But we've still got our lives, crow."

"But Dalla and Val—"

Mance sat forward and twisted, the better to study Jon.

"Dalla and Val made their choices. They knew the risks as well as I did. None of us were surprised to see the redcoats. Truth is, we were only surprised we'd not seen them sooner."

"But we couldn't protect them—"

"--They're people, crow, not sheep!" Mance said with a disbelieving laugh. "They don't exist just for me to protect them."

Jon avoided Mance's eyes. You were supposed to protect the people you loved, supposed to keep them out of danger. It was your duty as a man, as a husband, as a brother, a father... "They believe that the North should be independent, just as I do, and they want to stand up for their beliefs, just as I do."

"Aye, you stood up for your beliefs, and now you've lost everything, and changed nothing." Jon could not stop the bitterness from leaking out of his voice. "I stormed cities with Daenerys because we believed in putting an end to slavery and believed in breaking the wheel that rolled over the smallfolk. But Essos still has slavery, and the wheel still crushes the smallfolk, and now innocents are dead because of us. We did nothing but harm. And now..."

"...Now you fear you are simply repeating your past," Mance guessed softly. Jon nodded.

"The Brotherhood is supposed to help people, but we have not helped anyone today."

"Why do you want to help people, crow?"

Jon stared at Mance in surprise.

"I...I don't know," he admitted sheepishly. "I just do."

"I want to help people, too. So do Dalla and Val. The inn was never important to me; it was just a means toward food and shelter. I can find another means."

They fell silent for a long time, staring into the night.

"How do you know that what you're doing is right?"

"You don't," said Mance softly, "but you try anyway."

It had taken hours to return to Winterfell, and it was quite late now. Clegane and Kettleblack were being tended to by the garrison's maesters. Dickon walked through the pain back through the hunter's gate into Winterfell, followed by Ramsay and Theon. Their legs had been bandaged and Dickon had had enough whiskey from the Inn's stores before they had burned it that he no longer felt the pain. He was lightheaded and furious; drunk on rage and whiskey; he wanted to fuck and to kill. He wished he had raped that girl, wished he had been raping her as the Targaryen wolf had burst in through the door.
"Get me a torch," he snapped at Theon as they passed through the hunter's gate. The Greyjoy eyed him warily, but did as told, hastening off to the Great Keep as Dickon stalked to the godswood.

"I thought you did not keep the old gods, my lord," Ramsay remarked, hot on Dickon's heels like an annoying little dog. Dickon despised him.

"I do not."

He had had the idea as they had watched the Bael and the Blue Rose Inn burn.

*Fire and blood* were the Targaryen words, were they not?

Dickon could give back fire and blood, and more, too.

They stood before Winterfell's godswood. The night was at its darkest; dawn was approaching.

As they had ridden back to Winterfell on mismatched horses, some of them clearly the Brotherhood without Banners' horses, Dickon had thought on the idea more and more, turning it over in his mind as he choked down the burning northern whiskey, numbing the pain and feeding his rage, thinking, irresistibly, of the dragonwolf, how their swords had clashed, how his lovely mouth had twisted at the mention of Sansa Stark. That would be the last time the Targaryen wolf humiliated him, the last time he defeated him, the last time he escaped him. The next time they met, the wolf would know shame, humiliation, pain, and defeat.

This was his vow, his oath. The next time that Dickon faced Jon Snow, there would be fire and blood. The next time that Dickon faced Jon Snow, he would give him the same agony and helplessness that he had seen on the innkeeper's face, as Ramsay and Trant had prepared to rape the golden-haired girl.

*Go back south*, he had said, so pityingly. *Go back home.*

But Winterfell belonged to him, now. Snow may have taken Sansa from him, but he had taken Winterfell from them both. And soon he would take the north from them, too. No one would ever take anything from him again; no one would ever humiliate him, or belittle him, or defeat him again.

"Here's the torch," Greyjoy's voice came. He walked into the godswood, limping a little, his face contorted with pain. Dickon took the torch, barely looking at the Ironborn man. "I didn't figure you for a gods-fearing man," Greyjoy said slyly.

"There are no gods here," Dickon said. And he went to the biggest heart tree of them all, the heart tree he had once sat beneath with Lord Baelish, worrying over Sansa Stark, and held the torch to it.

"Wh-what are—" Theon began, horrified, and he stumbled forward, but Dickon turned round and hit him so hard in the face that he fell back and did not speak another word.

"Tomorrow we will go to Winter Town, and burn the godswood there," Dickon said to them. Ramsay's eyes were golden, reflecting the flames as the godswood burned. Theon lay on the ground, his face black with shining blood, but his eyes were not glimmering with humor—they were wide with fear.

*The north is my home now, Snow,* Dickon thought, stalking away from the burning godswood. *It is not yours.*
Sansa held her breath, waiting. Her blood was thick in her head and her thighs were slick and her mouth was filled with cotton and the room was too warm, and though she knew that once the fog of whiskey cleared she would feel shame, for now she only burned with a mindless lust. *Jon, Jon, Jon*, her blood seemed to cry out, but *Jon* was not here...

"I-I'm sorry," she whispered to the door. She heard the floor creak on the other side; Jaime had shifted his weight, but he did not walk away.

"No, it was my fault. I thought you were having another nightmare." His voice was soft, and weary.

With a shaking hand, Sansa turned the knob, opening the door. The moonlight in the hall had turned Jaime's golden head silver. He was turned away from her. She was gripped with a desperation for someone to know, someone to understand...she wished someone might explain it to her. Why did she still want Jon? Jaime began to walk away, back to his own room, but she said the words in a rush, the words that she had not been able to say to anyone else.

"He never bedded me."

The confession hung thick in the air. Jaime froze, and looked back at her, his face impassive. "We never consummated the marriage," Sansa added, swallowing against her dry mouth. She stepped on bare feet into the hall, her sark playing round her thighs, tickling her skin, her hair clinging to her neck and shoulders in sweaty tendrils. There was unmistakable heat in Jaime's gaze. He was a man, of course. "I cannot stop thinking of him," she continued in a whisper, taking another step toward Jaime. His smooth skin was edged in silver and his eyes looked nearly black. She was a monster consumed by lust. If he wanted to take her, she would happily let him. Anything to stop thinking of Jon. "I should not want him. I do not know why I want him."

"We cannot help who we love," Jaime replied, his voice solemn.

She wanted to tell him that she did not love Jon, but she could not find the words. What was it to love, anyway? She did not know. Her blood burned and sang for Jon, but she hardly knew him. She could not possibly love him.

"I wish he had just bedded me. Then I could stop wondering," she said bitterly.

"You are drunk. Go to bed," Jaime replied, turning away. Some demon possessed her, and she reached out and grasped his arm, turning him back to her.

"Why does no man want me?" The words were coming out faster than she could even think them, pouring out from the darkest recesses of her heart. "Jon did not want me, you do not want me. Even Mr. Payne will not kiss me. Why does no one want me?"

She pulled him closer, searching his eyes desperately, gripping the front of his shirt, his chest hard beneath her hands, and sank against him. He stumbled backward, back against the wall, and then she was pressing her lips against his, but he was not responding to her kiss. His hand was on her arm and he was pushing her away, gently. Breathlessly she broke away from him.

"I do not desire you because you are a child to me."

His words rang in the silence of the hall, and Sansa stumbled backward, horrified and ashamed. "You are beautiful, but you are the same age as my son. You might have married my son, had things turned out differently." Jaime had never seemed so somber.

Sansa turned away, covering her mouth to stop a horrified sob from being unleashed. What had she done? Had she lost her mind? She had thrown herself, drunkenly, at Jaime, once before already—
had she not learned her lesson? "Jon Snow is a fool for not bedding you, but perhaps he thought he was being honorable. As for Mr. Payne, he is afraid of his own shadow. Men like that are cowards in the face of beauty; he has not been raised to believe he has any right to you."

"Please, tell me why I want Jon," Sansa pressed, unable to face Jaime. She wrapped her arms around herself. "He stole me from my home, then sent me away. He did terrible things. I shouldn't want him. So why do I want him? Why can't I stop thinking about him?"

"I do not know. There are so many kinds of desire. Sometimes it is about a kinship, a recognition of the soul; sometimes it is purely a physical attraction; and sometimes..." he faltered, "...sometimes it is simply a violent, uncontrollable force."

A recognition of the soul...Sansa thought of Jon's eyes as he had finally turned to face her, that moment when they had gone into the bedroom, supposedly to consummate the marriage. She had seen his soul, in that moment. And as his lips had found hers, she felt she had been cradling his soul against hers; the connection of their bodies had felt so inadequate in expressing the profound desire that she had felt for him, for the boy who had given Bran his own fish, for the man whose scarred hands had twined with hers as they had woven the net of reeds together, for the man whose face had twisted with fury at the threat of her returning to King's Landing. Would that she could soothe the turbulence and pain within his heart, would that she could heal the gashes in his soul... His soul is as mine is, she realized; he too longs for the world to be beautiful and is devastated that it is so cruel...

"What is it between you and Cersei?"

"It was all three."

"Was?"

"It has been over between us for some time."

"And there has been no other?"

"I have never desired another woman."

The haze of the whiskey was lifting; she was chilly, now, standing nearly naked in the hall, with a man who did not want her, and she had thrown herself at him once again. And she was alone, and perhaps always would be. And Jaime was alone, and perhaps always would be. And Jon was alone, and perhaps always would be. The world was unbearably ugly and desolate, a wasteland of razed earth, torched by desire that left nothing but barren fields. What was the point of love songs, of poetry, of dances and art and music and sunrises and flowers? Her eyes burned and her heart ached.

"I am sorry," she said at last. "That is the second time I have forced myself upon you."

"I cannot say I've felt terribly threatened either time," Jaime said wryly, and Sansa's lips curved in spite of her pain. "Go to bed, Sansa."

She heard his door shut. For once, he had not called her Mrs. Snow. For some reason, it made her eyes burn, and hot tears spilled down her cheeks.

They had passed Deepwood Motte some time ago, and the air began to taste salty as they approached the Bay of Ice. Further inland it had been warmer, the air fragrant with spring, the trees silvered with the promise of buds, but it was colder, here, the wind harsher, the sunlight more brittle. Daenerys was bundled in a white fur coat, a gift from the Mormonts, and she was grateful
for how it hid her shape.

The journey had been quiet. After languishing in Torrhen's Square for so long, they had agreed to retreat to Bear Island. The word was that General Clegane was on the hunt, and had spread garrisons of redcoats throughout the north in search of them. It wasn't safe, not while they still had no men. Their following had been explosive after the Red Wedding, but now... Lady Mormont said the North was afraid, too afraid to speak out. The Crown was imposing new taxes, she had been told, and it would cripple the north, apparently, but the topic bored her and she had stopped listening.

Jorah had not spoken of the child since the morning he had come into her room, and no one else either knew or dared to speak of it. And Daenerys, though she had made her decision already, was not prepared to speak of it, either.

She was not prepared to say goodbye to her quest, to the thing she had been seeking for more than half her life.

*And yet every minute that I do not speak is another minute I risk everyone's lives, another minute I waste Mormont and Karstark gold, another minute I take away from those who have supported me.*

The words had been lodged in her throat for a week now, begging to be spoken and yet... Once upon a time, not so long ago, she had not even been sure if she loved Jon or the throne more. How could she simply give that up? It was no easy matter. The path ahead was murky and shadowed; she did not know what her future would be now.

The world was flatter, here. They passed icy marshes cluttered with dead trees, thin and jagged and white as bone, rising up from the reeds and broken ice. It was a desolate place. Every now and then a gull shrieked, but the world was silent otherwise, save for the sounds of their horses as they traveled. No one had had much to say. Lady Mormont and Tyrion led the group, and Daenerys rode with Missandei and Jorah on either side of her, with Daario and Grey Worm behind, searching for possible trouble. Once upon a time, Jon would have been beside her, just as silent, his grey eyes scanning the horizon, his dark hair toyed with by the wind.

Every time she thought of him it was another lash of pain. The only remedy was to imagine their child. She saw silver hair and grey eyes in her dreams, but she did not yet know if it would be boy or girl. If it were a boy, she had decided he would be named Gida, high Valyrian for calmness and evenness, and for a girl, Rhaella, for her mother, who had been gentle and sweet.

She hoped the child would have Jon's eyes, and Jon's temperament. Sweet and gentle and so filled with love.

She hoped the child would be innocent of the Targaryen legacy, innocent of any fire and blood, and safe and happy and loved. She would tell the child stories of Jon's bravery and valor, stories of Rhaegar and Lyanna's passion, and stories of Aerys' greatness, but they would be stories, not a legacy.

The child would never sit the throne, nor wish to; the child would have pretty dolls and books and know how to ride a horse and sing every happy song that had ever been sung. And Daenerys told herself that she would smile and love and laugh and forget about the throne, forget about Drogo and all of the fire and blood that she had left behind in Essos, and forget about red wolves and red weddings and red women.

"Princess," Jorah said in a low voice, and Daenerys looked up. Lady Mormont and Tyrion had pulled to a stop ahead of her, Mormont on her gelding and Tyrion on his pony. The path ahead,
sandy and narrow, snaked into a grove of holly trees, but something was cast on the path, something grey. There was movement, and the distant sound of sobbing.

"It is a woman," Daario realized; he had always had sharp vision. As they drew closer, she saw it was not just a woman: she was crouched over a man, as well, sobbing. Daenerys slid off her horse, ignoring the protests of the others. Jorah and Daario hastened to follow her as she approached the woman.

The woman was crouched on the ground over a man, who was shaking violently, trying to restrain him, as she cried; an infant, strapped to her back, was squalling. As Daenerys got closer she saw the woman was disfigured; half of her face was scaly and grey.

"Princess, she has greyscale," Jorah realized, grabbing Daenerys' hand, but she snatched it away. "Then I won't touch her face," she said without looking back; her heart was pounding. "They need help."

"She is unclean," Daario insisted, but Daenerys ignored him. She had never been able to resist helpless people, especially women.

The woman looked up, her ruined face shining with tears, as Daenerys approached. She would have been uncommonly plain even without the greyscale, but her eyes were pretty: bright blue, and gentle.

"M-my husband," she began thickly, gasping. "It's n-never been this bad before—"

"He is having a fit," Daario deduced needlessly. Daenerys knelt down at the man's head and held it in place. He was young, younger than Jon; he had the face of a child, elfin and smooth, but the body of a man. His mouth was foaming, his eyes rolled back into his head, as he shook violently. The infant was crying harder; Daenerys saw twin wet spots on the front of the woman's dress.

"Jorah, Daario, hold him down; nurse your child," Daenerys told the woman, who shook her head mutely. "I-I c-can't—"

"Feed your child," Daenerys said firmly. She looked back at Jorah and Daario, who hastened to kneel beside her and hold the man down. The woman let out a soft sob and turned away to breastfeed her baby.

"Turn him on his side; he'll swallow his tongue," Missandei, who had just reached them, said, and the three of them attempted to roll the man onto his side. It was not difficult, even with his violent spasms: he was so thin and fragile that Daenerys thought she could have lifted him on her own. A few feet away, the infant quieted, though the mother was still crying as the baby nursed, her shoulders shaking.

The fit seemed to last forever. When at last the man's shaking stilled, Daenerys felt weak, and she was soaked with cold sweat inside her furs. The woman had finished nursing her child, and now the only sound was the wind through the barren lands. Daenerys sat back on her heels, her own hands trembling finely, as the man slumped back, his head in her lap, his face shining with sweat.

"Thank you," the woman whispered, cradling her child. "I think it's the hunger; he's become weaker than ever."

"Where are you going?" Daenerys asked, meeting those striking blue eyes once more.
"We were going north, to Castle Black."

"Castle Black?"

"For the maesters there," she explained sadly, nodding to the man that Daenerys was cradling in her lap. "They healed me, once," she added, pointing awkwardly to the grey ruined flesh of her cheek. "I thought they might be able to cure him of his fits."

"You're going the wrong way," Lady Mormont said, still atop her horse. "This road leads west." But her eyes took in the weak man, the way the woman trembled and shook like a leaf. They will never survive the journey, Daenerys realized. She knew starvation well; it had been her constant companion, a threat forever at her back, for more than a decade. "That road leads north, but it's a long journey round the mountains...especially without a horse."

"Take mine," Daenerys said suddenly. "Can you ride?"

"Y-yes, I can," the woman began in surprise, but Tyrion scoffed.

"Take yours?"

"Do we not have enough horses?" she asked Tyrion acidly, though unease squirmed within her. The horses were the Mormonts', technically. Daenerys bit her lip, avoiding Lady Mormont's eyes. "Take my horse, and take some gold."

No one protested further. Jorah and Daario helped the woman and her husband onto the horse; her husband could only moan weakly and slump forward, barely held upright in the saddle.

"Thank you," the woman said, her eyes bright with tears. "You are too kind."

They watched the woman ride off, and then Daenerys mounted Missandei's horse, riding behind her. They did not speak of the woman again.

Days passed, and Sansa did not hear from or see Jory. Podrick assured her that Jory was always on the move, always moving from one hiding place to another, but his absence still filled her with dread. Then a rumor came that Dickon Tarly had burned the godsdownd at Winterfell, and then, a day later, that he and Gregor Clegane had burned the godsdownd at Winter Town, and that soon they would burn the godsdownd at Mole's Town. Sansa had not prayed in the godsdownd at Winterfell; she had only found the old gods later, at King's Landing. But that godsdownd was gone now, too. The Crown, with the help of Dickon, was slowly burning away everything that had ever belonged to her, everything that she had ever loved. Bit by bit, Sansa Stark was being struck from the world. Her family, first; then, everyone she had loved; then her gods, and soon, her home. When would they come for her, too?

And so, to cope with her fears, she sewed.

Jaime's jacket was the first thing she finished, but she had yet to present it to him and complete the last fitting. For a few days, things between them had been uncomfortable, but by necessity that dissolved. Brienne was putting Jaime to work more than ever, and they simply ran into each other too much to maintain any discomfort. And when Jaime wasn't being put to work in the bakery, he was training in the yard, sometimes with Podrick, but most often with Brienne.

"He's getting better fast," Podrick observed one morning as they stared out the window, watching Brienne and Jaime spar with wooden swords. Even Sansa could see the change. His movements were getting less awkward, and he never dropped the sword anymore. Brienne's face was flushed
with effort, now, as they sparred. Slowly, Jaime Lannister as Sansa had known him was returning...just as Sansa herself was fading from the world. And yet, he was coming back to life a different man. There was a grim determination to his jaw; he was a man on a mission, but of what that mission was, Sansa was not certain... He did not seem to have any intention of returning to King's Landing, so what could he possibly be planning?

Sansa had finished her customers’ dresses for the ball, too. She had created a glorious light blue confection for Gilly, with frothy lace at the elbows and a split skirt that revealed sumptuous sage-coloured silk billowing out front and back. For another customer, she had embroidered bluebells into raw lilac silk, staying up for nights on end, working until her fingers ached and her eyes itched and burned. And for another, she had stitched pink silk flowers into heavy ivory satin, dotting the center of each flower with silver thread, so that the gown shimmered and winked in candlelight.

Each dress was lovelier than any dress that Sansa had ever sewn; each dress she would have been delighted to wear to any ball in King's Landing; each dress would flatter its wearer.

But for herself, she had not sewn a dress of beauty or elegance.

The red silk dress was buried in her trunk of fabrics. She only brought it out to work on it periodically, and only at night, when no one else would see it.

It was her most daring dress yet, of any she had ever sewn or worn—or any she had ever even seen. Even Margaery Tyrell, known for her skin-baring, daring dresses, would have blushed at it.

She didn't have to wear it, she told herself, each time she made another stitch, or added another detail. She hadn't even planned on going to the ball in the first place. What use did Alayne Stone have for balls? She wanted no husband and had no flirtations. She had, at some point, decided that Alayne Stone did not dance, but that lie had been dashed by her dancing at the last Direwolves’ meeting, of course...

And yet, the idea of not going to the ball, of not wearing the dress, seemed more painful than the risk of going to the ball in such a dress.

The morning of the next Direwolves' meeting, Sansa went to Sam and Gilly's shop to deliver Gilly's dress for the ball...and to ask, yet again, after Jory.

It was a damp, grey day, but warmer than it had been, to the point of being unpleasantly humid. She had dressed in her dark blue wool dress and left her shawl at her office, and had braided her hair to keep it off her neck. She ran into many people she knew—and many she had seen at the Direwolves' meeting—but everyone was as grim as the weather today, avoiding eye contact and keeping to themselves. Dread was knotting in her belly, and she hastened her steps to the printshop. The very air was tense, roiling with the threat of a storm.

The window of the shop had still not been fixed. Sansa entered, the bell ringing with her entry, to find Sam locked in conversation with, to her shock, Anguy. He was dressed all in green, as he always was, and though he brightened slightly at the sight of her, there was tension and worry about him, too.

And beside him, Sam looked positively horrified.

"Miss Stone!" Sam greeted with false, unconvincing cheer, his voice too high, too wavering. Sansa shut the door and set Gilly's dress, wrapped in brown paper, on the nearest table.

"What has happened?" she demanded, joining the two men. "Anguy, it is good to see you again,"
she added politely. He smiled at her, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"It is safe; she's a wolf, too," Sam assured Anguy. Sansa would have laughed at the irony of his words, had the situation not been clearly so dire. He turned to Sansa again. "The man who supplies us with the White Stag's essays was confronted by the Crown's forces, and his inn was burned. Anguy has been delivering the writing to me for ages."

"Burned?"

"Aye, for his association with the Brotherhood without Banners," said Anguy grimly. "I happen to be in contact with the Brotherhood, and learned how it happened. The new general, Gregor Clegane, took a small force to the inn, with Dickon Tarly, and they tried to kill the man, and rape his wife and sister-in-law."

Sansa felt weak; she clutched the nearest table for support, trying to hide her eyes from both men. But she couldn't help but notice that Sam looked just as weak, just as pale... "The Brotherhood stopped them, though. It was the Targaryen wolf's idea," Anguy continued, still looking at her. "He pretended to think that the innkeeper—Mance Rayder—had betrayed them, and ran into the inn pretending to be about to attack Mance for his betrayal. A bastard of King Robert's is also one of the Brotherhood, and he looks just like King Robert, so he went too. The redcoats took the bait and were lured away from the inn."

"Because they recognized them, and there are bounties on their heads," Sansa concluded, feeling sick. "So the redcoats would go after them for certain." That idiot.

"Aye, meanwhile, the others of the Brotherhood sneaked Mance and the two women out of the inn and away, to safety. But the redcoats still burned his inn. He's got nothing left," Anguy added, shaking his head. "The Brotherhood's devastated. They never wanted anyone to suffer for them," he added fiercely, and Sansa realized by the emotion twisting his voice that he was not merely in association with the Brotherhood—he must had been part of the Brotherhood.

Then he knows Jon.

"You say that they didn't want anyone to suffer... yet I've heard stories of the Targaryen wolf's taste for violence," Sansa began innocently, though her heart was pounding. She met Anguy's eyes carefully. Only someone who has something to hide will avoid a man's eyes, she reminded herself. "What is he truly like, if you've met him? Is he really so violent? And why does he no longer serve the Beggar Princess?"

"Aye, I used to tell my little brother tales of the Targaryen wolf's savagery," Sam agreed softly, looking out the window. Anguy smiled at Sansa, slightly.

"He's no savage," he said wryly. "He never talks of the Beggar Princess, but I've heard they parted ways because he no longer believed she was doing the right thing. He's a brilliant fighter, aye, but he's kind. He broods a lot," he added. "A very sulky fellow, that one. And, I think, still very much in love with his wife," he continued thoughtfully.

"His wife?" Sansa prompted softly. Anguy was looking directly at her.

"Aye, Sansa Stark. Only he knows where she is, and he'll not tell anyone where she's gone."

"How can he love her, if he is not with her?" Sansa countered.

"Don't ask me, Miss Stone. I know nothing of marriages, and hope I never learn," Anguy shot back cheekily. But he sobered again, and looked to Sam, who seemed to have to shake himself out of
"I suppose we won't be hearing from the White Stag for a time, then," Sam concluded sadly. "Poor Mance Rayder."

"What will he do, now?" Sansa asked Anguy, who shrugged.

"Who knows? He's got no gold; the inn was everything to him. He knew it might come to this, of course. He's no fool. He knew he couldn't just pass out anti-royalist writing without consequences forever."

"We could help him," Sansa blurted suddenly. "You say you're in contact with the Brotherhood, Anguy—are they still in touch with Mance?"

"Aye, he's with them now, until he decides where to go next," Anguy replied, looking surprised. Sansa bit her lip.

"What if we raised gold for him?"

Sam and Anguy stared at her, dumbfounded. "Or if not gold, then at least, what if we provided them with clothing, with food—anything that would help?" She stepped forward, lowering her voice. "The Direwolves meet tonight—what else will we do, if not think of how we might help them? Complain more about taxes? Drink more whiskey? We sit idle while Mance has been risking everything—and now he's lost everything. We have to help him."

"A woman of action," Anguy remarked lightly. "You would suit the Targaryen wolf well, Miss Stone," he added with a laugh. "You're both the first to run to a helpless man's aid."

"We could all take a lesson from the Targaryen wolf," she said, her face flushing, hoping to sound dismissive. "Besides, he's already married to Sansa Stark, is he not? And very much in love with her, is he not?"

"You raise a good point," Anguy yielded. "He is already married, you're right."

"Let's help Mance Rayder," Sansa insisted. "When will you see him next? Can we send food and clothing, at the very least, with you?" she asked Anguy. He was grinning.

"Of course, Miss Stone. I think it's a brilliant idea."

"You ought to come to the meeting, tonight," Sam suggested brightly. "Jory has been anxious to meet you. And I think everyone'd love to hear more about the Brotherhood without Banners," he added eagerly. "Come to the Laughing Tree alehouse, tonight. We meet at midnight below the bar."

"I'll be there." He turned to Sansa. "And will I see you there, Miss Stone?"

"Of course you will. Miss Stone was the heroine of our last meeting," Sam said suddenly, his eyes shining. "Mr. Thorne of the Town Watch walked in in the midst of our meeting, and we all pretended to have been dancing and celebrating—per our plan—and when Thorne questioned us, Miss Stone said it was her name day," he explained. "Miss Stone is so brave."

"Aye, just like the Targaryen wolf, just as I said," Anguy insisted. Sansa turned away from his clever eyes, her face burning. "Perhaps I'll convince the Brotherhood to come tonight," he added lightly. "They're not far from town."
She looked out the window, and the day suddenly seemed brighter, like the sun had come out, and some curious mix of agony and hope was swelling, blooming, within her. The trees were silvered with the promise of buds and leaves, and secrets and promises—magic—seemed tucked into every crevice between stones, hidden in every shallow puddle in the street, in the wheel of every carriage.

The world was suddenly beautiful again.

Anguy, the only man among them who wouldn't be recognized and had no bounties on his head, had been tasked with taking the merchants' stolen wares into Mole's Town and returning them to their rightful owners. Jon loathed to be so near Mole's Town again, so soon, and had spent most of the day hunting, alone. Hunting was the only thing that could occupy his mind well enough, aside from fighting, but there was no one to fight. Bronn was the only opponent worth dueling and he was busy drinking heavily with Mance and flirting with Val, which incited such profound jealousy in Gendry that Gendry could not bare to be out of range of the two. It was tiresome and he could not stand it any longer.

Mole's Town was so close. He could see the top of the Sept over the trees, and he thought it might very well finally drive him mad. Everyone knew the Targaryens tended toward madness; perhaps this would be his downfall. Sansa, Sansa, Sansa, the trees seemed to rush in the wind as he moved through the forest.

Hunting felt good. It served a purpose. It helped them. And it occupied his mind. He hunted until it was dark, and came back to their camp dragging half a dozen rabbits and a deer. As he approached the camp and saw the fire, he saw the familiar slender form of Anguy, heard the man's sly laugh, and his heart leapt into his throat.

It was only now that he could admit to himself that he had been afraid that Anguy might see Sansa again.

Jon lingered in the trees, his shoulders aching from the weight of the deer, animal blood smeared on his hands.

What if Anguy had seen Sansa?

Could he bring himself to ask? Did he want to know?

Would it be worse if he hadn't seen Sansa?

What did it even matter? It made no difference to Jon if Anguy had seen Sansa. What could it possibly matter?

I just want to know that she's safe, he told himself. That was all.

He forced himself to walk into the camp, and all fell silent when they saw him. Jon dropped the game near the campfire for Sandor to skin; the man seemed to enjoy the task.

"We were just speaking of your wife," Val remarked in the tense silence. Jon did not look up, as he shed his bow and arrows.

"Were you," he said lightly, taking unnecessary care in arranging the quiver.

"She's joined the Direwolves, the resistance group in Mole's Town—"
"She what?!"

Jon dropped the quiver and shot to his feet, staring at Anguy. Davos snorted.

"They don't even have to be in the same town to squabble like a married couple," he remarked to Beric and Mance, who chuckled lightly. Anguy was smirking.

"Aye, she's a good match for you, Snow. Wants to save everyone," he said slyly. "She wants to raise gold and help Mance recover from his loss. ...And still at odds with the commander of the Town Watch, from the sound of it."

Hot fury rushed through Jon, and before he knew what he was doing, he turned round and kicked his quiver, sending arrows flying everywhere. He heard chuckling, but he was turned away from everyone. He could not bear for anyone to see his face.

"I did not know your wife was so fierce, Jon Snow," Val remarked. Jon exhaled hotly, mopping at his face.

"She is supposed to be keeping a low profile," he began tightly. "Why in seven hells is she joining bloody resistance groups?!"

"Runs in the family, I expect. Those Starks were never ones to run from a fight," Mance mused. "She's just like her father, it seems."

"Her father is dead," Jon snarled, turning to face Mance and the others. "If anyone finds out who she is, she will be dead...just like her father."

"Aye, and your father is dead, and if anyone finds you, you'll be dead just like your father, too, Snow," Mance countered, getting to his feet. "I don't see that stopping you from doing what you like."

"That's different—" Jon began furiously, but Val scoffed.

"How is it different? Because she's a woman?"

Jon had no response for that, and his face was too hot, and his fury was burning too bright. He scowled at Val, who returned his scowl, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You wanted to give her her own life, Snow," Davos said, rather more gently. "You can't get mad at her for doing with her life what she wants to."

"She wasn't supposed to be doing this," Jon insisted desperately. Why did no one else see his anger, understand his pain? "She was supposed to make a life, find a man, have a family—"

"—But she didn't want to," Davos interrupted, his voice still gentle.

"But if she didn't want to, then why—" He could not finish the thought. *Then why did she choose to leave?*

No one had any explanation. Jon stared into the fire, fists clenched so tightly his nails, short though they were, dug into his palms painfully. The pain felt good, it grounded him. Some new pain was rising, rising, rising... It was not trouble she did not want, it was *him* she did not want...

"She asked about you," Anguy remarked, suddenly. Jon's gaze snapped to Anguy, but, infuriatingly, Anguy simply dropped to sit down next to Val.
"And?" Jon prompted furiously, after waiting a moment. Anguy glanced up, as though he had already forgotten Jon was there.

"Oh, I can't remember what I said," he replied cheekily. "That was hours ago, Snow. I've had dozens of conversations since this morning." He paused. "Oh, but the Direwolves do meet tonight. I'm supposed to go. I think she might be there," he added, narrowing his eyes and rubbing his neck as though struggling to remember.

"When I get back, I will kill you," Jon told him shortly. He picked up his sword and cloak, and Gendry got to his feet.

"Mole's Town?" he asked simply, following Jon away from the campsite.

"Aye," Jon replied furiously.

"She lives at the bakery on the edge of town," Anguy called after them.

They walked in silence for a long time, and as they approached the gate of Mole's Town, the anger began to die down, leaving rationality and embarrassment in its wake. What had he planned? Surely he could not simply walk into Mole's Town, knock on the bakery's front door, and scream at Sansa, even if that was precisely what he felt like doing.

But even so, in the darkness, they scaled the wall, avoiding the gate, and dropped on silent feet into Mole's Town. The streets were patterned with squares of golden light from the cosy homes, everything well-worn but tidy. *She could have made a normal life here,* Jon thought miserably, desperately, as they passed through the houses as mere shadows. *She could have raised a family here... a son named Robb...* Why was she throwing it all away?

Why was she undoing the only good thing he had ever done?

It did not take long to find the bakery. It truly was on the town's edge, positioned next to an abandoned paddock that was covered in the season's last snowdrops. The bakery was dark, but the house behind it, attached by a breezeway and centered by a dirty yard, had brightly-lit windows.

Did he dare?

Jon stood in the darkness provided by the town's high wall, hardly able to breathe. He could see over the fence, and into the kitchen, but he was too far to see any details, to distinguish the people moving about inside. Gendry, thankfully, said nothing; only waited patiently, beside Jon, as Jon stared in agony at the house.

This was the closest they had been since their wedding night; this was, perhaps, the closest they would ever be again.

He just needed to see her, he told himself. The fight, the anger, bled away. He would not tell her how to live her life. He would not confront her. She had not chosen him. But he just needed to see her...

He darted to the fence, and Gendry followed. They crouched behind the fence, holding their breaths, and Jon straightened, slowly, his heart pounding. He needed to see her, but he was afraid to see her. What might he do? How might he feel?

And there she was.

She was standing near the window, talking to someone, laying plates onto a small table. She was
smiling, laughing. Jon gripped the fence, reeling in agony and hope. She disappeared from view, and Brienne's distinctive form blocked his view, and as grateful as he was to the woman, for a moment he despised her.

And then a man appeared, clad in rust-red, with short blond hair, but Jon could not see his face. He was tall, and lean, and moved with a warrior's grace. He disappeared, walking to the right, and Sansa was back in his view again...looking at the man...smiling at him... He had wanted her to meet a man, to be happy, but this was unbearable... He had been lying to himself all along... He was a fool, always such a fool.

"Someone's coming, come on," Gendry said softly, pulling Jon away by the elbow, and Jon let himself be dragged, still desperately drinking in the sight of Sansa. Every part of his being cried against being pulled away, and, out of nowhere, he thought of the marriage vows of the old gods... *blood of my blood, and bone of my bone, I give you my body, that we two might be one...* it had been a meaningless phrase to him until this moment. He now understood it in a primal way. *I am hers, and she is mine.* He had spoken the words and had meant them but he had not understood them, not as he did now. He would never be truly separate from Sansa; it was something ancient and unknowable that bound them together now, older than the weirwoods and older than the coloured glass of the Septs, older than words.

They melted back into the darkness, and Jon watched a man, round-faced but handsome, approach the house. He knocked on the door, and Sansa opened it, brightening at the sight of him. Jon sank back against the wall, helpless and lost. The door shut, the man disappearing inside.

For a long time, he simply stood there, leaning against the cold stone, a searing pain in his chest rendering him unable to do more than stare at that window. They were sitting down for supper, and a sliver of her copper hair and slim shoulder were just barely in his view, and he drank in even that sight.

Horses, whickering and trotting along the street, drew his attention, and he and Gendry squinted into the darkness. A lean, sinewed man on a gleaming black horse, dressed all in polished black, rode to the front of the bakery, and lingered for a time. Even in the darkness, Jon could see the snakelike coil of his whip, the dark metal of his pistol. He stared at the house a long time, and then, reluctantly, turned away, moving back down the street. Two men, one skinny and the other broad, followed him on their own black horses, also dressed all in black.

"Town Watch, must be," Gendry breathed, staring after the man. Jon stared after the men until they disappeared round a corner, then looked back at the window, where he could just barely see Sansa.

"I've got to stay," he told Gendry, never taking his eyes from the copper hair. "I have to make sure she's safe."

"Will you speak to her?"

Jon thought of the blond man in the red jacket and the handsome man whom Sansa had greeted so happily, and his heart twisted so painfully that he was breathless again.

"No." He swallowed, and heard Gendry scoff.

"You have a problem, just so you know," he informed him in a low voice. "You can't keep her safe *and* avoid her forever."

"Aye, I know."
Part II: Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, everyone. Real life got a bit crazy. This chapter is super long, too. Thanks to everyone for reading, commenting, and kudos-ing. I appreciate every comment and kudos (kudo?) and am continually blown away by how smart everyone's comments are.

Sansa had changed her dress four times already, in anticipation of the Direwolves meeting, knowing full well that she was being ridiculous.

What might happen if she saw him?

Jon could not acknowledge that he knew her—it would be an instant giveaway of her identity. They would have to pretend to have never met. Could they pretend?

The irony was that in so many ways, they had not truly met yet. Everything had changed—she was no longer Sansa Stark, and he no longer belonged to Daenerys. The woman that she had been even three months ago would never have attended the Direwolves meeting tonight.

She had changed, but had he? He must have changed, to be willing to abandon Daenerys. What had made him break from Daenerys, and when had he done it?

What if, after all this painful hope, nothing happened and nothing changed? What if they simply pretended to have never met, and then parted ways after the meeting, never having spoken, never to see each other again?

Somehow that seemed the very worst possibility of all.

She eventually settled on her blue dress, which brought out her eyes but did not look ostentatious, and at first put her hair up, then left it down, then braided it, then put it up once more, then left it down. And then an idea struck her, and she went to her jewelry box, which only contained the Targaryen clasp from her wedding cloak, and the remaining snowdrop pins. Only one had been undamaged during their journey from Winter Town to Mole's Town; the others had either shed their paper petals or become stained.

She brushed out her hair once more, and twisted a lock of hair out of her face, and pinned it in place with the last snowdrop pin.

It was so tiny, barely visible in her hair. He would probably not even remember what she had worn in her hair on their wedding, anyway. And what did she even mean by it? She did not know. There were so many competing feelings in her heart. She was so angry with him, and so hurt, yet so hopeful, too. The world had seemed cast in some golden light all day, since she had seen Anguy and learned that Jon was near; everything was gilded in fairy dust, like she was a princess in a fairy tale about to see her knight.

But she was no princess, and Jon was no knight. She was being foolish. But it felt so good to be foolish and hopeful. It felt like coming home, or like coming back to life.
Sansa left her room at last, for it was nearly time to meet Podrick. She took her cloak, and went downstairs. Jaime and Brienne were at the kitchen table peeling potatoes when she walked in. She had given Jaime his coat and shirt earlier, and he was wearing them now, and it warmed her to see him wearing them. He had accepted the clothing with a dismissive joke, but she had not missed how he seemed to stand a bit taller, seemed to carry himself a bit more like General Lannister once more.

"Make sure you take a different route," Brienne advised without looking up. "And don't let Podrick drink so much whiskey this time. He was sick all morning last time," she continued as she peeled.

Jaime, however, was studying her suspiciously, and Sansa felt her face burn as she took a seat at the table with them, intending on peeling potatoes while she waited. "They really ought to change the meeting place," Brienne was saying. "Thorne will be there again tonight, mark my words—and you can't use the name day excuse again."

"Mr. Payne said they had changed it, when he was here earlier for supper," Sansa replied, clumsily grappling with one of the peelers. Her silly hands, usually so competent, were disobeying her in her nervousness. She risked a glance at Jaime, but his eyes were narrowed as he looked out the window.

"You keep looking out that window," Brienne observed irritably. "You're like a cat, except you don't do anything useful, like catching vermin."

"There's something out there," Jaime insisted, throwing down the peeler and stalking to the window.

"Perhaps a bird?" Brienne suggested, rolling her eyes. "I've looked three times and found nothing."

"It's by the fence," Jaime said, peering out the window. "Someone's watching us, I swear it."

"Thorne lacks the subtlety to stalk us," Brienne said shortly, dumping a dozen peeled potatoes into a large pot by her feet. "And if not Thorne, who else would it be?"

A thrill rippled through Sansa; she did not look out the window, her breath catching in her throat as she focused her gaze on the table.

Who else, indeed?

*Don't be silly,* she told herself. *It wouldn't be Jon. Jon isn't there, and he won't be there tonight, either.*

"Who indeed would be watching a house that contains the missing general of the army, an officer who has deserted the army, the Targaryen wolf's missing wife, and a woman wanted for the murder of King Robert's little brother?" Jaime asked with awful sarcasm, stepping away from the window and dropping back into his seat to resume peeling. He was peeling potatoes awkwardly: by holding them down on the table with the stump of his right arm, and clumsily hacking into them with the peeler in his left hand. It was painful to watch, and she could tell that the humiliation was making him more prickly than usual.

"Murder of King Robert's little brother?" Sansa asked in surprise, looking to Brienne. Podrick had made jokes on occasion about Brienne being wanted for murder, but she had always dismissed them, as the idea of Brienne murdering anything was so utterly preposterous. Brienne was scowling at Jaime, and Jaime was hacking into his potato with a new, vicious glee.

"Yes, P-p-podrick P-p-payne let that one slip today," he informed Sansa delightedly. "Remember
when Renly Baratheon so mysteriously died after King Robert passed?"

"He drank himself to death," Sansa replied, confused.

The story was that he had gotten drunk at a party, gripped with misery at his brother's passing, and had choked on his own vomit, but of course, rumors had been flying left and right at the time about the truth of Joffrey's parentage, and therefore legitimacy, and as a result, some people had suggested Renly as the true heir to the throne.

"Or, one of his serving maids was bought by Crown loyalists and murdered Renly," Jaime offered. Brienne's jaw was set, and she was peeling potatoes with violent vigor.

"I loved Renly," she said abruptly, setting the peeler down, hard, her eyes bright. "I would never have hurt him, ever." Jaime snorted.

"You know, you're perhaps the only woman who might have had a chance with Renly, given how much you look like a man--"

"That is enough--"

"Why were you wanted for his murder, Brienne?" Sansa interrupted. Brienne was blinking rapidly.

"I found him, the morning after he had died," she explained brokenly. "He was miserable at Dragonstone. He should never have gone there. It was so grim and unfriendly a place...Renly liked sunlight and gardens; he liked being around people. It was so much more Stannis' home than his."

Dragonstone belonged to Joffrey's younger brother, Tommen, now. The very thought of Dragonstone made everything fade before Sansa's eyes as she recalled the red woman's prophecy of the Crownlands... Dragonstone had once belonged to the Targaryens, back when everything had belonged to the Targaryens, and the red woman had predicted it would be the place of Daenerys' death. Of course, red women were not to be taken seriously, according to Davos, but the very thought of it still made her sick with fear.

"I didn't know that that was why you had come to Mole's Town, Brienne," Sansa said, shaking herself from her reverie.

"Mr. Seaworth helped me to escape and find a new life," she explained. "I was never convicted of anything, but it was no longer safe for me at Dragonstone, after Renly died." She looked down to hide her tears.

"It's too bad Stannis didn't die drunk, too. It would have made such a nice set," Jaime mused fondly. Brienne shot him a look of disgust. "But Robert and Renly were always the fun ones, of course. Stannis never had a drink in his life."

"You are relentless, do you know that?" she hissed.

"Did he not...hang himself?" Sansa asked tentatively. There had been rumors of it, of course, but as suicide was a crime, and Stannis was the brother of the king, his official cause of death had been ruled a failure of the heart in his sleep. But for years there had been dozens of oblique references to nooses and stags in the plays, all but confirming the rumor that Stannis indeed had committed suicide. Later, Sansa had realized that this too had been the work of Tyrion, paving the way for Joffrey's ascension amid the uncomfortable rumors of his parentage. Tyrion had anticipated that rumors of Jaime and Cersei's incest would escape, and had carefully, masterfully ridiculed all other contenders for the throne. Stannis' suicide had soiled the Baratheon name, and all that was left for Tyrion to do was to further encourage rumors of Renly's reputation for preferring men. Then,
Tyrion set to work destroying the Targaryen name with the same cruel efficiency, and when that had been done, there were no more contenders for the throne, and Joffrey had ascended unchallenged. The workings of the small council were so much more complex and widespread than anyone knew.

"It was rumored," Brienne conceded carefully, but Jaime was sniggering.

"Of course he did. One could hardly blame him, after how thoroughly rejected he was by the people. He would have named himself as Robert's heir, but no one wanted him to be king because he was ugly and dull, and his wife was ugly and dull, and she gave birth to a disfigured little creature that did not even live to see her tenth name day, and who, had she lived, would have been even more ugly and dull than her parents. What a sad king he would have made! The hilarious irony is that Stannis would have been the best suited to be king of them all," Jaime mused analytically, and Brienne and Sansa looked to him in surprise.

"Your own son is—"

"—An idiot, and cruel," Jaime finished for them dispassionately, "and has no interest in finance or law to boot. It's no surprise. I never cared for my studies, nor did Cersei, and he takes after us both. But the Crown is deep in debt—thanks to Robert's decades of drinking and whoring—and Westeros would have been best served by a more shrewd, frugal king."

"Well, he seems to have taken an interest in coin lately," Brienne remarked, resuming peeling her potatoes. "Now that he's levied the salt tax...and rumor has it that there's more taxes to come."

"That's not Joffrey," Sansa said immediately. "Granted, he would be delighted to find out how much pain it has caused already and will continue to cause. But there is no way it was his idea."

"Yes, you're right," Jaime said with some surprise.

Their eyes met and a shiver of horror rippled through her as she thought of the one person most likely to have thought of the tax...the very same person who had bought her from Randyll Tarly, and whom she was certain had been angling to marry her all along—but only once he had assured it was most advantageous for him.

"I would bet anything that it was Petyr Baelish," Sansa said at last.

"And I'd bet anything that it's only the beginning," Jaime agreed. "His methods make sense in the short term, but what of the long term? He's only angered the northerners further. This will end in blood, just like the last time the north sought independence."

"What if the north became independent this time?" Brienne asked archly. Jaime snorted.

"What if, indeed? I can predict exactly what would happen, and I almost believe that the Crown ought to simply let it happen, so that everyone's curiosity can be sated and we can stop having this ridiculous discussion every few decades. The north has no means of sustaining its own economy, no means of union, no means of protection, and nothing to trade. Independence would isolate the north from industry and from trade, rendering it as barbaric as the bowels of Essos. The north adds nothing to the economy of Westeros, merely bleeds it dry," Jaime reasoned, his eyes glimmering with cold amusement. "I say, let it die, and let the north come crawling back to the Crown once it realizes it can’t survive without it."

"How can you be so certain that the north would collapse?" Sansa asked, even as she felt a cold finger of truth running down her spine. Jaime arched his brows at her.
"Why, Mrs. Snow, I would have thought that you of all people would know that best of all. The clan system is a failure. There are too many of them, and they can't band together—not even to save your father, who was the closest to a king that the north has ever seen. They couldn't save him, and they couldn't save your mother, and they wouldn't follow your handsome, brave brother into King's Landing—and having met your brother, young as he was, I do believe he had the best chance of inspiring a true uprising, out of all of the stupid, young, brave, and handsome men I have seen in my time. They couldn't even save you, a beautiful young damsel in distress.

"If they can't band together for a cause that ought to inspire passion, how can they possibly band together for causes that have less blood? No one wants to sit around and debate taxes and laws. Such topics are boring, and moreover, involve making decisions and compromises that make no one completely happy. The north hasn't even revolted over the burning of the godswoods, which I had personally thought might be the only thing remaining that could inspire revolt. But clearly, my fears were misplaced. Northerners are different. They lack discipline and foresight; they are a people little more advanced than the Dothraki. I often wonder why it is that King's Landing looks so dramatically different from Winter Town, which is arguably the capital of the north...And I think the answer is that some people are born different."

"You speak simply to make me angry," Sansa said, the blood rushing to her face. "I had no idea you had such a foul, evil perspective—and I don't believe you actually do. I think you are just trying to upset me."

"Then give me a better explanation, Mrs. Snow," Jaime retorted carelessly. "You are right in that it is not actually my perspective; it is my father's explanation and, cruel as it is, I have yet to find a better one. Why do the Dothraki still use no saddles? Why does Winter Town look like King's Landing did two hundred years ago? Why do some populations succeed, over and over again, where others fail, over and over again?"

"I think that centuries of oppression destroy a people, and that our circumstances are random," Sansa said hotly, her eyes burning. It was so much worse that Jaime seemed so unmoved. He arched his brows.

"Centuries of oppression...you mean the Targaryens, then," he reasoned, eyes glittering. "They had the longest run yet, after all. Oh, and, by the way, you married a Targaryen. So you married a man from a bloodline that—in your words—destroyed a people?"

"Targaryens, yes. And Lannisters. And Baratheons. And if the Starks had been put on the throne, then the Starks, too," Sansa countered. "I think all people, everywhere, are the same, and when you give one man power over everyone and everything, you ruin him and everything around him," she said, lips trembling and blood hot in her veins. "I saw, firsthand, what it did to Robert and Joffrey to wear the crown. It made them both even more violent and cruel."

"What do you propose, then? Make every man a king?"

"Make no man a king." The words were out before she had even thought them through, and she clapped a hand over her mouth in surprise. Brienne was aghast; Jaime looked genuinely surprised. "What good have kings ever done?" she began nervously. "Joffrey does nothing of value; he contributes nothing to Westeros but violence and cruelty and embarrassment. And what did Robert contribute? What did Aerys contribute? Nothing...but violence and cruelty and embarrassment. The small council handles everything anyway; why should the people not know who is in the small council, and know what decisions they are making? ...For that matter, why should the people not choose who sits in the small council?"

"Because the people are idiots," Jaime replied with a laugh of disbelief. "Most of 'the people'
cannot even read. Think of the beggars and whores and thieves, Mrs. Snow—do you trust them to choose the right small council members?"

"More than I trust Petyr Baelish," she retorted. "More than I trust Cersei, or Varys, or any of the Tyrells...or your father, or your brother."

"What of me, then?" Jaime asked almost cheekily. "I'm good for nothing but hacking off men's heads; I cannot even peel a potato unaided. Oh, and do not forget my 'foul, evil perspective.' Do you trust me to choose the right small council member?" He leaned forward. "What of Mr. Thorne, Mrs. Snow? Or Joffrey, or Randyll Tarly—or his stupid, willfully ignorant son—what of them? Do you trust them to choose the right small council member? Presumably if you'll give the poor man a vote, you'll give the rich man a vote as well, will you not?"

"I think more people are kind than cruel."

"And I think more people are stupid than clever." Jaime leaned back. "Petyr Baelish would buy and blackmail his way to the position anyway; Varys would...well, I'm not entirely sure, but I don't want to know...and Cersei would gain a place based on looks and name alone."

"And it might turn out exactly the same...but at least it would be the people's choosing," Sansa said heatedly. Jaime's eyes narrowed into shrewd crescents.

"Ah, a life of one's choosing. Of course it comes back to Jon Snow."

"Jon is a perfect example of the cost of bloodline royalty," Sansa shot back. "He was innocent; just a child who had nothing to do with his parents' choices and who never wanted the throne. He still doesn't. He has more right to it than Daenerys—or Joffrey, or anyone else alive, actually—but he has no interest in it, and bears no threat to Joffrey or anyone else, yet he will never live a peaceful, happy life. So long as he lives, he will be hunted, simply for having been fathered by a man in line for the throne. Monarchy is a thing of so little value that costs far too much."

"I cannot tell if you are a foolish idealist or a weathered cynic, Mrs. Snow."

"I would say the same about you," Sansa replied, not looking at Jaime. She glanced at Brienne, who was simply staring at her, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry, Brienne," she said to the woman. "I don't mean to upset you--"

"—You haven't, Alayne," Brienne said at once. "You've said the very thing on my mind."

"Next you'll be saying women ought to own property," Jaime began, but Podrick was at the door, interrupting them—at least, she assumed it was Podrick. He was more bundled up than the weather called for, and as he entered, he pulled down the scarf that had been obscuring his face.

"I'll get my cloak," Sansa said at once.

"Take a roundabout way," Brienne instructed Podrick, as Sansa wrapped a scarf round her hair to obscure it. Podrick looked grim.

"Aye, and they've changed the meeting place, too, but the T-town Watch is everywhere, crawling up and down every street tonight," Podrick began, shaking his head, and a ripple of horror rent through Sansa's body, anticipating what he might say next. "I-it m-might not be wise to go--"

"NO!" Sansa exploded, and all three turned to look at her in shock. "We have to," she insisted, her face flushing. "We said we would go. We'll take the long way. It's not against the law to be out for a midnight stroll, is it?"
"Not yet," Jaime said, and he looked out the window again. "Take the front door out."

Sansa thought Brienne might snap at Jaime for his suspicions once more, but now she was looking unhappily out the window, too.

"No whiskey," she instructed them, following them to the front door. She went to the window and peered out into the darkness. "And no name day dancing. You run at the first sign of the Town Watch."

"Aye, we will," Podrick promised. Sansa finished bundling herself up, and when Brienne was at last satisfied that no one was waiting in the street, they stepped into the dark night.

Gendry had left, briefly, to run back to their camp and explain their plans, and had come back with the promise that Anguy would meet them to let them know where the Direwolves would be meeting—as the meeting place had been changed at the last minute—as well as Jon's bow and quiver.

As promised, the archer had slunk into town and dropped down over the wall beside them, looking visibly cheerful—he was always put in a far better mood by the prospect of women and danger.

"They'll meet at the Chubby Grumkin Tavern at midnight. It's behind the Sept," Anguy told them in a low voice, his swarthy eyes trailing to Sansa's house, and the square of light that came from the kitchen window. "Sam Flowers told me that a local legend will be escorting her," he added, eyes twinkling. Jon thought of the round-faced but handsome man who had come to the door earlier, and the graceful blond man in the red coat...was it one of them...or would it be another?

"Local legend?" Gendry prompted with interest, glancing at Jon, who pointedly avoided both of their gazes.

"Oh, it's not a story safe for sweet virgin ears," Anguy said, and he cuffed Jon in the ear.

"What?!" Jon hissed, rubbing at his ear in pain. "What is it?"

"When you're older, son," Anguy said sweetly, and he rose from his crouch. "See you two at midnight."

"If you see us, we'll not be doing our job right," Gendry remarked wryly as Anguy stalked off, blending in with the night.

"What did he mean, 'local legend?'" Jon asked, after they had sat in silence for some time. Acid rose in his throat as a bundled figure approached the house, looking this way and that. It was the man from before. Was he the 'local legend?'

"The hell should I know?" Gendry snorted, but he nodded to the man approaching the house. "Doesn't look like much, does he?"

Jon said nothing. There was no reason to hate this man, but he hated him all the same. The man knocked on the door and he saw Sansa in a flash in the window, but then she was gone. "It's about time," Gendry remarked, glancing up at the moon.

A lone man on horseback had been patrolling the street all evening. He was skinny, and barely old enough to be a member of the Town Watch, with ears slightly too big for his narrow head. He was lingering near the house now—and Sansa would be leaving soon. It was time.

They were careful, this time. Jon scaled the wall and moved along its top, cat-quick and cat-graceful, melding with the shadows, his breathing low even as his heart hammered in his chest. He was not afraid of this man—but he was afraid of Sansa.

He leapt onto the roof of the closest house, the landing a little uncertain on the slate tiles, but steadied himself with enough ease. The watchman looked around curiously—he had heard something. Good.

Jon crawled along the roof and over it, to the next house, and leapt over the short gap, landing on crumbling rippled clay tiles. That was a louder smack. He paused, heard the clop clop of the horse's slow, uncertain steps along the street, coming towards him—and more importantly, away from Sansa.

Per their loose plans, Gendry was on the next street, running along in the darkness, and Jon sensed his presence, even if he did not see him or hear him. His quiver, strapped to his back, rattled with his arrows, as he crawled along the roof, up and over and down the other side. The Sept's silhouette rose up in the distance, a black smudge against the night. He was still far enough from the Sept—this was perhaps as good a place as any to enact the next part of the plan.

Crouching on the roof behind a chimney, he could see the watchman had ridden his horse down the street, and was looking around in confusion for the source of the noises. Jon licked his lips, and drew an arrow. He was nowhere near the archer that Anguy was—Anguy was superior to even Theon Greyjoy, who had been highly skilled even as a young lad—but he could still hit a target when he needed to.

Jon turned and scanned his surroundings, the arrow drawn, the bowstring taut between his calloused fingers. Everything was cast in silver by the full moon.

There he saw it—a pot in the alleyway between the houses. He looked backward, back up the roof—he'd have to move, fast, after loosing the arrow, and he needed to make sure he had a viable path. It seemed good enough, and he turned back to the pot in the alleyway, just visible over the edge of the tiles, and loosed the arrow.

A shatter, and then a baby's wail in the house beside him. Jon slung the bow around his neck to free up his hands, and lunged upward to the apex of the roof, but misjudged the sturdiness of the tiles—and then he was skidding downward, over the other side, tiles cracking and crumbling, and, blindly, he leapt forward, just catching on the edge of the next roof and swinging, his shoulders and wrists throbbing with the force. He held on, holding his breath, listening for the watchman.

"Oi!"

The watchman had gone down the alley with the broken pot. With shaking hands, Jon barely vaulted himself back up onto the next roof. He heard another wail, and then the distinctive thwack of arrows in wood. Gendry was drawing the watchman further away, now, through the alley and into the next street.

Jon pushed back his hair, which had come free, and crawled to the edge of the roof to look out over the street. His hands burned from grabbing onto the roof, and his heart was still hammering in his chest, but these things did not matter. He flattened himself against the cold tiles, and waited.

Two figures, bundled up in cloaks, were walking along the street—arm in arm, as far as he could tell.
It took them ages to get to the Chubby Grumkin Tavern, though they encountered none of the Town Watch on their journey, so their long route had evidently worked. They had not spoken for the entire walk, and Sansa could not tell whether she was grateful or not for the silence. Something was building within her, and half of her wanted to turn back round and run back to Brienne and Jaime—and the other half wanted to break into a run to the tavern.

*He won’t even be there,* she told herself, as they passed the looming shadow of the Sept. It would be a foolish risk for the Brotherhood to attend the meeting; it would serve no purpose. It would be a pointless risk, and furthermore, it would put all of them in even more danger—surely the Brotherhood’s presence would further incriminate everyone at the meeting, would it not?

She felt a burst of rage toward Jon, now. She did not know if she would be angrier if he did show up than if he didn’t. But there was no time to think on it. The tavern was now in view: its sign, swinging in the evening breeze, depicted a very fat green ogre dancing with a tankard of ale, and its windows, fogged up, cast golden light onto the road.

*Oh, gods.*

Sansa froze, feeling unequal to entering the tavern—and thus finding out whether she would see Jon or not—but Podrick would not stop, and pulled her along. "*Come on, come on,*" he was muttering, panicked, under his breath. He paused only to glance around them at the empty street before yanking open the door and frog-marching her inside.

There were still a few patrons scattered among the tables. It was not nearly as merry of an atmosphere as the Laughing Tree, even though it seemed far more reputable. Podrick led her to a staircase behind the bar, and they descended into darkness.

"They took the longest damn way," Gendry complained, as they dropped from the rooftops to the alley beside the Chubby Grumkin, where Anguy was waiting for them.

"They're already inside. Coast seems clear," Anguy breathed. "They're meeting in the storeroom." He kicked a tiny window set into the stone, level with the street, giving a weak angle of the storeroom beneath the bar. The storeroom was filled with barrels, and only a dozen or so people had gathered inside.

"That's it?" Gendry asked, crouching down, the better to see. "Thought there’d be more."

"Flowers thought they might lose a lot of them this time, what with the Town Watch on their backs," Anguy said, shaking his head. "I'm going in. I'll see if I can't crack open the window so you lot can hear."

"Aye, thanks," Jon said softly, and he dropped down next to Gendry to see as well.

Sansa was there, and everything else ceased to matter. He could not have looked away from her even if he had wanted to. He was closer now than he had been earlier, outside of her house. She, who had so completely changed him, seemed to be made of light, a light that his very soul yearned to be close to. She could not know the power she wielded. The heedless desire that consumed him to touch her, to kiss her, to hold her, was utterly secondary, though it burned him too. He loved her, he knew it now with more certainty than he ever had before. She was kindness in a world that was endlessly cruel; she was relentless light, bright and strong. The world's darkness could not consume
her, no matter how it tried. She was proof that beauty and love could endure, that some things could not be poisoned by violence and pain. She was proof that the things that had once mattered most to him, the things that he had stopped believing in, still existed, were still worth fighting for.

She had shed her cloak, revealing a dark blue dress, and was unwrapping a scarf, so that her thick auburn hair cascaded down, catching the light. She was talking to someone, and then Anguy appeared. Sansa turned to set her cloak on a hook, and he saw something pale winking in her hair, and he was thrown back to the moment he had climbed the stairs behind her, to their bedding ceremony, and seen the white flowers pinned in her hair... And he'd seen them once more, just a glimpse, as she had slipped out the window, to leave him... Damned snowdrops...He could not breathe, and he pressed his palm to his chest, as though it could ease the tightness there. It could not mean anything...could it? It was just a hairpin. It might not even be one of the ones she had worn for their wedding. Sansa had always loved pretty things; it would not be out of place for her to have purchased more pretty hairpins.

When she turned, he could see her face. She had looked so lit-up and joyful before, but now she looked pale, and drawn. Was it because she was afraid?

A familiar shadow passed before the narrow window—Anguy was shifting it open, and Jon and Gendry slid to the side, to avoid being spotted.

"...smells like a bloody tavern down here..." he could faintly hear Anguy joking as he walked back to the center of the room, where Sansa stood. He couldn’t hear their conversation, but he saw the blood drain from her face, and she swayed for a moment—before the man next to her instinctively reached out, steadying her with a hand at the small of her back.

Jon hated him, he wanted to kill him. His hands curled into fists.

_I knew other men would touch her_, he reminded himself desperately. _I even told her to find a man. I knew it would happen._

_I am a fool._

Jon was not there.

The blood rushed from Sansa's head, and she suddenly felt weighed down, like her limbs had been coated in tar. It would be worse if he were here, she reminded herself furiously—and yet how sweet it would have been, to see him again, to see his soft dark eyes and shy half-smile, so rare and so precious, and be overcome with the scent of his skin and be warmed by his deep, soft voice... _I am acting a fool_, she told herself. _I must be Alayne Stone, too busy changing the world to pine for a man who has hurt me...even if he did not mean to, even if he regrets it...even if he has changed._

She set aside her cloak. In spite of her sadness, she was pleased to see Anguy, though it worried her that the group was much smaller...and that Jory was missing.

"Where's Jory?" Sansa asked Sam, turning away from Anguy, who had gone to open one of the narrow windows that were just at the street level. Sam looked anxious.

"I don't know," he admitted. "No one's seen him in days. Marsh said he'd tell Jory where we were, if he showed up at the Laughing Tree..."

"Marsh?" Anguy prodded, butting back into their conversation gracelessly.

"The proprietor of the Laughing Tree," Sam explained, wringing his hands. Anguy pulled a face.
"Can you trust him?" he asked doubtfully.

"We'll find out," Sansa said grimly, but her belly lurched and she abruptly forgot about Jon.

Where was Jory?

"He might just be taking a bit longer to get here," Sam thought aloud. "Jory's clever, and he's fast… it would be hard for the Town Watch to catch him."

"Was fast," Podrick corrected, and Sansa glanced at him in surprise. "H-he's been ill, I think," he added in explanation, avoiding Sansa's eyes. "Didn't look right, the last few times."

"No, he didn't look well, did he?" Sansa agreed, thinking of how he'd looked in the jail cell.

"Well, he's been living on the streets," Sam reasoned, "for years. No one's bound to look too pretty after living on rats and sleeping in gutters for a decade. And he sends any gold that he gets his hands on back to family, too."

The thought of Jory Cassel—one of her father's most devoted clansmen—living on rats and sleeping in gutters was unbearable. He had been one of the few to try and save her family; while the Mormonts and Karstarks sat comfortably before their hearths, their tartans unwrinkled and unstained, tossing their excess gold loosely at Daenerys in the name of independence, Jory had lost everything, though he'd made the same vows they had. They had sat before their hearths, comfortable and unconcerned, as Joffrey lopped off her father's head, then her mother's, then Robb's, then Arya's and Bran's and Rickon's. Sansa felt another rush of weakness, and thought she might faint. She felt Podrick's hand on the small of her back, steadying her with surprising strength.

"S-sorry," she stammered, feeling the blood then rush to her face as Anguy, Sam, and Podrick studied her in concern. "I don't believe I ate enough at supper; I feel a bit faint, is all," she reassured them, even as she realized that the rush had not been of weakness, but of an anger so pure and white-hot that it could have torched all of Mole's Town.

Maybe Jaime was right. Maybe the clans were truly a failure, destined to collapse in on themselves. After all, what good had they done? Where had the clans been when she had watched her brother's head roll away from his body? Vows were meaningless. The Mormonts and Karstarks—and so many others—had vowed to protect her father, and they had never once honored their vows. Even when she had come to them in need months ago, it had not been any of the clansmen who had come to her rescue. It had been Jon, who had sworn no vows to her family. In fact, he had only sworn vows to Daenerys—and he had broken his vows, too.

But if vows could not guarantee loyalty, then what could? She did not think even gold could guarantee loyalty. Not even love could guarantee loyalty—after all, love faded so quickly. And blood, too, was worthless—In fact it was often at the heart of the most vicious of betrayals.

Yet, what had made Jon break his vow to Daenerys, if not love (for he did not love her, clearly, and by all accounts loved Daenerys), or gold (for he had lost gold, not gained it in helping her), or blood (he was more Daenerys' blood than hers)? And what, if anything, could have prevented him from breaking his vows? What could have made the Mormonts and the Karstarks honor their vows, if not love, blood, or gold? What had made Jory keep his vows, even after all this time? If not love, or blood, or gold—then what? What else was there to life?

"We ought to start," Sam decided, as Edd entered the room, fiddle-less this time. He looked shaken.
"Didn't see no Town watchmen on my way," he explained, shrugging off his cloak. "They're all busy near the south gate...doesn't seem right. Noye said there was a disturbance...Someone firing arrows everywhere, breaking windows and spooking the horses."

Anguy was beaming, and he turned to Sam and Sansa.

"Looks like the Brotherhood without Banners paid us a visit after all," he said slyly, and Sansa's heart gave a shudder as Anguy's clever eyes fixed on her. "The Targaryen wolf's not bad with a bow and arrow, I hear. Might be he's prowling about town, keeping the Town Watch busy for us."

"By destroying property? How clever," Sansa said coolly, even as her heart was pounding in her ears. They'd not seen a single watchman on their journey to the Chubby Grumkin...they had thought they'd cleverly evaded them all, but what if it had been Jon's doing?

What if he'd seen her?

What if she'd walked right past him?

Did he know that she was here, that she was one of the Direwolves?

"I'll inform him that Miss Stone is unimpressed with his methods when I see him next," Anguy shot back, looking altogether too amused.

"I am sure he'll be devastated to hear," Sansa quipped, looking away. She heard Anguy snigger, mostly to himself, but Sam was calling the group's attention, and she could not examine it further.

"We'll just...have to start without Jory," Sam began uneasily, looking about the room and clutching a piece of parchment in his hand, with his notes scrawled upon it. "Everyone, meet Anguy. He’s been delivering the White Stag’s writing to me for ages, and he’s good friends with the Brotherhood without Banners," he said, gesturing to Anguy, who gave a short, cheery wave, in stark contrast to the awed looks from the rest of the room. "First order of business," he continued in a high, unsteady voice, after audibly gulping, "is that there is a rumor that General Clegane may come to burn the godswood."

"Aye, and Dickon Tarly, lord of Winterfell, will come too," Anguy added. He'd taken a seat on top of a barrel and was swinging his legs. "He's burned the godswood at Winter Town."

Sam was blinking rapidly, his face growing flushed, and Sansa could not bear it any longer. Sam was always emotional, but this seemed excessive, even for him. Was he merely upset about Jory, or was it the godswood that worried him? She took the parchment from him as Gilly tactfully handed him a handkerchief and he blew into it loudly as a warhorn.

"There’s nothing to be done for the godswood," Sansa said after the room had recovered from the loud noise, her cheeks growing warm as all eyes turned to her, and she saw Anguy give her an approving nod in her peripheral vision. "So let’s move on...to Mance Rayder. He owned an inn in Queenscrown, but redcoats have torched it. He was distributing the White Stag’s essays, and giving housing to the Brotherhood without Banners, and General Clegane made him pay for it. They burned the inn down and now he and his family have nothing."

Sansa looked up from the parchment. The girl that Jory had danced with last week, a plump, curvaceous blonde, was looking at Sansa with wide eyes, and Sansa met her gaze desperately, hoping to make a connection with someone, anyone, in the room. "Mance has lost everything, just for helping the Brotherhood and for distributing the essays that have meant so much to us. We’ve got to help him."
“I don’t have gold,” the blonde admitted immediately. Sansa was only relieved that someone was speaking, that she wasn’t being laughed off the figurative stage. “But we’ve got more potatoes this year than I’d expected, and I could make cloaks,” she added slowly. Sansa flushed with pleasure.

“Yes, every little bit would help, isn’t that right? Anguy?” She looked to Anguy, whose eyes were narrowed in thought.

“Aye, they’ve no clothing but what’s on their backs,” he agreed, “and they’re with the Brotherhood right now, but there’s not much food to go around.”

“Do they need blankets? I’ve a few quilts I don’t need,” another woman piped up tentatively.

“I’d help you sew some clothes, Miss Stone,” Gilly added. “And some of my medicines, too, they could have.”

“I could rustle up some silver,” said another man, red-faced and clad in a finer waistcoat than the others. “Not much, mind, but some.”

“Every little bit helps,” Sansa said loudly once more, watching the group turn to talk between each other, puzzling out what they might be able to give away. Her hands were trembling, so she clutched the parchment tighter, and glanced at Sam, who was now bawling, with Gilly exasperatedly patting his shoulder.

“S-so brave!” Sam wailed in Sansa’s direction. “Miss Stone, you’re my hero, you truly are!”

“Aye, it’s like I said—she’s just like the Targaryen wolf,” Anguy interjected loudly, catching the attention of the rest of the room. “Determined to save the world. …And just as pretty, too,” he added with a wink. Sansa flushed and pretended to not hear him.

By the end of the meeting, they had drawn up a list of what everyone would contribute. They’d bring their goods to Sam over the next week, and Anguy would return to take everything to Mance and his family. It took an hour to make the list, and her eyes burned and itched with exhaustion, but at the same time she knew she’d not sleep tonight.

“What of you, Freerider?” Anguy’s voice came as Sansa and Podrick were donning their cloaks. Sansa looked to Anguy, wondering who he was addressing, and saw he was looking at Podrick, who turned red as a tomato. “What’ll you bring?” Anguy added cheekily.

Podrick muttered something that sounded like bread, as he wrapped his scarf over his face. Sansa looked between the two men.

“Freerider? What is that? Do you two know each other?” she asked curiously. Anguy was smirking, and Podrick had fully disappeared inside his cloak.

“Oh, I only know of Mr. Payne, Miss Stone,” he replied innocently, shrugging on his own forest-green cloak. Sam was looking desperately at Anguy, and Gilly looked extremely irritated.

“What do you—“

“—Got to go!” Podrick interrupted, voice muffled by his scarf, and he dragged Sansa out of the room.

They were leaving, now. Jon felt weak and dazed, and when he finally looked away from the window, he felt like he could not recognize the world around him, as though he had traveled to
some distant land by magic. Gendry was peering round the corner of the alley, into the street. He heard the door open and shut, and he shifted further into the darkness of the alley, his heart pounding, as she walked by.

*I am a fool.*

He and Gendry split up: Jon to follow Sansa and her companion, Gendry to attend to the Town Watch and ensure they were still occupied with looking for them. Jon darted from shadow to shadow on silent feet, following Sansa and that man all the way back to the bakery. They did not speak, but walked quickly and silently, their cloaks flapping with the movement, their heads bowed as they hurried.

When they got to the bakery, Jon climbed back up onto the wall on the edge of town, the better to see their surroundings.

In the darkness, a lone figure, dressed all in black, was watching the house as Sansa bid her companion goodnight and went inside the darkened house. The figure watched as Sansa’s companion left, hurrying back to his own home, but he did not accost him. And for a long time, he simply stared at the bakery, watching.

*She’s made an enemy,* Anguy had said. Jon stared at the man, memorizing him in the darkness, until, at long last, the man turned and walked back toward the center of town.

He could not stop thinking of how Sansa had looked when she’d stepped to the middle of the room and taken over the meeting. She’d been radiant, as vibrant and bright as the sun. *She’ll help Mance more than I ever could,* he had thought, watching as she brought the room alive with the need to help Mance, Dalla, and Val. It had been like watching flowers bloom before his eyes. What audacity had he, in thinking he had any right to tell her how to live her life? Who was he, to try and stop her from planting trees?

It was the only thing he had ever done right: to give her a life of her choosing. *And if this is the life she chooses, then so be it,* he resolved, peering into the darkness, looking for Thorne. She would have that life, if that was what she wanted. He might not plant any trees but he could, at the very least, protect her while she did.

After he was certain that Thorne had gone, Jon returned to the camp. Everyone was asleep—Gendry too had returned—save for Val, who sat by the dying fire, still wrapped in her own cloak that he had given her the night that the inn had burned. She never seemed to sleep very much. He didn’t, either.

“Your wife is safe?” she asked when she saw Jon approach. He dropped to the ground on the other side of the fire.

“Aye, for now,” he said softly, thinking of the whip coiled on Thorne’s belt. Val was watching him carefully.

“And will you speak to her?” Her tone was light and teasing but her gaze was intense. Jon picked up a twig from the grass and snapped it mindlessly; anything to avoid her gaze.

“It’s better if I don’t,” he replied. The night was so calm and quiet, and he was grateful that it was only Val, here, now, and not the entire Brotherhood. He did not feel equal to pretending he was not in pain.

Val let out a soft, sad laugh. “What?”
“For a man who is so filled with love for others,” she began quietly, “I don’t think you’ve ever learned how to love.”

"How to love? This is the only way I can love," Jon countered, feeling cornered in a way he could not articulate. "She doesn't...she doesn't want me." The admission hung in the air, pendulous and painful.

"She told you that?"

"She didn't have to say it." Jon snapped another twig, and threw the pieces into the dying fire. "I ruined her life, and took away her home."

"Anguy told me she gets angry at every mention of you."

"There you have it," Jon scoffed, but the words wounded.

"I don't know that that means she does not want you, Jon Snow."

"Then what does it mean?" Jon snapped.

"Why not ask her?" Val's voice grew taut. "Why is it that men just assume they know what is best for women? Even though you are crippled with self-hatred, you still think you know how she feels, what she wants, better than she does." Val got to her feet. "You know nothing, Jon Snow. About women, about Sansa Stark, about love, about anything!"

Jon watched in shock as she stamped off to the tent she shared with Dalla and Mance.

“‘Freerider?’ Why did Anguy call you that?”

“N-nothing,” Podrick had snapped, rather more harshly than he ever spoke to her, turning away hastily from her.

Sansa lay awake, remembering the evening, unable to sleep, just as she had suspected. She couldn’t stop reliving the night.

Podrick had practically run away without saying goodnight, and she had been left to enter the dark house on her own. Brienne had been slumped at the kitchen table, asleep sitting up, but Jaime had been sitting in the darkness, wide awake and quiet, nearly scaring her to death when she’d walked in and shut the door behind her.

“You made it,” Brienne had yawned, jolting awake at the sound of the door clicking shut. “And Pod?”

“No whiskey,” Sansa had replied, feeling Jaime’s gaze heavy on her. She had suddenly recalled the events after the last Direwolves meeting, and had felt a strong urge to hide from Jaime. “And no name-day dancing,” she had added. “You shouldn’t have waited up.”

“Well, she didn’t, clearly,” Jaime had replied wryly, getting to his feet. He and Brienne had gone up to bed, leaving Sansa standing in the darkened kitchen, alone, her heart pounding, as she stared out the window into the impenetrable night.

Jon, Jon, Jon...

She had swept up to her room, caught up in both powerful joy and heavy disappointment, and a horrible, gnawing fear about Jory. She decided to look for him in the morning. With that settled,
her mind drifted back to Podrick.

What in seven hells did ‘Freerider’ mean, and why did Podrick seem so embarrassed about it?

Sansa awoke early the next morning, just around dawn. She’d only slept a few hours, and her eyes burned and her belly writhed with that peculiar nausea that only a lack of sleep could bring, but she hardly noticed or cared. She dressed in her plainest wool dress and heavy cloak, and stepped into the hushed grey dawn.

She had to find Jory.

The air was damp and bitter with the threat of rain, but there was a sharpness to the scent of the air, an acrid taste, that woke the nausea lingering in her belly. It was likely just someone burning old, rotting wood, but it still filled her with dread.

The world was just waking up. A few people were out on the streets, going about their mornings, their faces as grey and remote as the dawn itself, their movements hurried and stilted, as though eager to get back indoors. No one spoke to her, and she spoke to no one, but as she approached the center of town, and the scent grew stronger, she occasionally met the eyes of others. People were coming to their front doors, peering over their doorstep cautiously, wrinkling their noses.

Something was definitely burning.

Sansa’s steps fell swifter as she followed the burning scent, but as she got to the Sept, she no longer had to follow the scent—smoke billowed from behind the Sept. A crowd, even at this early hour, had gathered, and she could see the Town Watch’s black horses. Men were bringing buckets of water, but it was useless.

At first she thought the Sept was on fire, but as she got closer, she realized it was not the Sept—it was the godswood, which was placed directly behind the Sept.

Had Dickon come early? Her belly writhed and roiled with fear and nausea as she darted closer, her hood over her hair. Thorne was there, seated on his horse, staring at the burning heart trees with a grim face and eyes glittering with malice, doing nothing to stop the fire. He did not even bother to stop the people who were attempting to put out the fire, because there was no need. The godswood was ravaged, destroyed already. And on the back wall of the Sept, which faced the godswood, something had been painted in large, wild letters, though Sansa struggled to read it. She risked it—she crept closer, weaving between people and keeping her head low and her hood tight over her hair, avoiding Thorne’s eyes.

This close, the smoke was too thick, and choked her throat and burned her eyes. Tears streamed down her cheeks, both at the smoke and for the sight of the ruined godswood. The flames melded with the red leaves, stretching high to the grey sky. All around her, people were crying, especially the older townspeople—the ones who more likely had been raised on the old gods, the ones who still saw the godsdow as a place of worship and not merely a pretty garden. She could not help but think of her father watching the burning heart trees, his eyes bleeding tears just as the faces carved into the ancient trees bled tears of sap.

And painted on the wall of the Sept: Long live King Joffrey.

She did not understand this, but she did know one thing: she could not be here, could not be noticed by Thorne. She sensed him to her left, and began to back away, pushing through people—for the crowd had already swelled—but a gust of wind came and she felt her hood fly off. Even as she
clapped a desperate hand to the back of her hand, she heard Thorne's voice above the crowd.

"Miss Stone."

Her heart leapt into her throat. Could she pretend to not have heard? But Thorne directed his horse to her—everyone parted for him so easily—and then he was blocking her path to freedom with his great black horse. He looked more imposing than usual today, and she realized his cloak had a fine silver clasp and his waistcoat was done with polished silver buttons, and he was wearing a new crisp black hat. Crown gold, Sansa guessed.

"Mr. Thorne," she greeted with as much respect and warmth as she could muster.

"I had planned on coming to your home this morning, but fate seems to have saved me the trouble."

People were beginning to notice, and were tearing their eyes from the burning godswood to see what was going on.

"It seems so," she agreed carefully. "What can I do for you, Mr. Thorne?"

He smiled at her then.

"You can come with me, and answer my questions truthfully."

"Questions? I hardly can imagine a topic on which I might know more than you, Mr. Thorne."

"I can imagine only one topic, Miss Stone," he conceded, black eyes glittering. He looked over his shoulder. "Escort Miss Stone to my office."

It was Pypar that he had spoken to. Pypar's Town Watch uniform also looked suspiciously finely-made, but he did not look quite so proud in it. Sansa felt the heat of the crowd's gaze as he stepped forward, and placed a hand on her upper arm.

He might have looked apologetic, but mournful looks were not enough. Sansa held her chin up and ignored his attempts to catch her gaze, and allowed him to lead her away from the burning godswood.

Thorne's office was in the town hall, next to the jail. It was on the second storey of the building, at the end of a long, polished hallway. As Sansa walked the hall, Pypar still gripping her arm, her anger mounted with each step. This could only be about either Jory or the Direwolves, and yet she knew that Thorne's peculiar fixation on her was not entirely a matter of his distaste for rebels or his curiosity about her connection to Jory. He was like Joffrey, like Petyr Baelish, like so many other small, cruel men she had known: delighted to find himself in a position of power over a woman that he lusted after, and curious to find out just how far that power truly extended.

"Mr. Thorne will be here soon, I'm sure," Pypar told her as they reached the office. He opened the door, revealing a room that echoed the finery and style of King's Landing. A lovely, expansive mahogany desk stretched out beneath large windows, and dotted with fine crystal and silver trinkets. The curtains were made of the finest lace, and as pristine and starched as a queen's gown. Medals hung on the wall behind the desk, prominently displayed. "I ...am sorry," Pypar added now in a low voice.

Sansa looked to him, and saw fear in his brown eyes.

"You're just doing your duty," she said quietly, and she took a seat in one of the plush chairs before Thorne's desk.
Pypar drew in a breath as though about to speak, but in the end he said nothing, and merely left and shut the door behind him. She heard him pacing the hall, presumably stationed there to ensure that she did not try to leave.

In spite of her coolness toward Pypar, hot fear was roiling in her stomach, and her palms were clammy and her heartbeat too fast. To go into this blind was so much worse; she could not keep counting on happening upon a good lie or excuse. Her luck would run out soon.

What if it already had?

There were no indications in the office of what Thorne intended to speak with her about, save for a string of grey, pink-flecked shells on the center of his desk. Crudely strung on butcher's string, and uneven in placement and size, they looked like something she might have made as a small child, pretending she was a mermaid or sea princess.

Did Thorne have a young daughter? He did not seem remotely capable of sentimentality, so the idea of this shell necklace belonging to him seemed as impossible as if she could suddenly sprout wings and fly off. No, there was something sinister about this shell necklace so innocently placed on the middle of his desk...

"Miss Stone."

Thorne shut the door so carefully. Sansa did not turn to face him, but held her breath in and her back straight, not acknowledging him. He waited, and she waited, and at long last she heard his boots brush against the fine, plush, Southron carpet as he walked round his desk to sit behind it.

He took a leisurely seat, regarding her all the while with fascination. Sansa's mouth had gone so dry that she thought her lips might be stuck together.

"Mr. Thorne," she said at last, when he had sat down. Their eyes met over the desk, the string of shells between them.

"Do you recall," Thorne began quietly, and he reached forward with a black-gloved hand and picked up the necklace, "the cell I showed you, in the town jail?"

The shells clinked together, making Sansa think of wind chimes.

"You mean, for the ones that hang?"

"Yes. That one. What, would you guess, can land a man in that cell, in particular?"

Breathing normally was impossible. Sansa licked her dry lip, watched Thorne's eyes follow the movement hungrily.

"I-I could not say," she began. "Murder?"

"Very good. What else?"

"I do not know, Mr. Thorne. I am unfamiliar with crimes that a man could hang for."

"Give your best guess. You're a clever girl."

"Witchcraft?" she guessed helplessly.

"Yes, that's another, though only a woman can hang for that." His gaze lingered on her throat briefly. "Miss Stone, how well do you know Jory Poole?"
"Well enough to know he likes nothing more than aged whiskey and young women," she said lightly, though her voice was strained. "Why do you ask about Jory? I have not seen him since my name day, and have been worried for him. I do not know where he is."

"Ah, let me soothe your fears, Miss Stone," Thorne said softly. "I can tell you precisely where Jory Poole is."

He did not need to say it. Sansa truly thought she might be sick, and she was grateful that she was not standing.

"What has he done?" she asked at last, when the urge to empty her stomach had passed.

"When we found his little hiding spot, where he had been keeping all of the gold he had stolen from me," Thorne began, "we found dozens of these." And he held out the necklace of shells to her.

Sansa took the shells in a clammy, shaking hand, and examined them. "Along with letters from someone named Jeyne."

"A-a lover, perhaps? Jory has always been a fool for women." She set the shells back on the desk before Thorne.

"Fool enough to steal hundreds of gold dragons from the Crown and send them to a woman who sends back ugly seashells?"

There was no talking Jory out of danger. If they had found gold dragons...it was incriminating no matter what.

"When will he hang?" she asked as calmly as she could.

"A fortnight," said Thorne. "I would have liked for General Clegane to attend and do the honors himself, as it is the Crown's gold he has stolen, in stealing from me, but now there is no need for the general to come to Mole's Town as he had planned."

"Because you burned the godswood for him?" Sansa guessed, anger at last seeping into her tone. Thorne looked delighted.

"No," he said. "I did not burn the godswood, nor did any of my men. That remains a mystery. Nevertheless, it will be my happy honor to execute Jory Poole for his filthy crimes. I had hoped you might have more information, Miss Stone, as it might have helped offer some ...mitigating evidence... But it seems you cannot help your friend."

"Oh?" Sansa asked faintly.

"Yes." Thorne's lip curled. "Last night we had many disturbances yet could find no culprits."

"Perhaps we have a ghost in town, not a witch." Sansa got to her feet, weak though she felt, and turned away from Thorne. "If you have no more business with me, Mr. Thorne, I will take my leave. As enjoyable as it is to converse, I do have a business to run--"

His gloved hand closed in a vice grip on her arm and he roughly jerked her round to face him. He was too close; his breath, foul and warm, rushed over her face.
"You do not leave until I dismiss you," he said in a low, sharp voice, gripping her so tightly that she thought he might simply break her arm off. She opened her mouth to speak but she could not make any words come out. "I know you are one of the Direwolves, though I have no proof yet. It is only a matter of time until I find proof. Do not speak in such a cavalier manner to me, Miss Stone, because being a traitor to the Crown is another crime that can land a man...or a woman...in that cell."

"I-I don't--"

He let her go abruptly, and she stumbled back, her arm throbbing in pain. Thorne watched hungrily as she reached up and pressed a hand to the place where he had grabbed her so roughly.

"Now you may go, Miss Stone, because I say you may."

He turned away from her and went to his desk, stripping off his leather gloves. Breathless and horrified, Sansa turned and all but fled. Pypar was standing in the hall, his face pale, but Sansa sped past him, her blood pounding in her ears and her whole body shaking with horror.
Jaime had been cleaning the bakery all morning, enduring Brienne's continued disapproval. He had never worked so hard in his life—and in spite of his family name, he actually had worked very hard throughout his life.

His body ached, in ways different from how it had once ached after hours of training. It was his joints, his bones, and all of the hidden muscles that now had to compensate for a body that had always done everything right-handed. When he woke up each morning, it still ached, and no amount of food or rest seemed to make the ache go away.

And he was tired of Brienne, tired of spending all day, every day, indoors; tired of watching Podrick pointlessly pine for a woman who would never want him; tired of being around bloody women all the damn time. He missed fighting, and the weight of a sword in his hand and the rush of an enemy before him; he missed the open air and the horizon stretching out before him, glittering with possibilities and adventure.

Most of all, he missed Bronn, and he had spent enough time alone with his grief to at least admit it inside the safety of his own mind. It was another constant ache that never seemed to really go away. He missed the easy companionship, the shared humor, the security of a friendship that required no effort, no questions, no second-guessing, no mind-games. All of his life he had been surrounded by people who were duplicitous, conniving, two-faced, and always nursing this grievance or that against him, against everyone. Bronn, while intensely private, was refreshingly difficult to anger, and oddly straightforward and simplistic in his ambitions and desires. Jaime never had to weigh his words around Bronn, never had to be anything other than himself. Sansa was so filled with so many bloody feelings, and so easily distraught or offended; Brienne, while straightforward, disapproved of everything about him and laughed at none of his jokes; and Podrick was a bumbling fool with all the personality of a carrot, and about as conversationally skilled as one, too.

"Come on, let's train." Brienne was wiping flour off her hands. Jaime looked up from the floor he'd been scrubbing in surprise. "You're like a bloody thundercloud, floating around all dark and miserable. I'm sick of it," Brienne explained at his look of confusion. "Fighting seems to be the only thing that makes you happy, so let's fight."

"No no, abusing Podrick makes me happy, too," Jaime replied, but even so he got to his feet, his
breeches soaked through at the knees from his scrubbing, and followed Brienne out into the yard. "Where's Mrs. Snow?"

"Alayne is—" Brienne halted as they turned to face each other, armed with their wooden practice swords. "Actually, I don't know where she is. Perhaps she's still asleep. It was a late night, after all."

"Perhaps," Jaime replied doubtfully. Sansa rarely slept late. It was annoying how early she awoke, like she was powered by daylight. Jaime cast the concern aside, and faced Brienne.

The wooden swords thwacked against each other. Brienne was talented and fierce; her style was more formal than any that Jaime had known. She'd been trained, properly. That much was clear. Every movement was measured and precise, and hearkened back to some special form or another. Jaime, though properly trained, and though filled with respect for the art behind swordplay, rarely thought of those forms and never used them. The moment he had picked up a sword he had known what to do with it. The Warrior had been his god from that moment on, and the Warrior would be the only god he knew for the rest of his life. He had been made for killing, and did not know anything but killing.

And each time he trained with Brienne, he had to face this knowledge. *I can do nothing else.* There was no life for him outside of killing. He ought to have been more ashamed of this thought, more saddened, but it was not a surprise to him. It was like the knowledge that he longed for his sister in sinful ways, like the knowledge that he felt no paternal love for any of his children: it was who he was, and feeling guilty for it would never change it. He was a killer. He wondered, as his wooden sword thwacked against Brienne's, if Jon Snow felt the same way. The boy was the best swordsman he had ever seen. Even starving and weak, the boy had put up a fight better than any he had ever seen; even Brienne and Bronn could not begin to compare. The boy was as much a born killer as he was.

It was better, sometimes, to just accept what you were.

His left arm was getting stronger, but it still felt awkward, wrong. His right hand ached to hold the sword, but his right hand wasn't there anymore.

What was the point of this? Thwack. He spun and hit Brienne's sword upward, nearly hitting her in the face with her own sword. She was strong, though, and controlled the swing at the last instant, and parried, nearly knocking his own sword out of his stupid left hand.

He'd never kill again. Thwack. He'd never do anything again, probably, except scrub floors and bully Podrick and smack his wooden sword against Brienne's.

What was there to live for? Thwack. He could hang himself, like Stannis, but the thought was laughable. No Lannister would ever lay down in defeat. He simply wouldn't. He would exist, he would survive, until someone or something else stopped him.

So what was he surviving for? Thwack.

Bear Island was exile. The wind had been against them all through the Bay of Ice, and when Daenerys, ill and weary, crawled to the deck and glimpsed the rocky shores of Bear Island, she had wanted to cry.

Craggy rocks rose up against frothing sea. Beyond the crags, lumpy stone dwellings littered the shore. Rocky cliffs loomed beyond, their height lost to the low, thick clouds, with little lines of
streams spilling down over the mossy rocks. Messy pines cluttered the skyline. And in the rocky shoals stood a line of dark figures awaiting their arrival, and to Daenerys they all wore the face of the Stranger.

"I can see Dacey and Lyanna," Jeor was chuckling to Maege. The voyage hadn't bothered them and they'd stood on the deck for most of it in good humor, as though the weather were balmy and clear, as though they hadn't been relentlessly pelted with icy, unforgiving rain. Jorah, she noticed, had lingered below deck with the rest of them, even though he had grown up on Bear Island, though she doubted it was the weather that he was hiding from. Jorah had not been home in a very long time, and he had left on bad terms.

They dropped anchor as close as they could. The wind had calmed as they approached the shoreline, but it was still raining, and Daenerys still felt ill, between the baby and the sea. One by one they climbed from below deck to get into the rowboats that would take them to the shore. Tyrion and Daario emerged, green and weak, followed by Missandei and Grey Worm.

She couldn't help but remember when they had landed in Gulltown, and everyone had been so ill. Many men had died from that journey.

She had even thought Jon might die.

It was the first time she had felt any twinge of regret for her pursuit of the throne, any worry that she might have taken a wrong turn somewhere on her journey, when she had watched Davos and Jorah half-carry Jon down the gangway, off the boat and onto the docks of Gulltown. He had grown so weak and thin from illness, and she had only ever seen him strong and lean and full of life. It had been just like watching Drogo die; she had been useless, helpless. For days she had been unable to see him, for the threat that the illness posed to her, and then for weeks he had been so weak that he could only lay on the floor, barely able to even keep a sip of water down, and he would not look at her. She herself had been unharmed. She was the blood of the dragon, and illness could not reach her. But Jon was the blood of the dragon, too, so why had he grown ill?

The loss of so many of her men had been agony, but that had been nothing to the potential loss of Jon. And after the illness had run its course, they had been left weaker, more helpless, and though they had finally reached Westeros—a goal they had sought for so long—it had not been the triumphant landing that she had been imagining for so many years. Jon had been darker, more remote, after Mereen, and she had dismissed it, thinking it merely due to a wound he'd suffered in his arm. But after that illness, she had begun to see that he was slipping away from her. They'd left Gulltown unable to bury any of the men they'd lost, all of them so much thinner and weaker than they'd been in Essos, and they had not been met with anywhere near the support that she had been so sure they would find in Westeros. Jon had always been quiet, brooding, but that had been when he had started to seem out of reach. He'd stopped really meeting her eyes, and though he had always been reserved and shy when she came to his bed, he had suddenly seemed unwilling, and every touch had been perfunctory and without blood or warmth; every movement had seemed like a puppetmaster was pulling the strings, controlling his limbs.

The last time he had touched her, it had been the only night he had ever been the one to initiate, and she had been filled with hope and a fluttering happiness at his unusual insistence and seeming need for her...but she knew now that it had been false. He had not wanted her; he had been angling for something else...he had been angling for the Stark girl.

Awash in painful memories, she was helped into the rowboat, and was lowered into the uneasy waters. Everyone seemed ill and sad, and it was her fault. Even the child in her belly hated her; she did not know how she knew it. They lurched toward the line of rocks and sloppy pines in silence,
with Grey Worm and Daario rowing behind her, their movements tremulous and haphazard due to their illness.

As they got closer, Daenerys could better see the faces of the Mormont clanspeople. They all wore the tartan, its dark green reminiscent of the pines behind them, and their faces were as hard and jagged as the rocks. They were not smiling. At the very center of the group, the furthest into the shoals, was a lanky girl with fine, lank dark hair pulled back from an impassive face. She wore a man's waistcoat with the tartan, and a sword was sheathed at her hip. Beside her, a much younger girl, also in a waistcoat and tartan, was teetering on tiptoes, shielding her eyes from the bleached sunlight. The freezing seawater was up above her knees but she hardly seemed to notice it.

"Well at least she's wearing the tartan," Maege said exasperatedly behind Daenerys, sounding far more short-tempered and, simultaneously, more maternal than Daenerys had ever heard her. "You'll never get either one of them into a proper dress."

"No one could've gotten you into a proper dress at that age, either," Jeor retorted, not without fondness in his voice. "They're your daughters, for certain."

Daenerys' fears only grew. They are a clan of warrior women, she reminded herself. They will see my ability to fight and my ambition, and they will respect me.

"The tall one is Dacey?" she asked Maege, turning back to face the clanswoman. Maege was scowling.

"Yes, the tall one with the wrinkled coat. The Others take her; she looks as filthy as a bloody Greyjoy," Maege grumbled. "The little one's Lyanna."

"Named for Jon's mother," Daenerys remarked, turning back to face the line of Mormont women.

"Yes, named for Lyanna Stark."

"And as willful as Lyanna Stark," Jeor added. "You tempted fate there, Maege."

"Lyanna Targaryen," Daenerys corrected, before she could hold her tongue. Maege and Jeor looked at her with gazes that were unexpectedly cool. "She married my brother," she added defensively.

"Word to the wise, Princess," Jeor began now, and Daenerys realized that they were closing in on the shallows. It was almost time to meet the Mormont women. "That's twice now that a Targaryen man's been responsible for a Stark woman's disappearance. We might know the circumstances, but not every northman is so sympathetic."

"Or, that's twice now that a Targaryen man's been responsible for saving a Stark woman from a marriage that would make her miserable," Daenerys said. "You will not twist history."

"Nor will you," Maege replied calmly. "You've won us over, Princess, but you've yet to win the rest of the Mormont clan, and we can't do it for you. And we mean to give you fair warning of what our clansmen and clanswomen will take offense at. The north saw your brother as a rapist with little regard for laws, and now they see your nephew as the reason for the downfall of the Stark family."

"How could it possibly be Jon's—"

"—Some say that if Eddard Stark had not kept the boy, he might never have been marked a traitor —"
"—That is absurd," Daenerys said hotly. They were too close to the shore now; she could feel the gazes of the clan on her even as she argued with Jeor and Maege. "Jon bears no responsibility for Lord Stark's choices. He was a child! And how could one boy be responsible for the downfall—"

"—Princess, we know it is not the way," Jeor interrupted, gently still. "But the rest of the clan does not see it that way, and our words alone will not be what convinces them otherwise. It will be you, and your actions, that will change their minds and instill their faith in you."

Daenerys, still angry, turned back to face the Mormont clan. Dacey and Lyanna were staring her down, their faces unfriendly, unyielding, and Daenerys had the feeling of being thrown into an impossible situation. These people did not want to like her.

_I've done the impossible before, she reminded herself. I'll simply do it again._

The bottom of the boat hit rocky sand, making its passengers lurch forward abruptly, and Daenerys instinctively placed a hand on her belly. She had done the impossible, before, but she'd never been pregnant when she'd done the impossible.

Daario helped her out of the boat, and freezing saltwater entered her boots and sopped the hem of her white fur coat. She stumbled a bit, less graceful for the weight in her belly and the weakness of her limbs, but regained her balance. She was barely taller than Lyanna, a child of no more than thirteen or fourteen, though she looked younger than that.

"Where's Jon Snow?" Lyanna demanded as they stepped forward. Maege did not embrace her daughters as they came face-to-face with them. "You said you were bringing Jon Snow and Sansa Stark."

"This is Princess Daenerys Targaryen," Jeor began to his nieces. Dacey's black eyes settled on Daenerys with calm dislike, and Lyanna seemed to find Daenerys no more compelling than if she were an unusual rock that they had picked up on the opposite shore. "She is Jon Snow's aunt."

"I didn't ask for Jon Snow's _aunt_, I asked for Jon Snow," Lyanna insisted, folding her tiny arms across her chest. "And Sansa Stark. Where is Sansa Stark? You said—"

"—There are rumors, mother," Dacey interrupted calmly. "Rumors that—"

"Let's all get inside," Jeor suggested loudly. "We've been traveling, and some of us would like hot baths and some fish and ale."

"Some of us would like Sansa Stark and Jon Snow," Lyanna added, even louder.

Daenerys looked up, beyond Dacey and Lyanna. The Mormont clan was regarding her silently, the wind whipping their hair about their faces and unsettling their tartans. Most of them were dark-haired, the hair so fine and lank that their pale scalp beneath was sometimes exposed; others had Jeor and Jorah's fluffy, straw-like blond hair, which too seemed as sparse as the bushes dotting the shoreline. They were not a handsome clan as the Starks were, Daenerys thought. Jon had the Stark face, solemn and compelling, and Sansa Stark had evidently had the Tully face: heart-shaped and framed by thick auburn hair. No, these people were not made for weddings or politics or romance. These people were made for survival. But as Daenerys looked at the crude, empty, unforgiving landscape behind them, she wondered what they could possibly have that was worth surviving for.

"Welcome back, Lady Mormont, Lord Mormont," said another clansman, a patchy-haired man with heavy scarring on his face that looked like he'd had the pox as a child. "And Jorah Mormont."

Jorah lingered behind Daenerys, and she briefly despised him for his humbled posture, for the
shame in his eyes. Had he learned nothing from being with Targaryens for so long? Daenerys stood as straight as she could, though all of the Mormonts towered over her.

"This is Princess Daenerys," Maege announced, as the clanspeople drew closer. Her voice was nearly lost on the wind, rich and strong though it was. "We will introduce her properly at the Gathering, and you all will have the opportunity to meet her."

They were all staring at her, taking in her fur coat, her silvered hair. Daenerys had been hated all her life; their cold stares could not bring her down. She stepped forward, stepping among them, looking each of them in the eye as she passed. Maege and Jeor walked behind her, and they walked through the clanspeople and walked toward the buildings beyond the shoreline.

The main house of the clan was an ungraceful limestone building, tinged green from the salty air, and set into the hillside, overlooking all the other dwellings that littered the area around it. A rocky path snaked up the hillside, and after their journey, it was difficult to climb the path. The tiny rocks made it slippery, and it was a steep incline. Most of them, so weakened by the sea, were out of breath quickly. Determined not to show any weakness, Daenerys held her head high, gathering her white furs in her hand as she climbed faster than any of them.

It was not until she reached the gate that she remembered Tyrion. She turned back and saw him being helped by Jorah. Missandei, breathless and sweating, was being pulled by Grey Worm.

And what was it all for? Daenerys turned back to look up at the house. Cattle grazed on the hillside beside it, but they were not the glossy black cattle that she had seen in the north. They looked paler and more strange.

"Do you not know how to open a gate?" Lyanna's loud voice shook her from her thoughts, and Daenerys turned to the little girl in surprise. Dacey and Lyanna had been right behind her the whole way. Lyanna was staring at Daenerys with something like disgusted confusion. Behind her, Dacey went to the gate and pushed it open, not looking at Daenerys.

"I was waiting for everyone else," Daenerys replied. "This isn't my home, after all." She followed Dacey and Lyanna through the gate and into the dirt yard before the house. To the left were the stables, with deep grooves trenched in the sandy mud from the wheels of carts, and a few clansmen working in the stables. Dacey offered loose waves to both of them as she passed, her long legs making strides that Daenerys struggled to keep up with.

"Is Jon Snow really a good swordsman?" Lyanna asked as they followed Dacey. Daenerys placed a hand on her belly.

"Yes; some say he's the best in the world," Daenerys replied, thinking of how she had watched Jon learn to wield a sword...and then, so quickly, wield it better than anyone else. She thought of the graceful, lean lines that his body made as he swung the sword, thought of the fierce look in his eyes...He was a Targaryen, after all, and Targaryens were always special, always different. It was their destiny, their fate.

The house was barely as big as the holdfast they had been staying in, and they'd need to share rooms. Daenerys would share a room with Missandei, and she knew that this was crushing news to Missandei...who had often been absent at night, and Daenerys knew she was in Grey Worm's bed. They had been given a little room with a sad little hearth and a bed that, though it had a canopy, had a lumpy mattress that reeked of skin and old hay. The narrow windows let in little light and overlooked the sad little godswood.

It was exile indeed, and perhaps she deserved it. Daenerys lay on the mattress, willing herself to
rest before the Gathering. She was exhausted and weak; she needed her strength, if she was going to make an impression on the Mormont clan tonight.

*But why do I bother?* she wondered as she lay on her side, hand over her belly. *I have already decided not to pursue the throne. So why do I continue this charade?*

She did not know when she had drifted off, but she woke hours later. The house was quiet, and Missandei was gone. Confused, Daenerys rose, and left the room, clad in only her plain dress, her feet bare. The hall, too, was empty, and when she called for Jorah, for Tyrion or Daario or Grey Worm, there were no answers.

She searched the house, but no one was there, not even in the kitchen, and dread tightened around her throat, so she went outside. Maybe they were all gathered outside... But no one was in the stables, not even the horses. Daenerys wandered to the godswood behind the house, which her room had overlooked, but that too was empty.

She had never really looked at a heart tree up close. She disliked them. But curiosity overtook her now, and there was something horrible yet compelling about the face carved into the tree, its ancient eyes weeping sap. She went to it and pressed her fingertips to one of the eyes, and a bolt of lightning jolted through her.

The tree became wreathed in flames; everything was on fire, but the fire could not burn her. Daenerys stumbled backward with a gasp, turning round and round, and when she turned back to face the tree once more, it was no longer a tree, but a white stag, crowned by antlers, and it stared at her calmly, unburnt by the fire.

Daenerys had been running from the white stag for so long; she was tired of being chased by Robert Baratheon's ghost. So this time she walked toward it. It bowed its lovely head and turned from her, and she followed it through the flames, but it disappeared.

A seven-pointed star appeared through the flames, and beneath it, a great, jagged rock. Hundreds of swords were lodged into it, but one gleamed among the others at the very top, its blade turned ruby and gold in the fire.

Shadows ran toward the rock, some with antlers, others rearing like lions, and they each tried to touch that gleaming blade, but they each fell. Lion faced lion, wolf faced wolf, and they all fell. The flames crept closer and closer to the rock, melting the swords, the metal turning molten and seeping into the ground, silvery and liquid.

"The time of kings is ending, Daenerys Targaryen, and the realm is burning..."

That one sword could not be touched by fire, she knew she must not let it be touched by the flames. She must save that sword; she did not know how she knew it, but she knew she must. She stumbled closer to the burning rock, and then the white stag appeared again, but in the shape of a man, its eyes as gentle as an animal’s, but its body strong, and the antlers on its head larger and more blinding than ever. "...The white stag will burn the realm..."

The voice, so great and terrible, was so familiar, but who was it? Daenerys stared at the white stag, and the sword between them, the last sword left, gleaming brightly, and they each lunged for it—

—She woke in a sweat. Her belly ached, and she trembled all over.

"Princess, princess," Missandei was saying, crouching on the bed beside her. "You were having a nightmare," she told her. Missandei looked frantic and ill; her dark eyes, so briefly, flickered down
"I need..." Daenerys trailed off, breathlessly. "...I need to see Tyrion," she finally said. "Before the gathering."

It was late afternoon—she had been asleep for hours. Missandei helped her make herself at least somewhat presentable, and then fetched Tyrion. Daenerys waited for him in the godsdwod; it seemed an appropriate place to deliver the news. She stood in the center of the godsdwod, the salt air rustling the red leaves of the heart tree. It was strange to see the tree unburnt, and though she longed to turn away from it, she forced herself to look upon it. My destiny, my fate...

She soon heard the crunch of dead leaves under uneven footsteps; Tyrion had come after all. Daenerys at last turned away from the heart tree to face Tyrion.

They had spoken very little since the red wedding. Tyrion's mismatched eyes regarded her warily, now, as he approached her.

"You wanted to meet, Princess?" he finally said, coming to stand before her. Daenerys turned and sat on the bench beneath the heart tree, and Tyrion followed suit, struggling a bit to heave himself up on to the stone.

They sat in silence, staring at the heart tree. The words were in her mouth. She might as well spit them out. It was time, after all.

"I am with child."

Tyrion did not speak immediately. They listened to the wind through the trees, and the distant roar of the ocean.

"I know."

"I had a dream—no, a vision," she said, after a moment's pause. "Just now. Of a stag about to burn the throne...I think the red woman was sent to stop me, that night. The night of the wedding," she admitted in a rush. "I'm meant to save the throne from the stag, or he'll burn it down, and the red woman's prophecy was meant to deter me. I knew at the wedding that I was with child, and she was sent to distract me, to make me care more for my child than for the throne, so that the white stag might destroy it...But the gods are calling for me to save the throne from the white stag. I saw it, in my vision."

Targaryens had always been special, always been different.

Tyrion said nothing, only stared ahead.

"There are herbs," he began carefully. Daenerys shook her head, thinking of the red woman's words. You will try to destroy this love three times, and will damn yourself three times...

"It must be born," she said firmly. "We don't know what magic the red woman has. She said I would try to destroy it, so I mustn't harm the child. It must be born..."

"...But no one can know," Tyrion finished for her. Daenerys nodded.

"We—we could send it away; so many people would want a child. It would never need know who I am, it could have a happy, peaceful life..."

"What of its father?"
Daenerys stared hard at the heart tree.

"He does not know," she said. "And he need never know." She curled her hands into fists. "I've been called upon by the gods...I do not wish to part with the child, but how can I ignore the call of the gods? What is one child to the call of the gods, to the fate of a kingdom?"

"Forgive me, Princess, but..." Tyrion hesitated. "...I have known children born of incest before. I know it is the Targaryen way, but...it might be kinder to kill the child now, before it breathes. Joffrey is a monster."

"You said his brother and sister were not," Daenerys countered. "I am from incest and I am no monster."

"The gods flip a coin, as they say," Tyrion said, and for once his tone was without humor.

"Do they not flip a coin for all children? How many men are mad who were not born of incest?"

"Many," he conceded. "But it might be a kindness all the same, to never let it—"

"—No," Daenerys said firmly, even as her eyes grew wet. "I will not destroy this baby. I will have the baby, and give him up, and he need never know anything...he need never know he is Targaryen, he need never know anything but a normal, happy life...

She placed her hand on her belly, thinking of the white stag and the burning sword. "Will you help me?" she asked at last.

"Of course," Tyrion said. "But the path ahead is uncertain, Princess..."

"My path has never been certain," Daenerys said. "And yet here I am."

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Jon awoke alone in the tent, to the smell of meat roasting and the sound of low, terse discussion. He'd fallen asleep so late, and had been so tired, that he'd slept in far later than he usually did. Rubbing at his eyes, he crawled out of the tent. Beric, Mance, and Anguy were arguing, as everyone else listened.

"...As payback for the disturbance," Anguy was saying stubbornly. "Thorne wants to pretend they don't know who did it, but you know he'd suck King Joffrey's co—"

"—Do you have to be so foul?" Dalla, who was roasting the meat, interrupted.

"What's happened?" Jon asked, as he dropped down onto a log beside Gendry and Davos. Beric looked pensive, Mance and Anguy looked furious.

"The godswood's burned in Mole's Town," Bronn explained for them, unaffected by the words. He was sharpening his blade. "Clegane was supposed to do it in a few weeks, with Dickon Tarly, but someone else did it for them."

"And," Anguy interjected disgustedly, "painted 'Long live King Joffrey' on the side of the fucking Sept. Just in case we couldn't pick up the meaning of burning the godswood on our own. Thorne just couldn't wait, could he? It's a power move. He knows the Direwolves met last night, and he's mad that he didn't catch them, and he wants to show everyone who really has the power."

"Aye, or one of his little followers," Mance agreed. "But they won't admit it."

"Thorne says they don't know who did it," Anguy added in explanation. "No one's claimed
"It couldn't be Thorne," Jon blurted out suddenly, and everyone looked to him in surprise. He felt his face grow warm at the attention, and he cleared his throat. "What purpose would it serve, for Thorne to do it?"

"Make him look especially loyal to the Crown?" Anguy seethed, but Jon shook his head.

"It might, but it's too much of a risk. He would be going above his station," Jon insisted. "There's no guarantee that the Crown would look favorably upon it. And if he did decide to do it, wouldn't he claim responsibility for it? Wouldn't he want everyone to know he was the one to do it?"

Jon hesitated. "Now that the godswood's burned, the general doesn't need to come to Mole's Town, does he? ...I think it was someone who wants to keep the redcoats out of Mole's Town. The fact that they painted anything on the Sept is the clue, isn't it? It's not someone who worships the Seven, clearly."

"Would your wife do such a thing, Snow?" Beric asked. "She's got good reason to keep redcoats—and Dickon Tarly—out of Mole's Town."

"Sansa would never," Jon said immediately, and he knew it was true. Sansa would never be able to bring herself to burn down a godswood, no matter how afraid she was.

"That makes no sense," Anguy said, shaking his head. "It had to be Thorne."

"No, Snow's got the right of it." Everyone looked to Bronn in surprise. The slender man shrugged. "Thorne doesn't need to burn the godswood, so who else would do it? Anyone loyal to the Crown wouldn't need to; it was going to happen anyway. The only thing that's been accomplished is that now Clegane doesn't need to come to Mole's Town." Bronn went back to sharpening his sword. "It's what I'd do," he added, "if I wanted to keep Clegane out of Mole's Town."

"It could be Jory," Anguy said slowly, narrowing his eyes, "but he's been missing."

"Jory?"

A lifetime ago, Jon had known a man named Jory. A Stark clansman, Jory Cassel, a carelessly handsome rogue who had been like a brother to Eddard Stark. Jory had teased Arya, and flirted innocently with Sansa, always telling her how lovely she'd grow up to be. He'd teased Jon, too, and played at swords with Robb and Theon, and stolen treats from the kitchen for them, and laughed the loudest and fought the hardest.

"Aye, Jory Poole," said Anguy. "He started the Direwolves."

Poole was a Stark clansman name, too, Jon thought. "I think your wife knows him, too," Anguy realized. "She was torn up that he wasn't there, last night."

It had to be Jory Cassel. "Good thing Freerider was there to comfort her," Anguy added cheekily. "Alright, who is this 'Freerider'?!!" Gendry demanded irritably. "And why is he a legend?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Freerider, I know that nickname," Bronn realized, and he looked to Sandor, his eyes unusually bright. "...No. He's not here. He can't be."
"Could be," Sandor said. He looked more alert than Jon ever saw him, and he let out a rough bark of a laugh. "Didn't he desert the army?"

"—Yes, he did," Bronn said wickedly. He looked to Anguy. "Didn't know there was a brothel round these parts—"

"Brothel?!!" Jon spat in horror. "What in seven hells does that have to do with—"

"—Aye, even here, his ways are legendary," Anguy said with relish. "I've heard many a whore speak of him."

"We only heard of him, in King's Landing," Bronn marveled, shaking his head. "I knew a whore who had him; she only told me he was a redcoat."

"None of the whores in Mole's Town will say what he does," Anguy said in a low voice, "but they all say it's indescribable... things they've never done before."

"But why is he called—oh."

Jon halted mid-speech.

He rode for free.

"He never pays," Bronn explained in a patient voice to Jon. "They won't take his money, no matter how he tries. He does things that no whore's ever done, he fucks so good it doesn't even feel like work for them."

"We must learn his ways," Tormund boomed. Val was laughing nearly hysterically at the look on Jon's face.

"The man who walked her home," he confirmed slowly, "is Freerider."

"Aye, and they share an office...all day...every day..." Anguy sighed. "Who knows what they get up to," he said innocently.

Jon only realized he had picked up his quiver of arrows and was systematically stripping the feathers off of them when Gendry gently extricated the arrows from his hands.

"What on earth happened?" Brienne demanded as Sansa stalked through the door, still pale and trembling. "I heard the godswood is bu—"

"—Yes, it's been burned, and Jory's going to be hanged," Sansa blurted, bypassing Brienne and Jaime and going to the table, where she clutched the edge of it for stability. She could not seem to stop shaking.

"Jory? You mean Jory Poole?" Brienne asked, confused, standing behind Sansa.

"His name's not Poole, it's Cassel. He was a Stark clansman," Sansa explained, closing her eyes, willing her hands to stop shaking. "He saw my family die. I thought he was dead, but he's been here the whole time...and Thorne knows that I know him, and he knows I'm one of the Direwolves, and he's caught Jory and says that Jory's been stealing gold and—"

"Sansa, breathe," Jaime demanded, going beside her and gripping her arm. "One thing at a time. What the hell's happened? Why were you out to begin with?"
Sansa turned round to face them. Brienne looked stricken; Jaime looked furious.

"Jory wasn't at the meeting last night, and no one had seen him in days," Sansa began, "so I went to look for him early this morning. But when I passed through the center of town, I saw the godswood was on fire, and I went to look. Thorne was there; he told me he had been planning on bringing me in for questioning today, and made me go to his office to ask me about Jory."

Brienne and Jaime glanced between each other, silently communicating something that Sansa did not know. "He found Jory's hideout, and it was filled with gold...and seashells," Sansa continued. "Thorne thinks he's been sending stolen money to a woman named Jeyne. He thought I had information about it, and that I might have been able to use said information to save Jory from hanging."

"Why on earth would he think that?" Jaime blurted. Sansa bit her lip and averted her eyes from them.

"Because I visited him the last time he was in the town jail," she confessed, "and Thorne must have overheard me talking to Jory. All I asked was if he knew that my brother had been married...but I suppose it was enough."

"You little fool," Jaime said softly, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why would you even ask? What the hell does it matter if your brother was married? He's not married now; he's dead. And soon, you will be, too, if you're not more careful."

"Wouldn't you want to know, if Tyrion had married?" Sansa demanded, eyes growing wet. Jaime scoffed.

"My brother has been up to all kinds of things, Sansa. Of course I want to know what he's been doing, and why he's been doing those things, but I also know better than to go around asking questions about it."

"Alayne," Brienne said now, mournfully, "I'm sorry, but you've put us all in terrible danger. You've got to keep a low profile. Please. I'm begging you. No more Direwolves, at least for a little while. Thorne's got too much power, and our situation is far too precarious."

"I'm sorry," Sansa replied, hanging her head. She thought of the list that they had drawn up, last night, of all the things everyone would gather for Mance Rayder and his family. She had promised she would make clothing...She had led something, she had been in charge of something, for the first time in her life. People were counting on her... She had a chance to do something of meaning, and it was about to slip through her fingers...

"I know you didn't mean it," Brienne said, "and of course I would have done the same. But if Thorne and his men happen to come into the bakery at the wrong moment, they'll find Jaime. And I've been hiding salt, unlawfully, and if they find it, I'll be fined at best, and jailed at worst. And none of us need attention from the Crown."

"It's not our salt that Thorne's after," Jaime snapped, "and if he finds me, woe betide him. It's her pretty neck he's after, I know it without even looking at the man."

"You sound rather confident for a man who can't even best me in a duel," Brienne shot back.

"Besting you has nothing to do with it. I think most men are one hundredth the swordsman that you are," Jaime retorted, and Brienne went quite pink but said nothing. Jaime did not seem to even realize he had given her such a gift. "I could defeat any of these pathetic watchmen in my sleep,
"We can't let it come to that," Brienne said, shaking her head. "But why was the godswood burning? The general was supposed to—"

"—He's not a general; Clegane's a stupid thug," Jaime interrupted furiously. "He's a mad dog who can't tell right from left and thinks with his cock."

"Fine, the pretend general, then," Brienne snapped, "he was supposed to burn the godswood. Why would Thorne do it now?"

"It wasn't Thorne," Sansa replied, thinking of how Thorne's eyes had glittered, and she felt sick once more. "He said it wasn't him, or any of his men. But it was strange," she added, thinking back on the horrific scene. "...'long live King Joffrey' was painted on the side of the Sept."

"Well, it wasn't me, I assure you," Jaime said sarcastically. "I can't write with my left hand, and I get my letters confused anyway."

"It wasn't someone of the new gods, though, either," Sansa continued. "They defiled the Sept with the paint."

"Fine, then a Crown loyalist. Someone eager to set themselves apart from the Direwolves," Jaime said carelessly. "What does it matter?"

"Well, it's sort of a boon for us, isn't it?" Sansa said slowly, looking at them both. "None of us want Clegane or Dickon Tarly to come to Mole's Town...and now they don't have to, do they?"

Both Brienne and Jaime fell silent, staring at her.

"Could it have been Jory?" Brienne asked at last.

"No, he's been in the jail...he must have been there for a day, at least, since he wasn't at the Direwolves meeting."

"Brotherhood without Banners, then?" Brienne suggested. "Snow's one of them, now, is he not? Perhaps he was trying to protect you."

"No," Sansa said, shaking her head. "He was never much for worship but I don't think he'd ever burn a godswood, if for no reason but out of respect for my father."

"He betrayed his own blood to protect you," Jaime remarked. "I'm not certain there's anything he wouldn't do to protect you."

"I found out where Jory Poole went," Anguy said as he entered the campsite. It had been several days since the godswood had burned, and Jon had done little but hunt and watch Sansa's house. Thorne hadn't been there in days, at least, not while Jon had been there, but he'd not seen Sansa leave the house, either...but he had seen Freerider. In daylight he was even less impressive. He was of a stocky build, and his round face, though handsome, made him look quite young. He often tripped on his own feet, and Jon learned he had a stammer. And every day, he watched Freerider disappear inside the bakery...and spend hours with Sansa.

"Where?" Beric looked up from the knife he was sharpening, as Anguy dropped down beside him.

"Jail. He's going to hang." Anguy took out an apple and polished it with a corner of his cloak, and
Jon looked up sharply.

"Hang?"

"Aye, he was supposedly caught with Crown gold," Anguy said doubtfully, "though I have to say, last I saw him he didn't look up to stealing much gold."

"He would never," Jon blurted, and everyone looked to him in surprise. "I think it's Jory Cassel," he explained. "He was a Stark clansman. So was Poole, but he died before I even left Winterfell. I think Jory took his name." Jon got to his feet. "He won't even get a trial?"

"No trial," Anguy confirmed before biting into the apple. "He'll hang in less than a fortnight. ...I suppose that explains why your wife looked so sad at the meeting when he didn't show up. Nearly fainted."

Jon thought of Sansa swaying on her feet, and how Freerider had had to reach out and hold her upright. Bile rose in his throat but, at least, it had nothing to do with the thought of Freerider touching her. _He's the last one_, Jon realized in growing horror. _He's the last Stark clansman alive, besides her._ She had seen her whole family executed; now she would see the last Stark clansman executed, too.

"You look like a man with plans, Snow," Davos remarked wryly across the fire. Jon's heart was pounding.

"Less than a fortnight?" he asked Anguy once more. Anguy arched his brows.

"Aye," he said slowly, and mischief gleamed in his eyes. "The night after the town ball. Why?"

"Jory doesn't deserve to be hanged," Jon said. _And Sansa doesn't deserve to see another loved one killed by the Crown._ "He's been leading the resistance," he said to the group now, desperately. "He started the Direwolves. He might as well be one of the Brotherhood. And what is the point of the Brotherhood, if not to save those who need help?"

"You don't have to convince us, crow," Tormund said, rubbing his hands together almost gleefully. "I'm dying for a fight."

Everyone was looking at him, now. Expectantly. Waiting. Jon drew an unsteady breath. He'd never been a leader before. He didn't know how to be one.

"We could do it the night of the ball," he said, casting around for ideas, and he got to his feet, pacing. "It'll be harder to frame anyone else for the escape, if everyone's at the ball," he thought aloud, feeling their eyes on him, following his pacing. "And, probably, the Town Watch's forces will be thinner. Some of them will have to be at the ball. Everyone will be out of the way."

Jon looked to Beric for approval. Beric was the actual leader, and, ultimately, it was his decision. Beric was rubbing at his chin, staring into the fire thoughtfully, and Jon held his breath, flexing his fingers. _It matters not_, Jon decided. _If he won't help me, I'll go myself_.

"We'll need more help," Beric said at last. "Can we get the Direwolves to help, do you think?"

"Sam Flowers'll know," Anguy said. "I'm supposed to see him tomorrow. I can ask then."

"Snow should go with you," Beric said. "This would be a risk for these people. They ought to see a face of the Brotherhood. It would be a show of faith, it would be proof that we really mean to do this."
"Then why not me?" Gendry countered. "They think the Brotherhood's led by King Robert's ghost, don't they? Wouldn't it mean more to see King Robert's ghost?"

"Aye, and you too," Beric replied. "You both ought to go. Not to the meeting; it'll be too dangerous."

"They'll be looking for you, then," Davos agreed. "If you went earlier, they won't be looking so carefully."

"Hiding them in plain sight?" Mance mused, chuckling. "I like it."

There was a ringing in Jon's ears.

"Y-you want me to talk to Sam Flowers?" he blurted in horror.

"Aye, crow, keep up," Tormund said impatiently. "You're supposed to be the clever one."

"Clever? I'm not clever," Jon argued, his face growing hot. Everyone was laughing at him now. "If I'm so bloody clever," he began hotly, "then why are you all laughing at me?"

"It's a very narrow kind of cleverness, for sure," Bronn said. "Idiot savant, if you will." And then everyone was laughing even harder, even Gendry, and Jon scowled at him.

Later, as Jon was unhappily polishing his boots before bed, Val, Beric, and Davos approached him.

"Cut it all off," Davos was saying. "A nice clean look."

"Cut what off?" Jon demanded, scrambling to his feet and back away from them. He realized, now, that Val was holding a knife.

"No, I like him with a bit of hair," Val said, cocking her head to the side and studying him. "Just enough to pull back. It's such pretty hair, too."

"The beard, though, must go," Beric said solemnly. "He looks like a bear—"

"—No, she likes the beard," Davos countered. "But we can trim it, for certain. Just tidy it up a bit."

Jon backed away from them, holding his boot defensively, feeling twigs and stones under his bare foot.

"There's no use fighting it, crow," Val said sweetly, holding up the knife. "We'll get you in the end."

"Why are you cutting off my hair?" he asked, outraged.

"You can't see your wife like this, Snow," Davos said pragmatically. "I know you've not much experience with wives, not yet at least, but they're not too fond of the savage look."

"I'm not seeing—"

"—I don't have all night, Seaworth. Hold him down," Val said shortly. Jon was about to duck and run, but a very strong pair of hands latched themselves around his arms and forced him to sit down on the spot. "Thank you, Sandor," she said sweetly, looking above Jon.
"I will kill you," Jon seethed, feeling pressure on his head as Sandor held him down. The man only snorted skeptically as Val knelt before him, studying him once again with a critical eye.

"This won't hurt...much," she said, and then she put the blade to him.

Days passed in agony. Sansa kept a low profile, as she had promised Brienne, but just because she couldn't go to the Direwolves meeting, that didn't mean she couldn't still sew clothes for Mance and his family.

So she sewed. For days, for nights, she sewed. She sewed tunics and breeches and cloaks, and in between, she sewed her red dress, more determined than ever. And she made it more daring than ever, too. Anger and sadness was stitched into every seam of the dress. She poured all of her grief, all of her fears, all of her frustration, and all of her rage into the dress. She was possessed by some new kind of rage, a rage that could not be quelled by calm embroidery or prayer or singing or sleep. They took my father, my mother, my brothers, my sister, then they took my home, and now they take the only man who ever honored his vows to my father... Sansa Stark was truly being erased from the world.

The day of the Direwolves' meeting had arrived...and though Sansa would not go, for she knew she could not put Brienne's livelihood in jeopardy, she still could take the clothing she had sewn for Mance's family to Sam.

Besides, Anguy was going to be there, and she had a request for Anguy.

Thus Sansa folded the clothing neatly, carefully, wondering if Jon would see it...wondering if he would know it was she who had sewn the clothing. She folded the clothes in brown paper and tied it with string. She'd not told Brienne of her project, and she did not know if Podrick had told the woman...but she decided that, if asked, she could feasibly just be delivering clothing to a customer. This would be her last act, she told herself. She wouldn't endanger Brienne or Podrick or Jaime any longer, even if it killed her. She would deliver the clothes to Sam and Gilly, and she would make her request of Anguy—or else ask Sam to ask Anguy for her—and then that would be it. No more Direwolves, no more trying to save the world...she would not return Brienne's kindness with more danger.

She just had to do this one last thing.

She dressed in a plain dress, and she didn't even realize she hadn't brushed her hair in days until after she left the bakery. Oh well. It wasn't like it mattered. Nothing really mattered anymore.

It was late afternoon, and a light rain was falling, soaking through her cloak. Sansa kept her head down, gaze averted, to avoid meeting anyone's eyes. The clothing weighed heavy in her hand.

Mole's Town had never seemed so desolate, so ugly, so unkind. The Sept loomed over the town square, and Sansa did not look directly at it; she only looked at its shadow. Even now she imagined she could still taste the smoke of the burning godwood, could still feel it burning her eyes and lungs. She saw the dais in the center of the square, and the wooden structure that had never had any meaning for her had suddenly become a blinding point of evil. It was an innocent wooden post with a crossbeam nailed to its top, and in the corner of her eye she thought she could see a body swinging from a noose there—but when she looked, there was no body, no noose. Not yet.

There was probably no point in asking Anguy. Even though she was nearly positive he was one of the Brotherhood, why should he take her request seriously? It would be an enormous risk, a task perhaps impossible, with nothing in it for the Brotherhood. But Jon knew Jory once, she thought.
desperately, turning the idea over in her mind as she had so many thousands of times over the last week, as though it were a stone to be examined, as though hunting for some facet she had not yet found on its surface. *Wouldn't he care for Jory?*

But why would Jon care for Stark clansmen? He hadn't even seen his tenth name day at Winterfell. *He loved Robb, and Arya, and Bran and Rickon,* she thought as she approached Sam's shop, the door still boarded over. *He had so much love within him.* The shop windows were darkened; she had a dark moment where she wondered if Thorne had somehow seized Sam, too, and she felt a lurch of misery as she pictured Gilly and their son watching Sam be dragged away...Her anger was rising again as she knocked on the door, as she pulled it open...

The shop was empty. Sansa stepped inside, shutting the door behind her carefully.

"Hello?" she called out nervously, heart pounding as she carefully set down the package. "H-hello? It's Miss Stone, I'm—"

The door to the back, to Gilly's workroom, opened a crack, and Sam's round face appeared. In stark contrast to how he had looked in her mind's eye a moment ago, he looked quite lively, almost levitating with delight.

"Miss Stone!" he cried happily. "The timing could not be more perfect! Come, come!" He gestured for Sansa to come through the doorway.

"Why? Is Anguy here?" she asked suspiciously. "I've got the clothes—"

"—Yes, lovely, just come here," Sam insisted. He wouldn't open the door all the way. His eyes were shining, his face flushed. "It's the most brilliant—well, I won't spoil it. Just come here."

Confused and irritated, Sansa picked up her parcel of clothes once more, and walked to the door to Gilly's storeroom. Even from outside the room she was hit with the spicy scent of herbs, and yet...she heard something...a low, soft voice. "Don't worry, it's Miss Stone," Sam said over his shoulder, back into the room. "Come on, Miss Stone!" He reached out and pulled her into the doorway. "It's the Brotherhood without Banners!"

There was no time to prepare—the room darkened when Sam shut the door, and Sansa's eyes, still used to daylight, took a moment to adjust to the light, as her heart pounded and she was shoved forward into the room by Sam. She stumbled, dropping the parcel of clothes, and smacked into something hard just as she brought up her hands to stop her fall. Her hands hit a man's chest, clad in black riding leathers and a short black cloak.

"Oh, I'm sorry—" she blustered, blinking rapidly as the darkened room came into focus, and a pair of hands reached out to steady her, and then drew back, so hastily.

"No, it was me—"

She stepped backward, reeling, and raised her gaze, so afraid yet so hopeful; breathing was impossible; *no no no it can't be this is just a dream it's not him—*

And there he was.
Part II: Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

Beltane is, obviously, not a faith of the seven or old gods celebration, but I'm borrowing it here. I considered renaming it and making it its own thing, but it was taking up too much narrative space to get across.

Jon's hands moved instinctively, as though to steady her, but Sansa stepped back before they touched. She had forgotten how lovely his hands were. Her mouth was dry and the room was too quiet. There were too many eyes on them, as she met his gaze at long last. She was not ready, but the moment had come anyway.

He looked different. He had new scars on his face: one over his brow and another, the skin around it slightly pink, on his jaw, just barely visible through his short beard. But in spite of these scars he somehow looked younger, and his eyes looked brighter. He was holding himself differently, too: standing taller, his back straighter. He was happier, she realized, and his heart was healing. It was like seeing morning mist being burned away by the sun. He looked more northern than ever, too: his clothes were not the lightweight, finely-made clothes of Braavos; they were of a heavier, rougher fabric, with no decoration and no elegance to them. They suited him far better. Jon was a northern man at heart.

Had his mouth always been so pretty? Had his eyes always been so soft? Or had it got worse since she'd last seen him? Had he somehow become even more unbearably beautiful to her in the time in between?

No one broke the silence for a long moment. Sansa was overcome with joy, heedless and billowing, a joy she had forgotten how to feel. Every hair on her body seemed to prickle with heated awareness of how little air suddenly separated them, and her fingertips tingled as though running over each part of him, as she helplessly mapped him beneath her hands in her imagination: how the worn leather and roughspun wool would feel beneath her fingers if she touched him...how the coarse stubble of his beard might brush against her palm, how the smoothness of his cheek might feel beneath her fingertips, how the mess of dark curls would slip between her fingers, how his eyelashes might tickle her skin...

It seemed an impossibility, a trick of magic, that they should suddenly be standing so close, close enough that she could see every lash, every freckle, could see the way the muscles of his throat moved, just above the clasp of his cloak, as he swallowed. She could not help but revel in every sign that he was real, that he was here, and run over it once more, and then again, tracing every part of him and exalting in the senseless joy that each new detail brought. There was a tiny nick on the skin of his neck, there was a lock of dark hair that had come free behind his ear; his cloak had been torn and then poorly-mended near his right shoulder. These little details proved that he had been alive somewhere outside of her imagination, independent of her thoughts and dreams, and the idea was both thrilling and shattering.

But at the same time she was so angry, and felt so betrayed. The last time she had been this close to him, he had kissed her and cut her and then let her go...And yet, he was looking at her right now with his brows drawn together and lips parted in a look of pain, like she had been the one to kiss...
and cut him. She saw his shoulders rise, slightly and unsteadily, like he was trying to breathe, as he drank in the sight of her, warmth unmistakable in his dark eyes as they traced every line of her. She wondered if he could feel her beneath his fingertips, too, and her skin grew warm as though he'd touched her all the same.

"Er...well then," Sam began awkwardly, dousing the burning silence, "...Miss Stone, this is Jon...and Gendry. They're from the Brotherhood without Banners. And you already have met Anguy. Jon, Gendry, this is Miss Alayne Stone."

Sansa only belatedly realized that Anguy and another man were standing behind Jon, both studying her with great interest. They knew, she realized, who she was to Jon. It was all too clear in their eyes—especially Anguy's, as he seemed to be reveling in the anguished tension, eyes bright with mischief. The man named Gendry looked so strikingly like Renly—and, therefore, like King Robert in his youth—that she felt like she'd been slapped. Of course, he was far filthier than Renly would have ever been, and far burler, too. But his blue eyes were that same blazing blue, and they were fixed on her now with a delighted curiosity. He was King Robert's ghost indeed. Find the white stag...was he the white stag of the prophecy? Was he the white stag of the essays? Were they one and the same?

"W-what a surprise," Sansa wrenched out at last. She looked down and remembered the clothing on the floor. "Oh no, I dropped—"

"—I've got it," came Jon's soft voice and he crouched down before her with a warrior's grace to pick up the bundle of clothing she had dropped. His voice was more northern than before, too, she realized; his words curled and twisted with a northerner's accent. Being north was stripping him of the facade he'd crafted abroad, after so many years with Daenerys.

"Thank you," she blustered, looking away and tucking her hair behind her ear with a slightly shaking hand. Why hadn't she brushed her damn hair? She thought of how she must look: soaking wet, hair tangled and wild, eyes shadowed from lack of sleep... "It's the clothing, for Mance and his family."

"Yes, it was Miss Stone's idea to collect things for Mance," Sam informed them proudly. "And look at what everyone's brought!" He gestured to a small pile of things behind him, including folded blankets and sacks of grain. "I think that's everything, now. I had that list somewhere, but seems I've misplaced it again. Gilly was just telling me to keep better track of these things, too." He turned to Sansa. "Anguy was right. You really are just like the Targar—I mean, like Jon," he corrected hastily, nodding to Jon apologetically. "Sorry, it's just I've spent my life calling you the Targaryen wolf. Bit of a habit, I suppose. I used to tell my little brother stories of the Targaryen wolf, when we were little."

"Stories?" Jon arched his brows. Sam began fidgeting with his apron.

"Er, yes, well, you know, just about you conquering, and being a savage come to take the throne with fire and blood and spears...things like that. Just to entertain him, of course. I-I may have said you were like a Dothraki but covered in scales and able to breathe fire, and...as tall as two men," he finished feebly, eyeing Jon.

"You can't be much younger than me—wouldn't I have been a child?" Jon pointed out, looking reluctantly amused, though she knew it hurt him, too. Sam cleared his throat.

"Yes, well, you know, of course I took poetic license and, perhaps, stretched certain facts, such as your age...and height...and species...just a bit, for the sake of the stories... obviously they weren't intended to be anything more than bedtime entertainment—"
"—Bedtime entertainment? What sort of house did you grow up in, Flowers?" Anguy joked, earning a reluctant chuckle from Gendry and a look of horror from Sam.

"N-no, that's not—"

"It's best if you just ignore Anguy, Mr. Flowers," Jon reassured Sam, glancing back at Anguy warningly.

"Anyway," Sam cut in hastily as Anguy opened his mouth, eyes glimmering, clearly ready to supply a mischievous retort, "as I was saying, Miss Stone, you really are just like Jon. You want to save Mance, and Jon wants to save Jory!" Sam's face fell, then, as he turned to Sansa. "Jory's been __"

"—Jailed, I know," Sansa finished for him. "That was partly why I've come—to ask the Brotherhood without Banners for help." She bit her lip, bracing herself, and turned back to Jon, Gendry, and Anguy. "He was caught with Crown gold, so he won't get a trial, but I don't think he stole any gold. I just don't."

"Aye, I knew him as a boy," Jon agreed, avoiding her eyes, "and I don't think he'd steal, either. Nor do I think he burned the godswood," he added.

"I'm telling you, it was Thorne—" Anguy began stubbornly, but Sansa interrupted.

"No, it wasn't. Thorne told me himself that it wasn't him, or any of his men, and he wasn't lying." She felt sick, remembering the look in Thorne's eyes as he'd spoken of the burning godswood. She kept imagining how her father's face might have looked at the sight of the godswood on fire, and it gutted her each time.

"Thorne told you himself?" Jon asked, looking at her in surprise.

"Yes." All eyes were on her now. "He—well, he took me into custody last week, the day the godswood burned. To ask me about Jory."

"Why?" Jon looked murderous, and Sansa turned, pacing away from him. It was too hard to think when their eyes met, too hard to think when he was so close.

"The last time Jory was in jail, I...may have visited him," she admitted, wringing her hands as she walked around the little table, which was covered with clippings of herbs. The candle on the table was the only light in the room. Across the room, she turned round to face Jon again. "Thorne overhead me speaking with Jory, and is now convinced that I'm in league with Jory—"

"—He's got a vendetta against you, Miss Stone," Gendry said bluntly. "He was watching your house on the night of the Direwolves' meeting."

"Watching my house? How do you—"

"—Jon and Gendry followed you and Mr. Payne, that night, to keep the Town Watch from following you," Anguy explained quickly. "They were the ones who distracted Thorne and his men so that everyone could make it to the Chubby Grumkin safely."

She could not say why the thought infuriated her, but anger, fiery hot, shot through her. So he had seen her. She'd wondered but now she knew for certain. The thought that he might have seen the flower in her hair was a tiny point of brightness that she cast aside furiously. She pictured him crouching in the shadows, watching her. He had never even made the effort to speak to her. She had been so filled with hope—she had changed her bloody dress four times; she had worn a damn
hairpin for him!—and he had not even felt the need to give her some sort of sign that he was there at all. Beyond the hot anger was sickening embarrassment that she had been so girlish and hopeful and excited, and that meanwhile he had not cared at all. Why did she have to get her damn hopes raised so easily? Why, after the many, many crushing disappointments she had lived through, was she still so foolish and stupid and hopeful? Had she learned nothing? She had been practically dancing with excitement at the possibility of seeing him, and meanwhile he had been so wrapped up in his stupid Robin Hood fantasy. I suppose having a wife would dash that fantasy, she thought disgustedly.

"That wasn't necessary," she informed them, scowling at Jon across the little table. "Mr. Payne and I planned to take the long way to throw Thorne off of us. It was kind of you, but there was no need. You wasted your time—we had it handled."

"Aye, and when you returned after the meeting, and Thorne was watching you in the dark, did you have that handled, too?" Jon asked coolly, but in spite of the coolness of his voice, his eyes were blazing. Another ripple of rage shot through her. "You have made an enemy of him, Miss...?"

"Stone," she supplied acidly. She crossed her arms over her chest, still scowling at Jon. "There's no reason for Thorne to hate me in particular. He hates the Direwolves, that's all, and he thinks that because I'm a woman, I'm an easier target for him. But it doesn't matter—the fact is that Jory doesn't deserve to be h-hanged," she continued, hating how her voice broke. "There has to be a way to stop it, there has to be."

"Aye, I think there is," Jon said, though his voice was still rather frosty, and he shot her another burning look. "The execution is set the day after some...town ball," he continued with a dismissive jerk of his hand, unmistakable disdain for the ball in his voice. He'd always hated dancing, she remembered with a stab of pain. Because he's a bloody spoilsport, she thought savagely, wishing he could read her mind and know exactly what she thought of him. He probably only hates dancing because he's bad at it. Idiot. "I think we can break him out that night, but we'll need help."

"What do you need?"

Jon pressed his lips together, as though physically stopping himself from saying something, as he looked at her with that blazing look again. A muscle leapt in his jaw as he clearly suffered some sort of inward battle while he regarded her, like he was trying to force himself to do something very unpleasant. She matched his gaze. At long last, he spoke.

"We need," he began through clenched teeth, as though the words themselves were drawing blood, "the floor plan of the jail, and which cell Jory is in."

"That's easy," she said at once. "There's only one cell he would be in. I've seen the jail; I could draw it for you."

"And why do you know which cell Jory is in?" Jon demanded, his voice caustic, looking at her mutinously.

"I told you, I've visited the jail. And one of the Town Watchmen told me there's only one cell for the prisoners who will hang. He showed it to me." She decided, at the look of outrage on Jon's face, to omit some of the more uncomfortable details of that encounter. "Do you have paper I could use?" she asked Sam, ignoring how Jon's eyes flashed.

"E-er, yes, of course," Sam stammered, clearly surprised that he'd been spoken to. He snatched parchment, ink, and a quill from one of the shelves, nearly dropping them in the process, and smoothed the parchment on the little table between Sansa and Jon. The paper looked more golden
in the low candlelight. Sansa felt Jon's eyes on her as she took the quill with an unsure hand.

"There are...I think six cells," she began, drawing a long rectangle and marking the cells by drawing hatch marks, "on either side of the corridor. When I was there last, they were all occupied, but I don't know if that's still true."

"If anything, there'll be more," Sam said unhappily. "Too many people can't pay the salt tax, or've been caught hiding their salt."

Sansa thought of Brienne, steadily kneading dough; she thought of Jaime awkwardly peeling the potato. They had a little life together. They could be something like happy. This might be risking it, not just for her, but for all of them. She swallowed, and drew a larger box on the end.

"This is the cell for the ones that hang," she said. "It's got a solid door, not bars like the others. But it's got a hole in the ceiling, exposing it to the air. That'll be the only way in, without a key to that door."

Jon leaned forward and took the quill from her; their fingers brushed and they ignored it fiercely. Over the parchment, their eyes met for a fleeting instant.

"I looked early this morning," he began, "and there was one watchman stationed here," he marked the entrance to the jail, "and one patrolling here." He marked the entrance to the town hall, which was adjoined to the other end of the jail, and drew a long line, indicating the patrol’s path.

"Thorne's office is here," Sansa added, taking the quill back, ignoring the jolt in her belly as their fingers brushed again, and marking the town hall, "on the storey above the hall, at this end. He's got keys to the cell, and he usually wears them, I think, but he might not if he's attending the ball and not in uniform."

"And where's the ball being held?"

"...The town hall," Sansa replied grimly. "So, right beneath his office...and right next to the jail."

"Good thing I like a challenge," Gendry said lightly, from behind Jon. He leaned over the table as well, surveying the map they'd created. "We'll need a distraction," he said, "at the ball, to draw the attention so we can get into his office."

"We'll never get the keys," Jon said, shaking his head, "so there's no point in trying. Our only hope is to go through the ceiling...as long as it can fit two men." He glanced up at Sansa questioningly.

"I..." she thought back to being inside the cell, and her arm seemed to throb with the memory of Thorne's violent grip. "...I don't know," she confessed. "It's big enough for one man, I think, but not two at once, probably. ...I also wonder how capable Jory will be," she added. "When he was in the jail cell last time, he looked so weak...and he'll have been in there for weeks, by that time."

"Aye, he hasn't looked well," Anguy agreed slowly. "I thought it last time I saw him." He hesitated. "I don't know that a decade of living on the streets hasn't done him in for good, Miss Stone," he warned. "Even if we get him out, none of us are Septons or Maesters."

"No, but Castle Black isn't so far," Sam broke in excitedly. "You could take him straight there—I mean, if it's necessary," he added.

"Castle Black?" Gendry prompted.

"Maesters and Septons practice there," Sam explained, but Jon looked doubtful.
"It's a sanctuary for invalids; a place people go to die," he said. "Bringing Jory there, and exposing him to illness when he's so weak, might do more harm than good."

"I didn't realize you were so familiar with the north," Sam said in surprise.

"I grew up at Winterfell with the Starks, remember?" he reminded him. A thrill rushed through Sansa at the mention of her family, which quickly turned to horror when she felt Sam looking at her. Had he realized—?

"Of course! I forgot to mention," Sam began brightly, "that Miss Stone's been writing a history of the Stark clan! I bet you'd have all sorts of useful details for her, Jon!"

Jon looked at Sansa, brows raised. Sansa flushed.

"A history," he repeated slowly. "What for?"

"Just an interest," she said defensively. "I have little to occupy my time. I work as a seamstress, and I help out with my friend's bakery, but that doesn't fill every day."

"Aye, and no husband to take up your time," Anguy interjected, mockingly. Sansa watched Jon look at Anguy briefly with a withering gaze before turning back to her.

"Miss Stone," he began, and her stomach clenched at the look in his eyes, "it should go without saying that you must be visible, at the ball, while we are breaking Jory out."

"Why?" she bristled. "I've as much right—"

"—Because if Thorne thinks you're in league with Jory, you will be one of the first suspects when they find out he's gone," Jon said loudly over her protests, "and if he wants to hang a man just for taking some gold, what do you think he'll do to someone he suspects of taking that chance from him?"

He was right. But if they got Jory out, and he really was ill, and they took him away to Castle Black...she might never see him again. A place people go to die. Her eyes stung and she watched Jon's gaze soften, slightly, as he watched her fight the urge to cry, and she hated him for it. Oh, don't be so sweet now, she thought furiously. She clenched her fists, for her anger and grief had nowhere else to go.

"Fine," she said shortly. But he was still looking at her with those damn soft eyes, still looking at her with such intensity that she felt he was touching her. She wished she could tell him to bloody stop it.

"I'm sorry," he said suddenly, and she looked back at him in surprise. His gaze was so pleading, so desperate. "I know it's hard to feel you can do nothing. But without you we wouldn't know any of this," he added, pointing to the map between them. "And...and..." He hesitated, and drew in a deep breath, as though steeling himself, "...it doesn't mean there's nothing else you can do to help. This is going to be complicated, and risky, and I'm not even certain we can do it," he admitted. "We'll need your help. But you just can't be there when we break Jory out."

"He's right, Miss Stone," Gendry put in. "If Thorne suspects you, we'll just have another person to break out of jail."

"I don't think jail is where she'd go," Anguy said, and Sansa's arm throbbed once more with the ghost of Thorne's grip. She rubbed at the spot and felt Jon's eyes follow the movement, as a tense silence stretched on.
"So! How does the print press work?" Gendry suddenly blurted almost wildly to Sam, and Sam's whole being seemed to light up like the sun as his chest swelled, eyes shining.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked breathlessly.

"Aye, he can't read; the written word's all a great mystery to him," Anguy cut in. "It'll be a bit like showing him a glimpse of the faeries."

"Can't read? My Gilly couldn't read, but I taught her quick enough. Of course, she's brilliant—"

"—And Gendry's an idiot—"

"No, that's not what I meant at all!" Sam said, horrified. "Come, let me show you," he said eagerly, flapping his arms a bit in excitement as he went to the door, reminding Sansa ludicrously of a very large, very excitable bird, and Anguy and Gendry followed in amusement. "Don't you think Miss Stone and Jon are meant to be? Love at first sight, like a faerie tale!" they heard him whisper loudly as they left the room, and Jon's eyes glimmered with amusement, his pretty lips twitching, and Sansa tried not to laugh as well.

"Aye, love at first sight—because they've definitely never met before," they heard Anguy agree bemusedly, just before the door shut.

And then they were alone.

Suddenly they could not bear to look at each other. He seemed to burn too bright. Looking at him might simply set her ablaze.

Sansa looked down at her nails; she had once had such lovely hands, but she realized now that they had become so common-looking, the nails short and uneven, and her skin roughened with callus. It was like seeing herself for the first time, as she wondered what her hands looked like to his eyes.

"Thank you," he said softly. "For the clothes, for Mance and his family."

"It was nothing."

She felt like crying again. She heard a rustle of fabric, and dared to look up. Jon had drawn a short dirk from his belt, in a simple, worn leather sheath, and was holding it out to her, reaching across the table.

"You need to watch out for Thorne. Take this," he insisted, and he pressed it into her hands.

"I-I wouldn't even know what to do with it," she stammered, fingers curling around the leather. Jon's lips twitched.

"Stick them with the sharp end," he said wryly. "It's better than nothing."

"Not in my hands," she scoffed, but held it close to her all the same. Jon was looking at her in that damned soft way.

"I can recall a few times you almost wrought destruction with just a dirk," he said quietly. In a rush she remembered it: him advancing on her, the night he stole her, as she'd pointed a blade at him with a shaking hand; then, in the woods, when she'd tried to escape, she had come so close to slitting her own wrists right before his eyes. How different that girl was who had sobbed, so helplessly, in the woods...Sansa hardly recognized her. That girl, so fair and pretty, was gone.
She could remember a third moment, though the dirk had been pointed at her that time, and she had
the scar from that moment on her thigh, so close to where he might have touched her, and the scar
seemed to pulse now with her heartbeat. Her fingers felt thick and clumsy, suddenly, and her heart
was fluttering in her throat, as she looked down at the blade.

"I-is this...?" She glanced up at Jon. "I think I know this blade," she explained. "I have a scar from
it...if it's the same." She could see in his eyes that he knew what she meant.

"No, it's not the same one," he said at last, looking away suddenly, his face flushed.

"Where is that one?"

"Maybe with Daenerys. Maybe still on the floor of that room," he said with a shrug. "I didn't take
anything with me, when I ...left."

The words were burning on her tongue—she longed to ask; she had so many questions, yet she
could not speak as their eyes met once more. Why had he left? When had he left? Why was he here,
now? Why had he not come to her sooner, why had he not spoken to her last week, when he had
followed her?

Just when she had finally mustered the courage to speak, the door banged open again. "THORNE!"
Sam hissed.

Anguy and Gendry leapt into the storeroom and Sam stumbled back, shutting the door. Before
Sansa even fully understood what was happening, Jon had extinguished the single candle, sending
them into darkness—and then there was an arm around her, pulling her down. She smacked her
head on the table's edge and stars winked in her eyes as she was pulled beneath the tabletop,
crushed between Jon and Gendry. They were holding their breaths, everyone waiting. Her head
throbbed where she had smacked it, but Jon's strong hand was still on her waist, his chest pressed
to her back and his leg crushed against hers, and it made it hard to think about anything else. The
scent of his skin was dizzying.

"Mr. Thorne! What a pleasant surprise!" Sam squeaked, his voice muffled by the door between
them. The front door to the shop slammed shut.

"Mr. Flowers...Fortunately, it does not seem as though I have interrupted your print work."

"N-no, was just cleaning up my wife's storeroom for her this morning!"

Sansa heard Anguy let out the softest—yet most graphic—oath she had ever heard, and barely
perceived him shaking his head in the darkness, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Storeroom?"

"Oh, yes, where she makes her medicines. It's just right back there."

She felt Jon let out a short scoff, his breath tickling the back of her neck, and gooseflesh rippled
along her skin, making her shiver. "What can I help you with?" Sam asked now, his voice
dangerously high.

"His Majesty King Joffrey has levied a new tax, in order to maintain the reputability of places of
commerce," Thorne said. "Each shop will pay two gold dragons, quarterly, in order to maintain its
status."

Sansa drew in a breath and felt, rather than saw, Gendry and Jon look at her, their faces inches from
hers. In front of her, Anguy was shaking his head. "And as the first quarter is drawing to a close, this tax will be collected on Friday."

"Of course, Mr. Thorne," Sam squeaked. "Th-thank you for informing me."

After a moment, the door slammed shut and Sansa almost went limp with relief. In spite of this, for a long time no one moved, not until Sam opened the door, letting in a beam of white light from the shopfront. Anguy crawled out from under the table and Gendry shifted to the side, leaving Jon and Sansa. She felt him, at long last, draw his hand from her waist, and then felt him shift away as well. Cool air rushed in where his warmth had been seconds ago.

"Word of advice," Anguy was saying to Sam tersely, "if you don't want someone looking in a place you're hiding something, don't draw their attention to it, for fuck's sake!"

"I'm sorry," Sam cried, "I knew it was stupid and I don't even know why I said it, but Thorne just terrifies me!"

"He terrifies everyone. He's a bully," Sansa said, crawling out from under the table. Her forehead throbbed in pain but that was nothing to the way her skin tingled from where Jon had touched her. She massaged her head, thinking of what Jaime had said about the Crown's debt. "The shop tax is surprisingly logical, actually," she remarked. Gendry shrugged, but Sam was pacing, and Jon was still staring at the doorway, eyes narrowed in thought.

"Why all of these taxes, all of a sudden?" Gendry wondered.

"The Crown's deep in debt," Sansa replied. "The shop tax, at least, makes sense. The salt tax was outlandish."

"Aye, it doesn't make sense," Jon agreed slowly, looking at her again. They were standing so close that her arm nearly brushed his. "There's got to be some reasoning behind it."

"What about: 'make everyone in the north miserable and sick?'" Anguy suggested bitterly. "Seems good enough reasoning for King Joffrey."

"No, there's a strategy there, I agree," Sam said, tapping his chin. "I just don't know what it could be..." His eyes were already trailing back to the bookshelves in his shop as he continued to tap his chin in thought.

Jon turned to Sansa.

"You'd better go. If he's making the rounds to all the shops, he'll notice you're gone," he said. He was right, but it didn't make her feel any better about it.

"Right," she said softly. Wordlessly he picked the dirk from the table where she'd set it when Thorne had come in, and placed it in her hands. Sansa felt everyone's eyes follow the movement. "Thank you, for this," she said for their benefit, holding the dirk. "I'll be more careful." She looked down at the dirk. "What else can I do?"

Jon shifted. He looked unhappy.

"We need to determine how many of the Town Watch will be working, the night of the ball. That'll tell us if it's worth waiting until that night or if we'd best do it sooner."

"I can find out...without drawing attention," she added quickly at his warning look. "One of them sort of..." she paused, face growing warm, "...fancies me, I think. It wouldn't be hard to get
information from him."

"Who doesn't fancy Miss Stone?" Anguy wondered with a smirk.

"I don't," Gendry offered, then looked at Sansa and shrugged. "Not that you're not lovely," he added hastily, and Sansa laughed with Anguy. The laughter died quickly, though.

"If you find anything out, tell Flowers," Jon said now, his voice brusque. "But don't endanger yourself."

"I won't," she promised. "I hope Mance and his family like the clothes," she added. There was hesitation, because she was not ready to say goodbye, and wished she could have another moment with Jon, even if to say goodbye, if nothing more.

What if she never saw him again? After all, there would be no need for them to speak again. She'd pass information on to Sam, and they would break Jory out while she was at the ball, and...then...

"Anyway," she said quickly, tearing her gaze from Jon, "I'll be off. It was nice meeting you both," she said to both Jon and Gendry, but Jon was looking at the floor. "Good luck."

In silence, she left the storeroom. Sam walked her to the door, and they peered out into the street, searching for Thorne, but saw him nowhere.

"Be careful," Sam advised quietly, opening the door for her.

"Thank you," she replied, and, forcing herself not to look back, she left the shop.

It was raining harder, now. She was weak and trembling, as though she'd run for hours, as she made her way back to the bakery. It was too much. There were too many feelings within her; it was like she'd taken a deep breath but could not exhale. She tried to recall the conversation, but all she kept going back to was the look in Jon's eyes as he'd handed her the dirk, and the feel of his chest against her back. Everything else was lost in a fog.

She paused, a few houses away, and looked for Thorne or his men, but none were there. The bakery looked the same as it always did. Inside, Brienne was helping a customer, and did not seem unruffled or upset, so it seemed Thorne either hadn't come or at least hadn't upset her; Sansa bypassed her and went through the yard, back into the house, to her own office.

She wasn't sure whether the shop tax would apply to her; if it did, it wouldn't likely be a problem for a bit. Two gold dragons per quarter was not catastrophic, but she doubted it would stay at that low rate. Fear was rising as she stepped into her office. Podrick was at his desk, ticking away on an abacus, and he only barely glanced up when she entered.

Her shop was barely profitable. She was lucky in that she was part of Brienne's household, but if Brienne was taxed highly too, they might not be able to weather the taxes. And then what? If she couldn't pay the shop tax, would she be jailed? Or simply left to survive on the streets, as Jory had been? And surely this was not the last new tax; there would be more, and even if they all were only a gold dragon or two, it would add up too quickly.

She went to her room and changed out of her wet clothes, and then returned to her office. She was caught up on her work; the only thing she had left to do was to finish the red dress. She took the dress from her trunk and pinned it on her dressform, watching the lustrous silk catch even the grey light from the windows. Nearly finished.

"Brienne doesn't want me to go, tonight, because Thorne's been paying attention to me," she told Podrick. "So, you'll have to go without me." She hesitated, as she checked a seam's strength. "The
Brotherhood without Banners will be there, I think."

Podrick looked up and over his shoulder, his gaze lingering curiously, briefly, on the dress. He looked back at his work.

"Aye, I heard," he replied, scratching out something on his parchment.

He had been distant and strange ever since the last meeting, strange enough that she had been afraid to ask about 'Freerider' again, even though she was dying of curiosity. She’d asked Brienne, but the woman had said she didn’t know anything about such a nickname, and changed the subject quite quickly. But it had been a week, now—surely he was no longer upset? What could it possibly be about?

"Will you not tell me what—"

"—No."

Sansa stared at him. He had never been so firm. He hadn't stammered even a little bit.

"You don't even know what I was going to say!"

"I'm not telling you about Freerider." He didn't even look up from his work.

"Why not? I'll tell you a secret of mine," she tried gamely. "Something really humiliating."

"No."

"But why not?" she pressed. "Please?"

"No." A blush was creeping up his neck, to his cheeks.

"Is it...about your time in the army?"

"No."

"Is it..." she racked her brains, "about horses?"

Podrick broke into a coughing fit.

"N-no," he rasped, beating his chest, face bright red.

"Is it about carriages? Wagons? Carts?" she cast around.

"No."

"Free goods?"

Podrick slammed his book and got to his feet.

"M-miss Stone," he began, almost angrily, "I am trying to w-work, and Miss Tarth is going to kill me if I d-don't get this done!"

"Sorry."

"It's...fine."

She heard him sit back down as he went back to his work, and she turned back to her dress once
more. She still felt like she hadn't exhaled, and her skin still seemed to tingle with the ghost of Jon's touch. Her gaze strayed to the window over and over again, as though Jon might simply pass by on the street at any moment, though she knew he wouldn't.

He had given her a gift, though: he'd not tried to stop her from helping with Jory, though for whatever reason he had obviously wanted to, and he'd listened to her, and maybe he might even use the map she'd drawn. And in spite of everything, it was this that she kept returning to with delight, like a perfect pearl hidden in a jewelry box, for her and her alone.

The main hall was of the same pale, brittle stone as the outside of the house, and though a large fire roared in the hearth, it felt dark and damp. Three long tables had been arranged around the hearth, piled with food that Daenerys did not want to eat. It was mostly fish, and a lot of sodden-looking bread, all of it as grey as the stone, as grey as the faces of the Mormonts. Above the hearth, the head of an enormous bear was mounted, its jaw open, mid-snarl, its empty eyes regarding the feast before it with mute rage.

Yet the Mormont clan seemed to find it a joyful sight, and their laughter and chatter made a din that almost felt solid. Jeor and Maege hadn't been home in a long time, and their return was clearly celebrated. Hounds moved among the tables, licking at ankles and whining for scraps, and men, red-faced and drunk, roared with raucous laughter.

But no one spoke to Daenerys. In fact, she was almost entirely ignored, though she was supposed to be the guest of honor. She had been seated at Maege's right, but everyone else had been piled at the very ends of the other tables, leaving her with no one to speak to. Dacey, seated next to her, spoke exclusively to the clansman on her other side, and pointedly never so much as glanced at Daenerys.

Across the room, she met Tyrion's gaze, but he had already consumed far too much wine, and she could not read his thoughts.

How was she ever going to win over the Mormont clan? It was not even that they disliked her—they had no interest in her. Hours passed, of sitting there, bored nearly to tears, and hungry, too. The fish on her plate was foul-looking and grey, and she could not bear to eat even one bite of it. She had tried to, earlier, but the strong scent made her sick, and sometimes she felt a fluttering inside of her, like her baby was moving, and though it was exciting, it nauseated her, too. There was something so strange about being pregnant, something that she tried not to think about, because it seemed like the wrong sort of thought to have—but that there was another human, growing inside of her, forming hands and feet and eyes and ears and a nose and a heart and a mind, was both wonderful and macabre, and she sometimes felt such a powerful revulsion that it was all she could do not to simply stab herself in the belly and be rid of it. It was a passing, wild urge that she was ashamed of. She loved her baby, loved the child so desperately, so why did this horrible thought keep rearing its head? She couldn't help it. She stared at the whole fish on her plate, and its flat, opalescent eye stared back, and she wondered how big her baby's eyes were. She wondered what a baby might look like, inside the womb, so early in pregnancy; and then she had the horrible image of a lump of bloody flesh, out of nowhere, and she thought she might be sick.

"Excuse me," she said to no one, for no one cared, and she slipped off the uneven bench and into the shadows of the hall. The noise of the gathering faded, and the hall was cooler, the odor of fish less oppressive. She leaned against the wall. She missed Jon so powerfully for a moment that she almost cried.

"You are the blood of the dragon," she told herself fiercely. "Stop crying, stop hiding.

She smoothed the stray tears from beneath her eyes and stepped from the wall, drawing in deep
breaths, and returned to the feast. Maege looked up from her conversation in surprise. She'd not noticed Daenerys' absence until now, evidently.

"Are you unwell, Princess?"

"Yes, I think I haven't gotten my land legs back yet," Daenerys replied with a forced smile as she took her seat next to Maege once more. She sat up straight, feeling unbearably small and insignificant, particularly next to Dacey. "When should I introduce myself?"

"Oh, the clansmen aren't as formal as that," Maege said with a short laugh. She'd had more than a bit of whiskey. "Drink a bit of whiskey and enjoy yourself." And she poured more whiskey into Daenerys' glass.

"I've never seen a real bear before," Daenerys remarked, to keep Maege's attention before the woman could turn away, back to her conversation. She nodded to the bear mounted on the wall.

"They're all over the island. That one's from Dacey's Beltane," Maege said. At the look on Daenerys' face, she continued, albeit reluctantly. Daenerys could feel how she wanted to return to her conversation. "On the feast of Beltane, when a clanswoman comes of age, she wrestles with a bear, to prove her strength."

"You've wrestled one?"

"Aye, in those days I was quicker," Maege recalled fondly. "I jumped on her back and pushed her eyes into her skull. Got this scar from her," she added, pointing to a long, jagged scar on her jaw that disappeared into her fur collar.

Daenerys stared in horror at the enormous beast mounted on the wall.

"Surely with weapons?"

"What would be the point of that?" Maege asked, baffled. "The bear doesn't have weapons. No, bare-handed is how it's been done. Dacey was clever about it, she broke that one's neck. Lyanna will be more blunt force, I think."

"What if the bear wins? Does the clanswoman just...die...?"

"Aye, it's sad. Happens more often than not. Last Beltane, Jorgen's daughter Lyra killed her bear but died not an hour later from a gouge in her neck." Maege nodded to the clansman next to Dacey.

"But why do it?" Daenerys pressed. Maege was looking at her like she'd lost her mind.

"The Mormont women have always challenged the bear at Beltane, Princess," she said coolly, and quite abruptly turned back to resume her conversation.

"When is Beltane?" Daenerys asked, even though Maege was already turned away.

"May," she threw over her shoulder, and said nothing further.

Daenerys stared at the bear. Its jaw could have closed clean around her head. All around her, the plain, scarred, ugly women of the Mormont clan drank and laughed and ate, utterly indifferent to her. And why would they care for her? They had wrestled bears, and she had not. They were like the Dothraki, she realized. They respected strength, not formalities or talk of how she'd rule or promises of gold and silks. What use would these women ever have for such things? She would never win them with talk.
By May, her belly would be unwieldy; her secret would be out.

"Has anyone ever wrestled a bear before Beltane?"

Maege either did not hear or was choosing to ignore her; it mattered not. Daenerys thought of the white stag morphing into the shape of a man, thought of the wolves and lions falling away from the burning swords...she was the blood of the dragon, and stags and lions and wolves—and, yes, even bears—all burned in the flames, but flames could not touch her.

The bear stared back at her. The gods were calling her, and who was she to resist their call? There was a flutter in her belly, and she placed her hand over it calmly, still gazing at the bear.

Days passed. The Direwolves met, and Sansa did not attend, even though it killed her. I did the right thing, she reminded herself, each time she thought of it. And this business with Jory can't hurt. I'll be at the ball, nowhere near the jail. Sansa did not tell Jaime, or Brienne, about Jon's return, but she knew that Jaime at least suspected something. He kept shooting her suspicious looks, and bursting into her office at unexpected moments, as though thinking he could catch her unaware and surprise any secrets out of her.

She still had to learn the Town Watch's schedule, but she bided her time, until a bright, sunny day only days before the ball. Sansa dressed in her blue dress and spent more time on her appearance than usual, pinching color into her cheeks and carefully brushing out her hair until it shone. It was unseasonably warm, so she went without a cloak, and stepped into the sunny street, feeling the sun warm her bare neck, and the warm wind toying with her hair. She carried a basket of bread, wrapped in a pretty checked cloth.

Spring flowers had shot up overnight, and spilled from every nook and cranny of the town in riotous colors, making even Mole's Town look pretty. The air was infused with that magic that only the start of spring could bring, that mounting anticipation of summer that seemed to breathe life into everyone and everything.

It would be the perfect day to talk to Pypar.

She had been biding her time, and when she had awoken today, she'd just known it was right. She had asked Brienne if she could make a small loaf of bread to give to a customer, feeling guilty for the lie, but Brienne, suspecting nothing, had happily agreed.

Even the entrance to the jail, dotted with daffodils and violets, looked pretty. Pypar was standing guard out front with another watchman, the one she often saw him with. He was of a stocky build, and probably weighed more than three times that of Pypar, and often seemed flushed with anger. Today, both men had shed their heavy cloaks and were chatting, laughing, and didn't notice Sansa coming their way.

"I do not believe that you do not have three gold dragons, Mr. Waters," Pypar was saying, in an imitation of Thorne that was so accurate and convincing that she found herself stopping and shuddering. His friend was laughing reluctantly.

"I'm glad I'm not getting taxed," he said now. "I don't got three gold dragons, either."

"You don't have a shop, stupid," Pypar shot back harmlessly. "You only get taxed if you have a shop."

"How d'you know I haven't got a shop?" his friend demanded, looking outraged. Well, he won't be hard to get past, Sansa thought pityingly.
"Because you work with me all day, every day!" Pypar said in disbelief. "Honestly, Grenn, you're so thick you might be a genius. It's the only explanation."

"Am not a genius," Grenn said furiously, but luckily, Pypar happened to notice Sansa before he could do further harm.

"Miss Stone!" he greeted brightly, eyes immediately traveling to the bread.

"Pypar, it's good to see you," she said, and looked to Grenn. Her tongue felt too thick in her mouth; she had to be careful, but one wrong word could tip either of them off...or tip off Thorne, if he happened to learn of their conversation later. "Sorry, I don't believe we've met," she said to Grenn shyly.

"I'm not wax!" Grenn said, outraged.

"I live in the bakery and we had some leftover," Sansa explained to Pypar, holding the basket out, "and I wanted to thank you for being kind to me...last week."

Pypar went quite pink, to her surprise, as Grenn looked at him curiously.

"You were kind?" he asked in disbelief. In fact, Pypar had been little more than courteous, and not exactly brave or strong, but she supposed that sometimes even that was an act of courage. After all, he'd not hidden from Thorne that he had felt uncomfortable about taking her into custody. And even before that, on the day that Thorne had shown her the cell, Pypar had interrupted them, technically saving her. Perhaps in his own mind he had thought he was being heroic.

"He was," Sansa said, as Pypar eagerly took the basket and ripped off the checked cloth. "He was a bit of a hero, I might say," she added sweetly.

"I'm a hero, too," Grenn said suddenly, puffing up his chest. "Could've enlisted in the army, my mum says."

"They would've given you back," Pypar said thickly through a mouthful of bread. "Even the royal soldiers aren't as dumb as Grenn."

"Are too," Grenn argued, though he seemed uncertain about the validity of his rebuttal.

"I'm surprised you both aren't soldiers," Sansa said lightly, averting her eyes, hoping to seem like she was confessing to something more hidden. "I've always thought it. You're so imposing. No wonder Thorne has you guarding the town jail..." she trailed off, realizing she had used too similar of a tactic with Pypar the last time she'd tried to sneak into the jail. She smiled, toying with a lock of hair. "You both will have so many admirers at the ball, waiting to dance with you," she added.

"Grenn will be at the ball, but I won't," Pypar said, looking irritable now. "What a waste. I'm not even certain he can tell ladies apart from men without my help."

"I know what ladies look like!"

"They'll be the ones in dresses, batting their lashes at you," she teased Grenn. "The men will be the ones glaring at you jealously." She looked at Pypar now. "What a shame that you won't be there," she added, letting her words hang between them insinuatingly. Pypar swallowed his bread so fast he nearly choked.
"Well, I'll be here, doing important work," he informed her after his coughing had subsided. "Got to guard the jail."

"All by yourself?" Sansa sympathized, cocking her head to the side.

"Aye, just me. But I've got sharp eyes, and there's only one way in," he told her with a wink, patting the door behind him.

"Just you, all night?" she asked in disbelief. "But that will be so lonely."

"Aye, it will be," he conceded sorrowfully.

"Well, you've no choice, and it is important work," Sansa sighed. "I suppose I ought to stop distracting you both from your job...Enjoy the bread," she said softly, almost sadly, and turned away from them, pressing her lips together to stop from giggling, as she heard them begin to squabble again.

"Only one guard will be stationed outside of the jail," Anguy told them as he walked into the camp. He'd just come from Mole's Town, where he'd met with Sam Flowers...and perhaps Sansa, though she'd not gone to the last Direwolves meeting. At least she's being more careful, he consoled himself. As long as she was nowhere near the town jail when they broke Jory out, Thorne would have no reason to suspect her.

Jon, Gendry, Davos, Tormund, and Beric were sitting around the drawing that Sansa and Jon had done of the town square. More details had been added, including the usual flow of the Town Watchmen in the surrounding area, as they'd spent the last few days observing the Town Watch activity each night. "Your wife confirmed it," he added to Jon as he took a seat next to Tormund.

Sandor was napping, as usual, and Bronn was sitting away from the campsite. He'd been especially cruel in the last few days, on the rare occasion that he did bother to talk, and hadn't shown any interest in helping to break Jory free. It did not matter; they had more than enough men for what they needed. Meanwhile, Mance, Dalla, and Val were all packing up their things, preparing to go on to Eastwatch. Mance had some friends there, and it was the only option left for them, now. They'd considered settling in Mole's Town, but it was clear that it wouldn't be safe. And while the supplies from the Direwolves had been greatly helpful, they couldn't count on it forever.

After breaking Jory out, and taking him to Castle Black if necessary, the Brotherhood would likely move on and join them at Eastwatch for a bit...and then he'd be leaving Sansa. Again.

But he couldn't think about that now. Thinking of Sansa—of how his hand had fit against her waist so neatly, of how her eyes had filled with tears at the thought of losing Jory, of how she had looked at him when she'd told him of her scar from their wedding—was dangerous. The scar, in particular, was a thought he had been very carefully avoiding for days now, creeping around it in his mind, giving it as wide of a berth as possible. In fact, his mind was filled with thoughts better kept suppressed, to the point where he was beginning to feel that no corner of his mind was safe. He had been wondering if he ever should be touched again, if he ever could be touched again, but then he had met her eyes—at last, at last—and had thought that perhaps he had never truly been touched, that perhaps what he and Daenerys had done had nothing to do with the way he might touch Sansa, with the way she might touch him. But then, he had touched her waist and felt her against him, and thought that perhaps touch alone could not communicate what he felt for her, what she had become to him.

What do you think makes us want to kiss? she had asked him, that night they had hidden together
with nothing but whiskey. He hadn't known, then. He'd never really kissed anyone when she'd asked him that, not in the way that she had meant, but he had wanted to kiss her so desperately in Flowers' storeroom that he had thought he might lose his mind, and it had consumed him, tormented him, since then. *It's because it's the only kind of touch that can never be a weapon,* he thought now. There was no purpose to a kiss, other than to simply be kissed, and perhaps that was why it could never be ruined. He was afraid of touch, afraid of sex, afraid that he might never be able to touch or be touched without the shadow of his guilt and shame dogging him, but he was not afraid of kissing.

He had done the right thing, even though it had been torture. Every instinct had shouted at him to refuse any more help from Sansa, and to cut off any of her involvement in breaking Jory free. It was dangerous, and Thorne was after her, in more ways than one. But he'd not stopped thinking of Val's words, and he had seen the grief and helplessness in her eyes. *This is her choice,* he had reminded himself, *and I have no right to take that from her, too.*

That didn't mean it wasn't driving him mad, though. Even letting her confirm the guards' schedule had been a great sacrifice.

"Then it's the best night after all," Jon said, sidestepping the mention of Sansa. "We'll have to do it early enough, before people start leaving the ball."

Davos, who was good with knots, had made a rope ladder for Jory to climb up, in case the hole in the ceiling wasn't big enough. Everyone had been impressed with it, but Jon couldn't help but think of Sansa's warning about how capable Jory might—or might not—be. He might be too weak to climb up the rope ladder, and if he was too weak, Jon wasn't sure how they'd get him out. The best option would be to tie him to the ladder and heave him out, but that would be challenging, and time-consuming.

"You certain you don't want to help, Bronn?" Beric asked across the camp.

The others had been making their plans, all crouched around some silly drawing. They'd break this Jory or whoever he was out of the town jail, and then they'd have to hoof it to some dump at the edge of the world, Eastwatch or something.

Brong would have bet his own cock that they would not find Jaime at Eastwatch. There was no reason for him to even go. The time for a decision was coming, and he felt unprepared to make it. Sandor had hinted at it many times in the last few days, but Bronn had ignored him willfully, though it was becoming increasingly difficult to do so.

There was no word of Jaime. No one had heard anything about him, or his whereabouts. There were no avenues of possible information remaining. Back when he'd first disappeared, Bronn had tried to get information from the innkeeper, and had gotten nothing. He had loitered in the brothels, waiting for gossip, and had gotten nothing. He had trailed around with this band of self-righteous morons for weeks, now, and had gotten nothing. Jaime had evidently disappeared into thin air, because the royal army, Cersei's henchmen, and Bronn were all looking for him, and in nearly four months, no one had heard even a rumor of where he might have gone.

"You certain you don't want to help, Bronn?"

He'd always found Beric annoying. In the royal army, Beric had been so fucking idealistic and moralistic, entirely missing the point of an army, and the function of soldiers, and then he'd deserted and made such a big fucking deal about it, as though he had achieved some higher understanding of humanity and his worldly purpose, blathering on about the laws of men and the
pursuit of liberty, blah blah blah. He and Jaime had had endless laughs at Beric's expense; really, he ought to have thanked Beric, if anything.

"Does it seem like I want to?" he asked without looking up. He thought of Jaime, yet again, and the pain was so frustrating and so much of a damn hassle that he would have happily stabbed any of them. Snow, in particular, would have been satisfying. So self-absorbed, so brooding, so righteous, and, lately, increasingly commanding and bossy. Jaime should've just stabbed you, he had thought so many times, staring at Snow. If Jaime had just killed Snow and taken the Stark cunt, per the plan, he would never have wandered off on his own to brood.

"It'll be fun," Gendry was saying lightly. They were all peering at him, now, so fucking expectantly. They looked like a bunch of children, filthy and naive. But Snow wasn't looking at him.

"Leave him alone," Snow said to them. "We have enough men for the task."

That did it. I don't need you to defend me, you stupid brat, he thought.

"Can I just ask," Bronn began, drawing their attention again, "what the point of this venture is?"

"Breaking a man out of jail who shouldn't be there?" Gendry suggested.

"But he does belong in jail," Bronn countered, getting to his feet. "He was found with stolen gold. And not just any gold. Crown gold."

"Do you think a man should hang for stealing some gold?" Beric asked archly. "I never knew you to be so lawful."

"It's not about laws," Bronn replied. "If you break this dumb fuck out of jail, the story's going to be that a rag-tag band of brigands broke a thief out of jail. That's it. You've accomplished nothing."

"Except the saving of an innocent man's life," Beric shot back. He got to his feet as well, eyes glimmering in the firelight. Bronn rolled his eyes. This kind of nonsense always had invigorated him.

"But he's not innocent," Bronn said slowly. "He was caught with Crown gold."

"How do we know that Thorne didn't plant it there himself?"

"We don't, you're right. But we also don't know that he did. We've got nothing to go on but character statements from a girl who, in spite of having seen her entire family obliterated, is still stupid enough to join resistance efforts, and from a dumb cock who's spent the last decade and change with his head up a crazed conqueror's arse."

"You're right," Snow said solemnly. Jaime would've laughed at him, the brooding little fucker. Damn. Another pang, like he'd been stabbed. "And you don't have to help us. Leave him alone," he said once more, firmly, and turned back to the plans before him. But Beric wasn't finished.

"And you're hell-bent on finding a man responsible for endless destruction across Westeros, and responsible for fathering a king whose cruelty and madness might surpass Aerys before him," Beric said now, advancing on Bronn. "Even though, if you ask anyone north of King's Landing, they'd say Jaime Lannister deserves whatever hell he's been dropped into. How many men do you think Lannister's killed in his lifetime? Not to mention the rumors of how he raped Sansa Stark. We don't know that he didn't do that, save for character statements from you...and from, as you put it, a dumb
"Ah, this again," Bronn snorted. "Do you think Jaime Lannister has ever needed to force himself on anyone? Ever? And don't forget, Stark herself denied that he raped her."

"She could have been too scared, too intimidated, to tell the truth. We'll never know," Beric said, shrugging. "My point is, who are you to say if Jory's innocent? Who are you to judge us for this? You're giving everything to search for a man who has committed some of the greatest evils of our generation. He might be responsible, really, if the whole realm burns under Joffrey."

"I've never once pretended I was on any noble quest," Bronn snapped. "I just want to find Lannister, whether he's dead or alive. I don't give a fuck about what he's done, or not done. I just want to know how the greatest general of all time, a man deemed undefeatable by some of the most talented fighters of our time, just disappeared into thin air."

"Someone got lucky," Snow said.

"Maybe he just ran off," Gendry said suddenly. Bronn let out a peal of disgusted laughter.

"Ran off? The army was everything to Jaime. He had nothing to run to. I promise you he did not just run off."

"It was just a thought," Gendry said grumpily.

"Well, I'm sure having a thought is a novel experience for you, but here's a tip: you don't have to say every one of them out loud," Bronn informed him.

No one seemed to know what to say, and Bronn, had he been prone to embarrassment, would have felt embarrassed by his outburst. The others busied themselves with meaningless tasks, the silence strained, as Beric stared at him, hard, before finally dropping down again.

Hours later, when the camp had settled and everyone was asleep, Sandor got up from his nap, picked up the map, and set it down before dropping down on the ground in front of Bronn.

Bonn couldn't help it; his eyes were drawn to the markings on the map. He did want to fight, he did want to do something, anything. He had never been so filled with anger, nameless and senseless and acidic. He had never been an angry man at all. What were you supposed to do with anger? Where should it go? What was it for? The inside of his head, once such a safe place no matter what was happening in his life, seemed so transformed that he hardly recognized himself at all.

"I want to kill something," Sandor said bluntly.

"Me too."

"I'll take this one," Sandor said, pointing at the mark to indicate the guard at the door of the jail, "and you take this one." He pointed at a mark for another patrol. "And if that one's not there, just take one of them dumb fucks," he added with a short bark of a laugh, nodding back to the tents where the Brotherhood slept.

The night of the ball had arrived.

Sansa had needed Brienne to lace up the dress. The two women stood in Sansa's room, before her mirror, staring in shock.
"It...um...well," Brienne stammered, struggling for words. "It's very...well, it's quite...red, Alayne," she finished rather feebly.

The girl in the mirror was not Sansa Stark, or Sansa Snow, or even Alayne Stone. Sansa was not sure who she was. There was a creak of floorboards, and both women looked to see Jaime in the doorway.

"What do you think?" Sansa asked, heart pounding, as Jaime's leonine eyes roved over the dress. She gathered the enormous skirt and swished it playfully, just to have something to distract from her nervousness. At last, Jaime cleared his throat.

"I'm not an expert on dresses, but it appears to be missing some key bits...such as the front."

"It's no less modest than any other gown," Sansa snapped, hating how defensive her voice was, as she turned back to face the mirror. Her damn hands wouldn't stop shaking, and she fisted them in the lustrous silk of the skirt, watching her reflection swallow and blink.

Darkness had already fallen. It was nearly time. Sansa looked out the window into the dark night, wondering if Jon was out there, now, wondering if she'd walk past him again without knowing it, wondering...if he might see her tonight.

Anything might happen. They might find Jory already dead in his cell. They might escape, only to be caught before reaching the edge of town. They might be caught before they even got to Jory, and then they'd be hanged, too.

...Or they might succeed.

"You need a cloak," Brienne blustered suddenly. "Let me get you a cloak." She left the room, leaving Sansa and Jaime together.

"Well, this is my personal definition of keeping a low profile," Jaime finally said after a moment. "Nothing like wearing a big red dress that covers essentially nothing to make sure no one notices you."

"It's just a dress," Sansa replied. "It's good manners to tell ladies they look pretty when they've gotten a new dress," she added.

"You don't look pretty; you look terrifying," Jaime said shortly. "But I imagine that was your aim."

"I have no aim," Sansa said. She stared at the dress. Jon's blade was hidden in a pocket she had sewn within the skirt, and she felt the weight of it against her hip.

Jaime was right.

She did not look pretty. She looked fierce, otherworldly, dangerous.

She looked like a wolf once more.
NOTE: This was previously posted, but taken down when I realized that part of a scene had somehow not made it into the final draft. Thanks to PureSummerMagic for leaving a comment that made me realize this.

Warning that this chapter contains a lot of references to non-consensual sex.

Thanks for all the lovely responses to the last chapter. You guys rock.

It was so late that it was almost early, and silence had stolen over the Mormont house at last, like the house had exhaled the noise and life from earlier and was now breathless and empty. The main hall was piled with Mormont clansmen and clanswomen asleep at their tables, hands still grasping empty cups of whiskey and ale, like they had fallen asleep mid-drink. The fire in the enormous hearth had died, and the bear snarling above the hearth was rendered in ghostly blue. Daenerys paused by the entrance to the hall, and stared at the sleeping clan. It was like time had stopped, like some vengeful faerie had cast a sleeping spell over the clanspeople, and now only true love's kiss could wake them. She thought, achingly, of Jon, a knight riding in the darkness to kiss her, but that would not be true love's kiss. He did not love her, not in that way. Not in the way that little girls were told to dream of, not in the way that broke spells and gilded the world with magic. Daenerys turned away from that scene. There was no magic in the world, and Jon was not coming for her.

Tyrion was not in the hall, but she knew that wherever he was, he would still be awake and still drinking. None of the others remained in the hall, either. Missandei and Grey Worm, so quiet and so ill-suited for parties, had slipped out quite early, and Jorah had faded away as the clanspeople around him had become drunk, and Daario had drunkenly stumbled out ages earlier, muttering something about hearing barking noises. They did not fit in here any better than she did.

She continued on her search for Tyrion. He'd not been in the room he was intended to share with Jorah, Daario, and Grey Worm. She wandered around the house, peering into each darkened, empty room with a detached curiosity, taking in the contents of each room as she explored. Try as she might to like it, she found much of the north crude and bland. The furniture was clunky and functional, and no art graced the shelves or walls. The houses were old, remnants of the times of knights and tourneys, and many of them in disrepair. It wasn't like Braavos, where everything was beautiful, even things that did not have to be beautiful. The north was almost belligerently ugly and plain, like an ugly woman refusing to wear fine dresses or comb her hair. She hated it here.

At last she found Tyrion outside, next to the godswood, on the cliff overlooking the slope leading down to the sea. He was crouching before a small fire. A decanter of whiskey sat in the grass next to him, along with a white, rumpled, shameful little bundle. He stoked the fire, trying to make it grow.

"What is that?" Daenerys asked as she approached, studying the white bundle. It looked like old bedding.

"It no longer behooves me to keep it," Tyrion replied unhelpfully, not looking at her. There was a rust-colored stain like blood on the cloth, nearly concealed by a fold. "Sansa Stark's still missing,
and your delightful nephew has so thoroughly branded himself a brigand that we cannot hope to make much use out of that union any longer."

Daenerys opened her mouth to ask how that had anything to do with the white bundle, and then, abruptly, thought she might be sick. She felt the whiskey and little bread she'd had earlier rising in her throat.

"That is the—"

"—The bedding from Snow's wedding, yes," Tyrion finished for her, still not looking at her. Daenerys stared at it in utter revulsion and grief. It would not only be Sansa's blood staining that cloth, then. Memories falsed through her mind, of Jon's skin, slick with sweat and gritty with the desert sand, sliding against her skin; of the soft, desperate gasp he always made just when he came; the way he would arch beneath her, eyes scrunchet shut and hair clinging to his skin with sweat. She had taught him everything of how to touch a woman. He had touched Sansa Stark on that bedding. Had Sansa Stark made him make that gasp? Had Sansa Stark known how to make him give voice to his gasps out of desperation and ecstasy?

"You would keep that?" she finally wrenched out, horrified, unable to tear her eyes from the stain. Tyrion laughed, a dark, unhinged little laugh, the kind that came from him when he had drunk more than even he could handle.

"That bedding is the very reason for that whole day of nonsense, Princess," he said cruelly. "That bedding is proof that we own the Stark girl, proof that she is a dragon now. I kept it as proof to give to the right people, and now I've shown it to everyone that need be shown. No need to tote it around the world any longer."

"You showed that to people?"

"Yes, many. The innkeeper at the Wolf and Fish; the Mormonts and Karstarks, and a few others. But I got a raven that Snow's attacked General Clegane twice now, and has been sighted on the run with a fair golden-haired maiden." Tyrion chuckled and took a messy swig of whiskey, wiping his mouth sloppily. "It sort of kills the romance angle I had so brilliantly crafted, but no matter. Now no one else can have Sansa Stark." He let out another laugh. "We soiled her." He seemed to find this very clever, but Daenerys was not laughing.

She could not stop staring at the bedding, no matter how she wanted to. She kept thinking of the night she had first come to Jon. The night I took his maidenhead, she thought, with a trace of black humor. He had been as shy and fearful as a maiden, that first night. It had been exciting, at first. She had pushed him down onto the bedroll, feeling his strong abdomen tense beneath her hands, the muscles shifting as he became hard beneath her, his eyes wide and uncertain, his face flushed. His hands had gone to hers, fluttering and nervous, trying to pry her off of him without harming her. But she had ground her hips against his, watching the flush grow higher, watching his brows knit together. We were so young, she thought. No, he was so young. Not really even a man grown, by most standards, but his body had reacted like a man's, when she had rubbed her wet cunt against him. He'd grown hard, his eyes growing black with arousal, but his lips and lashes had been as soft as a boy's. A child-man, all for her. This was how Drogo felt that night he first took me, she had realized, grinding against him, her palm pressed against his chest, holding him down, watching his climax build. The power, the control, the ability to bring one soul across that faint gold line that divided how the world looked before sex from how the world looked after sex. It had been intoxicating, like drinking too much chilled wine beneath the hot sun. No, he had whispered, and, please. But he hadn't whispered 'no' as he had released into her, gasping, that first time.

"I cannot believe you have carried that around for so long," she said. "That is revolting."
"Oh, don't be so prim. You're just like Jaime. He always wanted to believe it would be glory and swords that win wars. You say it's fire and blood; but let me tell you a secret," he said, turning to her at last, swaying slightly, the high wind from the sea mussing his hair and the light from the fire casting his ruined face in terrible relief, "it's always been ink and gold that wins wars, Princess. Ink, and gold, and ugly men creeping behind the stage, pulling the strings and getting their knees dirty as they crawl through shit, while the golden and silver people like you and Jaime and Robert all raise their swords in the sun and the people cheer for you. No one cheers for men like me, but if there were no men like me, there would be no people, nor cheering."

"You cannot win a war—or a throne—with ink and gold alone," Daenerys shot back. "And that may have been the way of the past, but I mean to rule differently—"

"—Please, spare me," Tyrion groaned. "Believe me, I've heard your little song and dance so many times that they will probably find the words etched into my skull after I'm dead. And if you think it is only fire and blood that wins you a kingdom, look to the Dothraki. There's plenty of blood and fire to go around there, yet do you see them sitting on any throne? Do you see them shaping a civilization?"

Daenerys stared at Tyrion in mute outrage as he picked up the bedding. In the wind, it unfurled, and the copper spot was spread out before her, briefly, before he snatched at the edges of the cloth irritably, and balled the fabric up and threw it on the fire. The flames disappeared for a moment, casting the world in brief navy darkness, but then bled through the white cloth and shot skyward once more, snapping like dragons' jaws. She felt like crying. "Thus the knight slew the fair maiden with his sword, and she was a maiden no more," Tyrion said solemnly, then snorted, kicking an unburnt edge of the fabric back into the fire.

Her mind had taunted her, unbidden, with images of what their bedding might have looked like for months, and now these images rioted at the front of her mind. She was no longer the only one who knew Jon's body, who knew his scent and taste. She had been the only one for so many years. She touched her belly, thinking of Jon gasping into Sansa Stark's ear, thinking of Jon's pretty lips on Sansa Stark's cunt, thinking of Sansa Stark taking Jon in her mouth, tasting him, feeling his fingers in her hair. She tasted bile.

In silence they watched the last sign of the red wedding burn away.

"The Mormonts will never respect me unless I show them my strength," Daenerys said, long after the darkness had closed in around them and the fire had drifted away. "And if I do not gain the respect and backing of the Mormont clanspeople..."

Tyrion rubbed at his eyes and took a swig of whiskey. He was thinking, hard, but Daenerys already knew the solution.

She hesitated, thinking of Jon's eyes, before plunging forward. *If I look back, I am lost...* "They wrestle bears at the feast of Beltane."

"Yes, the lovely Alysane was boasting of her bear at supper," Tyrion said with heavy irony of the stocky, pockmarked woman he had been seated next to in the hall. "What of it—oh, no." He turned to look back at Daenerys. "You cannot. Princess, these women do not simply challenge a bear out of nowhere," he drawled. "They spend their *entire lives* preparing to take down the bear, and many of them do not survive it, even then."

"Many people do not survive what I have survived—"

"—You have been lucky, you fool!" he cried suddenly. "Very, *very* lucky, and surrounded by
people who have suffered in your stead. You're right, you have survived things that you should have not lived through; I do not know the gods' plans nor do I pretend to care to. It does not make sense that you should still be alive. But that does not mean you ought to test that luck—"

"Luck?" Fury burned through her like acid in her veins. She could not speak for a moment as she was blinded by anger. She faced Tyrion, the wind blowing around them. "You call it luck that I have come this far?"

"Yes, I do. I think everything is random," Tyrion shot back. He took another long drink of whiskey. "What if our ship got lost on the way to Gulltown? What if it got struck by lightning? What if you caught the illness that everyone else did, and perished? What if—"

"—But I did not." She stared at him. "I am the blood of the dragon. The illness could not take me. Lightning could not take me. And a bear won't take me, either. I mean to challenge this bear, and I mean to win, as I have won every other challenge I have faced."

"Well, you'll have a good long wait. Beltane isn't for months, I believe." Tyrion dropped down before the ashes and tossed back the last of his whiskey, swaying slightly. Daenerys looked to the messy pines dancing in the wind in the distance. Her bear was somewhere among those pines.

"I cannot wait that long, not for Beltane."

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Cloaked in a bloodred cloak that covered her scandalous dress, Sansa stepped out into the night with Podrick. It was cooler than it had been in the last few days, and the air was taut with the threat of rain. Will rain make it harder to get Jory out? she wondered, looking around the street, thinking of Jon. Her skin prickled with the memory of his hand on her waist. Was he near? She could not draw a complete breath.

"You look very handsome, Mr. Payne," she half-teased as they walked in the darkened street towards the center of town. Podrick was clad in a sage-colored coat with an olive-green vest underneath it, edged in olive-green silk cord. It was far too finely-made to have ever come from Mole's Town—she recognized the level of craftsmanship that would have only been available in King's Landing, reminding her of the fact that he had his own past riddled with secrets, too.

"Thank you, Miss Stone," he mumbled, not looking at her. "Y-you look lovely," he added. It was, she thought, probably for the best that he'd not seen her dress yet.

Even with the cloak over her, she still felt so exposed, and she was still unsure if she liked the feeling. Due to the neckline of the dress, a traditional corset and stays had not been possible, so she had had to make a new corset, which only came up her ribcage and stopped just below her breasts. It was an odd feeling, to not have her breasts pressed in place by her corset. She had always liked the feeling of security that a corset gave her—she had sometimes jokingly thought of it as her own armor, back in King’s Landing—so it might take some getting used to, to have the only thing covering her breasts be thin silk. In spite of the oddness, she found herself trying to stifle a secret smile as they walked along the street together, towards the town square.

She felt different than she had, the last time she'd worn a pretty dress—or rather, any time she'd ever worn a pretty dress. This dress had no goal, no one to appeal to. It was her dress, and her dress alone. And yet...what if Jon saw it? Would he find her outrageous? Would he be scandalized by the sight of so much skin on display? Would he even let his gaze travel to her breasts, or would he hold back, exercising that remarkable self-restraint of his? She didn't want anyone else to look at her breasts, but she wanted him to look at her breasts. She wanted to know what he might think of her gown, of her body. She wanted to know what it might feel like, to have his eyes trace the lines...
of her body. She wanted him to think about her body.

They could hear the music of the ball even from the other edge of the square; the town hall was lit up, glowing like a star, its tall windows casting the rest of the square in golden light. And yet just adjacent to the hall, which brimmed with gaiety and celebration, was the town jail as black as a cave by comparison. Pypar was stationed out front, looking longingly towards the entrance of the hall where guests were already making their way in. There was joy and music coming from that entrance, but it had not touched her yet. The world still felt as cool and remote as the dark side of the moon. And Jon was somewhere in the darkness.

"I have to make a stop. Don't wait for me," Sansa said to Podrick, and turned to walk toward Pypar, but Podrick followed her doggedly.

"Miss Tarth and ... Jaime... told me to stick with you the whole night, Miss Stone," he said almost apologetically. Sansa scowled. Brienne was overprotective by nature but this was just too much from Jaime. Pypar brightened when he saw them approaching.

"Miss Stone!" he greeted. "Have you come to save me?" he joked hopefully.

"You poor thing," Sansa said, looking toward the jail. Her heart was hammering in her ribs. "Are you ready for your lonely night?"

Pypar brightened.

"Oh, I won't be alone after all!" he said happily. "Mr. Thorne heard a rumor that the Brotherhood without Banners would be in town tonight and thought we should have every man on patrol tonight."

Sansa's mind went blank, and her fingers went numb.

"I-is that so?" she finally wrenched out. She felt Podrick looking at her meaningfully, but she did not turn her head to meet his eyes. Pypar looked positively gleeful.

"Aye, and I hope they are," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Always wanted to see the Targaryen wolf, I have. Heard he's the best bloody swordsman in the world. What d'you think he looks like? I always pictured him half-dragon and covered in fur, for some reason, but of course, that's not possible," he added, then paused. ".I think it's not, anyway. I mean, they say the Targaryens did wed brother and sister for hundreds of years, and you never know what could come of that. Still...he probably doesn't have scales."

"Probably not," Sansa laughed, but her laugh was stilted and strained. She could not seem to draw a complete breath, and there was a quivering of terror in her chest, like a bird trapped behind her ribs. "I-I suppose Grenn won't get to attend the ball either, then?"

"No, Miss Stone. None of the Town Watch will get to attend the ball...save for Mr. Thorne, of course."

"What a shame," Sansa replied lightly. "All of the handsomest men will be detained. What will become of all the ladies who dressed just for your eyes?"

Pypar audibly swallowed, his gaze flicking to her form though it was covered by her cloak, and went beet-red.

"W-well," he blustered, but Sansa felt Podrick's hand on her arm through her cloak, and then he was actually pulling her away. "En-enjoy the ball," Pypar stammered after them.
"Let go," Sansa hissed, wrenching her arm out of Podrick's grasp as they reached the entrance to the hall.

"What the h-hell are you playing at?" Podrick demanded under his breath, opening the door and bowing to her shortly, his manners utterly perfunctory.

"I'm not playing at anything," Sansa snapped. "What are you, my minder?"

"Y-yes," Podrick admitted, looking both irritable and embarrassed, as he gestured shortly for her to go in through the open door.

"Well, find someone else to mind!" She was panicking. She had to tell Jon, had to warn him...

"Miss Tarth told me she would s-sack me if any harm came to you, and Jaime—" he went bright red. "Er, well, his th-threat wasn't appropriate for ladies' ears," he said hastily.

"It's just a town ball, Mr. Payne," Sansa snapped as they walked inside. The corridor leading to the hall was lit up with candles, and the whine of fiddles and the din of laughter and the thump of dancers' feet on the floor were audible through the doors. Hooks along the wall were covered with the guests' finest cloaks. It was time to shed her cloak, and she was both eager and afraid. Sansa rounded on Podrick. "What harm could possibly come to me at a town ball?" she hissed, and to her surprise, he did not back down from her.

"I know about..." he glanced around, then stepped closer, so that she had to step back against the wall, "...the p-plot," he finished in a lower voice, "and your involvement." His brown eyes were fixed on her, for once, rather than carefully averted, and he was searching her eyes.

"I'm hardly involved, Mr. Payne," she hissed, "but if I don't warn the Brotherhood about—"

The front door creaked open, and Podrick impulsively stepped closer, took her chin in his slightly clammy hand, and pressed his lips to hers, hard. The back of her head was smacked into the wall and his chest brushed against hers. He smelled like soap, and she tasted whiskey on his tongue as he slipped it between her lips. Liquid courage, she thought faintly, her hands going to press against his chest.

"Why, Miss Stone, I did not know you had a sweetheart."

Podrick stumbled back from her, and Sansa, still gasping and reeling from shock, looked to her right.

Thorne stood in the doorway, casting off his cloak, dressed predictably in his finest coat rather than the Town Watch uniform. His coat was the same scarlet as that of the royal army, and he had pulled his lank, grey hair back from his face with a velvet ribbon whose edge she could just see faintly, nestled against his lace collar. He looked absurd in so much bright color, like he was in costume. Sansa's stomach roiled as her cheeks flamed, her lips still ringing with Podrick's kiss. Podrick cleared his throat, and Thorne's black eyes flicked to Podrick with a sinister sort of intrigue. "And it is Mr. Payne, of all people. What a surprise. I would have thought you might prefer another."

The door opened behind Thorne, revealing Sam and Gilly. Thorne cast his gaze upon their bewildered faces. "Such as Mr. Flowers, for example."

"Mr. Flowers is married to the loveliest woman in Mole's Town, Mr. Thorne," Sansa replied as Sam and Gilly looked between them in confusion, their cheeks still flushed from walking through the chilly night. "I could not possibly attract his affections."
At her words, Sam's eyes widened and he stared at Sansa in shock, but Gilly's gaze, by contrast, darkened. Sansa wondered, with a jolt, if Gilly was now angry with her. What on earth had she done to make anyone think she fancied Sam of all people?

"Well, Miss Stone, aren't you going to go inside?" Thorne said now, eyes glittering as they traced her form.

All eyes were on her, now. She had been nervous about shedding her cloak, and had been excited to see the reception to her dress, but she did not want Thorne's eyes on her. She swallowed, never breaking his flinty gaze, and undid the clasp of her cloak.

The brocade slid off her shoulders and there was a rush of cool air kissing along her skin like fingertips. Thorne's gaze traveled downward with the movement of her cloak, and lingered on her breasts hungrily, greedily. She heard Podrick draw in a breath sharply and then choke on it, and heard him excuse himself for the severity of his coughing fit.

"I shall," she said at last, and turned away from Thorne. Podrick had somewhat regained his composure, though his eyes were streaming and his face was still flushed. Without even looking in her direction, he blindly struck out his arm and offered it to her, and then they faced the double doors.

The double-doors parted, revealing the town hall. A normally drab room of white, paneled walls and grey wooden floor, it had been filled with candles, and it felt like stepping inside of a pearl. Sansa's breath was briefly taken away by the sight, but she was abruptly brought back down to earth when she realized that everyone was looking at her, and she heard the group of men playing fiddles stumble over a few notes. She couldn't even take in a steeling breath because it was so painfully obvious every time she breathed.

Gilly and Sam entered behind her, and Sansa, flustered and beginning to regret this damn dress, turned away in search of something, anything, to drink. The hall was crowded already, yet the ball had barely begun. It was too hot, too stuffy, in this damn room. Everything was wrong. She had to wend her way through bodies, pushing between people, feeling the crush of taffeta and silk against her bare forearms as she went. She needed to find Jon, or anyone of the Brotherhood, but how could she possibly reach them? She'd have to leave the ball, but she didn't know where to find them. By the time they reached the vicinity of even just the town square, it would already be too late. And she'd never be able to break free from the ball without attracting notice...For as she accepted a glass of wine, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Thorne looking at her, through the sea of heads, studying her...or rather, her body. Her face flamed and she turned away furiously. She wanted certain eyes on her breasts, but certainly not Thorne's. Yet by wearing the dress had she not invited the gaze of other men?

The music was lively and people were already beginning to dance, their shoes thumping on the wood floor as loud as the pounding of her heart. It was all her fault; she must have tipped off Thorne just by asking Pypar. She felt sick and terrified, so she gulped down the wine, and set the empty glass down with a shaking hand. When she turned round, Sam and Gilly were upon her.

"Miss Stone, you seem to have forgotten part of your dress," Sam whispered loudly, and buckled slightly in pain—Gilly had trod sharply on his foot. She turned to Sansa now, and took her arm, pretending to lead her along the edge of the dance floor as though gossiping about the dancers. Gilly looked stunning in the dress that Sansa had crafted for her. Why had Sansa not merely crafted such a dress for herself? Why had she felt so compelled to sew and wear a scandalous dress?

"Did Mr. Payne just kiss you?"
"He was trying to stop me from speaking," Sansa explained. Podrick was still standing with Sam, his face molten red, staring in horror at the floor and unresponsive to any of Sam's uncomfortable questions. His kiss had been so...expert, and confident, in a way she had never once associated with Podrick. It had stirred something in her, a certain thirst, but it was not Podrick who could quench that thirst. "The town watch wasn't supposed to have more than one man guarding the jail," she said under her breath, turning back to Gilly. "I told the Brotherhood—"

"Miss Stone," Thorne's voice made her freeze, and she turned away from Gilly. "I suppose, as you have no sweetheart after all, you will need a dancing partner."

The air smelled like rain. Up ahead, the town square seemed to be set aglow from the light from the town hall, and even from here, Jon could hear the music. They had gotten close to the town square and were stationed atop a building, clumped together: he, Beric, Anguy, Gendry, and Davos. Tormund, Sandor, and Bronn were behind them, waiting for their signal.

"Your wife lied. The Town Watch's crawling everywhere," Beric said, nodding to the Watchman all in black, prowling the street below them on a big black horse. He was a stocky one; Jon had noticed him a few times before. He looked thick: he'd been shocked by the same alleycat three times in the last few minutes. Up ahead, more Watchmen rode up and down the streets, eyes narrowed in search of trouble.

"She didn't lie. Someone tipped Thorne off," Jon corrected. There was something bothering him, something that had been bothering him since he had met Sansa in Sam's printshop, something that had been filling him with dread each time he thought of it... He looked to Anguy. "D'you think any of the Direwolves doublecrossed us?"

"Maybe not the Direwolves, but none of them have much experience in resistance groups. They don't know what to hide. I think someone who knows one of them, or lives with them, betrayed us," Anguy agreed, scowling down at the Watchman. "But I don't know who. Flowers is smart but he's not very secretive. He easily could have given the plan away by accident," he added. "You heard him when Thorne came in," he continued. "He just ...blubbers anything when he's afraid."

"If we don't do it tonight, we won't have another chance," Gendry interrupted. "It's now or never. We have to decide now."

The men looked at the town jail.

"I'm going to try," Jon said at last, "whether anyone wants to help or not." He heard Anguy chuckle behind him.

"Fear the dragonwolf, Town Watch," Anguy sniggered under his breath.

"He's no dragon, and he's no wolf," Beric argued now. Jon looked back at him in surprise, and the older man met his eyes with a sly grin. "He's a crow, remember? Dark, and full of tricks."

Gooseflesh rippled along Jon's skin, and he turned to look back at the town jail. He swallowed. As much as he wanted to rescue Jory, he also knew that this would be his last chance to see Sansa. One way or another, tomorrow he would be gone, and he didn't see much chance to see her in the near future.

But he needed to see her.

He just had to see her...one more time. Then, I'll be done, he told himself. That will be enough. Just one last time. One last look upon her, one last time of hearing her soft voice, one last time of their
eyes meeting...He just had to tell her what she meant to him, he just had to let her know what she had done for him. He did not know how to love, it was true. Val had been right about him. The only love he had ever known was violent and destructive, fire and blood. But Sansa was flowers blooming and trees stretching up toward the sky; Sansa was a dream within him reawakened. He needed to tell her. He needed her to know. He needed to thank her. It was his last chance.

He turned back to Anguy.

"I need your help with something," he said. "We've got hours until it'll be the right time to break Jory out, and there's something I need to do before then."

"My help?"

"You're the only one who can show his face in this town," Jon explained. "I need you to go in there and draw Sansa out. I just...I need to talk to her."

"Now?" Gendry balked. "Tonight? Are you bloody serious? You've had a whole week of crouching outside of her damn house, just staring—"

"—Aye, I have," Jon agreed, "but now's my last chance."

Anguy was studying him carefully.

"Aye, I'll do it," he agreed at long last. "Looks like you're finally acting like a man, crow."

Jon ignored Anguy, and looked back at the town hall. This is the last time, he told himself. His heart was a helpless, broken bird inside his chest. He did not even have the words to say to her at hand; but seeing her and offering her even broken, meaningless words would be better than nothing. A simple 'thank you' might suffice. She did not know what she had done for him; he did not know why but he needed her to know. He had seen the face of the Mother in her, he had been revived by her. The man crouching on the rooftops at this moment was truly him, at last, at last.

His soul had been a heedless cloud lost to him until she had taken his face in her hand and breathed his soul back into him, that night so many months ago. He had to tell her what she had done, he had to show her that she was everything, would always be everything.

"I suppose I do," she began reluctantly, turning away from Gilly. If nothing else, I can keep Thorne occupied for them, she told herself, even as every fiber of her being despaired, and cringed away from Thorne's foul, greasy touch. It was not for Thorne that she had worn her red dress; it was not for Thorne that her heart had soared with hope. It was not for Thorne, or Podrick, or Sam, or Pypar, or any of them; it had been for Jon, and it had been so stupid and foolish of her, as usual. Of course Jon would not see her tonight, of course—

"Miss Stone, you're positively ravishing," came a familiar voice, and Sansa turned from Thorne's penetrating look. Anguy, looking entirely inappropriate in a threadbare green waistcoat, was approaching them. He winked at Thorne. "Red suits you, sir," he added cheekily. "Not, I must admit, nearly as well as it suits Miss Stone, but then, I imagine you'd agree with me on that point."

Anguy took Sansa's outstretched hand before Thorne could. "Let's dance, Miss Stone, because there's nothing like dancing with a beautiful woman in a red dress."

"I've never had the experience," Sansa retorted, even as Anguy was dragging her into the throng of bodies. His hair was mussed; he looked filthy. He had not been intending on appearing at the ball tonight, she was certain of that. The fiddles aligned into a reel, a dance that Sansa knew far better than most of the people of Mole's Town, having been exposed to it for years in King's Landing.
Anguy’s dark eyes took in her dress.

"You've made many a man so very happy tonight, Miss Stone, but I'll have to ask you to make one more man happy," he told her as they skipped before each other in time to the music. The wine made her feel messy and wild and hot, and her lips were still swollen with Podrick's kiss.

"One more man?"

"Aye, he's a grumpy little crow, but he's pretty," Anguy teased, taking her hand and pulling her in, then pushing her away. "I've left him out back. He's not much for dancing, but the women seem to like him." Her heart was shuddering helplessly, hopefully. Jon, Jon, Jon. "Not that he likes them back," he added thoughtfully, swinging Sansa around. He missed some of the steps, but got enough of them well enough to blend in. She felt Thorne's eyes on her like slime on her skin.

"The town's busier than I thought it would be tonight," she told him, before twirling away from him and then back to him. They came together, brushing against each other, and Anguy's eyes twinkled at all of her bare skin on display.

"Aye, we noticed. Seems like word travels fast here, Miss Stone." They broke apart once more. "Let's pretend I can bear it no longer and must have you here, now, behind the town hall. A scandal fit for the red dress, no?"

"That is foul," she shot back, skipping backward and then forward again. Their hands came together and linked, briefly, before they broke apart. "There's a crow out back?"

"Aye, a crow. Waiting for a pretty shiny red dress to peck at," Anguy agreed. He glanced at the couple next to them, the better to copy their dance steps. "I hope you like birds, Miss Stone. For they like you, for certain."

"Then take me back and let's see this crow," she replied coyly, hoping to sound flirtatious. Anguy's eyes twinkled with delight.

"Take you? Happily," he teased, and he pulled her in close and, among all the dancers, pressed his cheek to her neck. "I can give you a few minutes but Thorne's staring at you like he's going to eat you for supper. Come on," he murmured in her ear. "And be quick about it. We'll not have much time to break Jory out to begin with, and this'll cut into that time."

Among the throng of dancers crushing them in closer, Anguy pressed his hand to the small of her back, and then began dragging her toward the door, as though in a fit of lust, and Sansa felt a giggle burst from her lips, of unbearable happiness...Jon, Jon, Jon. She let Anguy pull her through the dancers. Some candles had gone out, rendering the room darker, and warmer; still the lust burned brighter. Jon, Jon, Jon... She wasn't ready yet it was all she wanted, to meet his grey eyes, to touch him once more...

Anguy made a show of pausing to press a kiss to her neck before they left the room. The fiddle was giddy as though it had been soaked in wine and the light was flickering and unsteady; that was twice now she'd been kissed by a man tonight; would Jon make it three? Her whole body shivered at the feel of a mouth on her neck, and then she was spinning out of the room, and into the dark, quiet hall, and all pretense of gaiety had dropped; now it was all frantic need, and Anguy was pulling her along the darkness to the back of the town hall and out the back door.

And then they were in the open air of the night. It had begun to rain. Sansa stumbled out into the night, breathless, and Anguy dropped her hand, peering around with narrowed eyes. "I'll stand guard—just wait here for your dark little bird." And he went back inside, and she was alone.
Sansa shivered, trying to catch her breath. Behind the hall was little more than the backside of some buildings, the stone covered in moss, and shabby dottings of wildflowers, their heads bent forlornly in the rain, as though apologizing: *we didn't know we were too early*, they told her. She fell back against the wall, feeling the wet stone through the red silk, and the roughness beneath her fingertips. She looked around, her breath clouding in the wet air, barely sheltered by the overhang of the building, the spray of the rain cooling her too-warm face, and jolted at the sound of footsteps. Someone had dropped from a height, wet stone crunching beneath boots...

...And there he was.

He had been afraid to see Sansa. He'd watched through the window as Anguy had pulled her into a dance, but the windows had been fogged with the heat of the dancers, and he'd only seen a red blur twisted against Anguy. The jealousy burned him but faded quickly; Anguy knew what he was doing, he knew, and knew the best way to make this happen.

And now the moment was here.

From his hiding spot on the wall he could see her as she stumbled into the wet night. In the moonlight her lovely skin, so much of it on display, was silvered. Her gown was of red silk and was split at her breasts, exposing the impossibly soft skin between her breasts, leading down tantalizingly to her ribcage. He realized, like he'd had too much wine, that there was nothing, then, between her skin and the red silk across her breasts. No corset, no stays... The gown itself barely covered her shoulders, and only made it to her elbows, leaving her pretty forearms exposed too. The gown glinted in the night; it was embroidered with red thread that was a shade darker than the silk. He squinted and crouched lower and saw the designs at her hem were wolves. Her hair was wild and only half-pulled back, exposing her pale, slender neck, a few tendrils of copper clinging to the damp skin of her collarbone, of her breasts. The urge to kiss her, to kiss every inch of her lovely skin, was dizzying; he would have killed every man in Mole's Town just for the chance to kiss her.

She was looking around, her breasts swelling with every frantic breath, and he wanted to kiss them too; his blood was on fire. She was so lovely, and some other man would kiss her, not knowing anything about her except that she was beautiful, and he hated that man already, though he did not know him, though he did not truly exist, yet. Some man would unlace her dresses forever and kiss her and not understand her, not understand the risk that she had taken tonight, in wearing such a gown; not understanding that she had once worn gowns exclusively to please others, not understanding how she had been a captive all of her life and now she was free. He hated this faceless stranger even though it was what he had intended for her all along. She would be happy, but he would be in pain. *It was the plan*, he reminded himself, clutching the stone and reeling at the sight of her, *but no man can ever understand this red gown or what it means to her*. She was so ready to give away her innocence, to give away her flesh, but he knew from experience that it was a thing that another person did not take from you; it was a thing that could only be ripped apart, forever. It was not a gift given; it was theft, no matter how ready you thought you were. She did not know it, and he could no longer protect her, could no longer pretend that he had the authority to protect her.

Some other man would take this red gown from her shoulders and kiss her pretty skin and not understand it, not as he would; he would never unlace this red dress nor would he ever kiss her pretty skin. Could it ever be enough, for her to be kissed by a man who did not truly understand her, who did not see the steel beneath the beauty, who had not been brought back to life by her?

*Enough, enough*, he told himself. It was time. He could not hide from himself, or from her, any longer. He would give of himself, all of himself, revealing everything, too. Val had told him that he
did not know how to love, and perhaps he did not, but he could try, he could make this one, final attempt at loving before it was lost to him forever. He did not know how to love, it was true; but he could contain his love no longer. It was bursting free, blooming like thousands of snowdrops in the woods, life where winter had previously only paved death. And so he jumped off the stone and dropped on the ground beside her, in the rain.

This was the last goodbye, and he meant to use every second, to drink every moment with her like it was whiskey, feel it burn his throat even as it warmed his belly, and he'd be drunk for hours, and feel the pain later.

He was wet from the rain. His hair had come free, damp curls clinging to his jaw and neck. He was so lovely to her. He'd shed his cloak and she could see more of him, see his slender waist and lean arms. He was all in black. Aye, he's a grumpy little crow, but he's pretty. Through the rain his grey eyes met hers, and she felt his gaze on her like the rain, soft as lover's kisses on her bare skin. He approached her slowly, now. Be quick about it, Anguy had said, but quickness was such a relative idea. Forever would be too quick.

"I-I was wrong about the Town Watch," she said as he approached her, slowly, almost reverently. He was standing before her, but his eyes were not on her gown, not on her breasts or her neck, or any of her skin; he was looking at her eyes, now, a soft, half-smile playing about his pretty lips.

"We'll take Jory to Castle Black, and then we'll be on to Eastwatch," he told her, ignoring her comment.

They were so close. The rain was loud, louder than music, louder than her heart, and she watched him be soaked by it, while she stayed mostly dry. He was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She could have looked at him for the rest of her life and it would not be enough. Every part of her seemed to bloom under his gaze. We cannot help who we love. "So when you want to annul the marriage," he began, not looking away from her, "then send a raven to either place, and it'll be done."

Her eyes burned; she could not breathe. He would have hurt her less if he'd simply slapped her.

"Annul the marriage?" she gasped, and felt the spray of the rain on her face.

"Aye, let's annul it and be done," he said softly. His eyes were bright as he looked upon her.

There was love, written in grey in his eyes, as soft and bright as starlight. "You're no one's pawn anymore, Sansa. You don't belong to anyone but yourself anymore. You can make your own choices."

It felt so good to hear her name spoken from his lips, it was a rush that left her reeling and gasping. I am Sansa, she thought dizzily. Snow or Stark or Stone, she was Sansa, in solely the way he spoke Sansa, with such love and respect in his voice.

"I don't think I'll marry again," she confessed. His words were a fist around her heart, closing, squeezing, bringing her the sweetest pain. No kiss, no touch, could ever come close to the way he was looking at her now. It made her angry; she could not say why. "I suppose you'll finally be free of me."

"No," he said sadly, and she stared at him in shock. He half-smiled, eyes still so bright, and he looked up into the rain, briefly. "I'll never be free of you." His shoulders shook with a brief laugh. "I've tried."
"I've tried too," she began thickly, feeling her eyes burn and grow wet, and she looked down at the wet ground, clenching her fists. "I feel like such a fool."

"Aye, me too, but it's a small price to pay for what you've done for me."

She looked up in surprise, even though her eyes were filled with tears. He was doing that damned half-smile again, and she wanted to cherish it, for his smiles were so rare and so hard-won, but it was so filled with pain that it took her breath away. He moved her as only music could, a particular chord of longing from a violin; as only a sunset silhouetting black pines in winter could; as only a field of snowdrops could. She would have given anything to kiss him. What makes us want to kiss? she had once asked him. She hadn't known, and he hadn't, either, yet she knew now, staring at him in the rain, knowing that soon they would part for forever. It's because they haven't yet invented the words to explain it or describe it, she thought now, staring at him, that feeling that the gods have made this person just for me, that feeling that I am looking upon the gods themselves, and their handiwork, that I am seeing what no Sept, no godswood, no painting nor song can ever capture.

"What I've done?" she finally choked out. Jon was smiling again, that damned sad smile. "I've done nothing for you."

"You said you wanted to go back to Winterfell, that night, because you were finally going to have someone love you," he began, so slowly. "But you are so loved, Sansa." His words were so desperate, so gentle; it was like being caressed but it was not enough.

"No, I'm not," she shot back. "I'm not loved. I'm stupid, and foolish, and so weak. I really thought--"

"she could not finish, could not confess the secret hope she had held within her, as tiny and perfect as a pearl. She clapped a hand to her mouth. "I feel too much," she admitted at long last.

"No, you feel just enough. You are perfect. You are so perfect, and so beautiful." He let out a half-laugh, his breath clouding in the air, in the rain, as he looked away from her. "I won't recite poetry or make some long speech," he began, shaking his head, "but you have been everything to me; you have changed me. I had to tell you.

"Why?" she despaired. The rain was coming down harder. "Why tell me if you're just going to leave me?"

There was nothing but his eyes, and the way they softened as he looked upon her. She had never felt so beautiful as she did now; she had never felt so much herself. He would not be swayed by revealing dresses or scandalous silk; it was not her flesh he loved, it was her soul that he loved, her soul that he so cherished and looked upon now with such desire and gentleness, with such love. You are so loved, Sansa.

"To thank you," he said. "To..." he paused, looking away, fists clenching. Rain dripped from his curls, from his lips, and she thought she might lose her mind if she did not kiss him.

"To what?" she pressed, stepping forward into the rain, feeling it drench her gown, run between her breasts, as his eyes darkened as he looked back at her.

But she'd never know.

The door banged open, smacking into her back.

"Time's up," Anguy said in a low voice. Sansa looked to the door as Anguy came out, and saw Thorne behind him, approaching from the other end of the hall.
When she looked over her shoulder, though, Jon was gone.

"It's done." Jon vaulted himself back onto the roof, where Gendry, Davos, and Beric were waiting for him. "Thorne's busy with the ball; we just need to distract the other Watchmen for long enough."

"Aye, Sandor and Bronn said they'd handle it," Beric told him. "We'll wait until eleven. The ball ends at midnight; everyone will be drunk but no one will be leaving."

Jon felt their eyes on him, and he turned away. *I wanted to tell her everything,* he thought, staring back at the golden light emanating from the ball, casting the dais of the town square in gold. The beam that would hold the noose looked like it had been edged in gold by the faeries. *But I suppose she already knew.* How could she not?

He closed his eyes, trying to memorize every detail. Her copper hair gleaming, her blue eyes fixed on him, the way she'd looked as she'd stepped closer to him...His chest ached, a searing pain. *I am hers,* he thought, opening his eyes once more to look back at that patch of golden light, *but she is not mine.*

But what if she were his? What if she wanted to be his?

*There's no way.*

But she had looked at him so hungrily, so longingly... What if she wanted to be his? His heart was shuddering, writhing, agony in his chest. There could be no way for them; he had nothing to offer her but a life of hunger and violence, and she deserved more. *You know nothing, Jon Snow.*

He had offered the annulment, but she hadn't wanted it. *You know nothing, Jon Snow, about Sansa Stark.*

*Why not ask her?*

There hadn't been time. He had thought he would have more time. *Why didn't I just ask her?*

He knew the answer. He hadn't simply asked her because he had been afraid to hear the truth. Assuming that she did not want him was so much less painful than hearing her say the words for certain. Was he so craven? He had told himself for so long that it was not worth asking her, because he had nothing to offer her, because his life was dangerous, because of this and that and so many thousands of reasons he had given over the months, but really he was simply terrified. Terrified that she did not want him, yet terrified that she might. And worse yet, what if she did want him? He would never know how to hold her, would never know how to be around her. He had been corrupted, poisoned, ruined, soiled; he could not bear to taint her. He could not bear for her to learn just how deep his poison really ran.

*But why not ask her?*

He looked from Beric and the others surveying the Town Watch, to the silhouette of the town jail, to the golden light coming from the windows of the ball. His heart was pounding again.

*Why not just ask her?*

There was still time. His fingers felt numb as he fidgeted with his sword; the rain was in his eyes. How could she ever want him? He thought of Daenerys' hands on him, he thought of Mereen and Astapor burning as he walked away; he thought of Sansa's eyes as he had burst into her room at
Winterfell. He had done so many terrible things, had had so many terrible things done to him... how could she ever want him?

Why not just ask her?

There was still time.

The girl was lying on the bed, whimpering fearfully, naked all for him. Dickon did not know where Ramsay had gotten her. Find me a girl, he'd told him and Theon, quietly in the darkness. Innocent, and young. Find me a girl who won't know—

His cock wouldn't get hard. Dickon had been standing at the foot of the bed for several long, pained minutes now. He'd drunk some wine, but not too much, and it had made his tongue thick and heavy but it hadn't quieted the horrible thoughts in his mind. He pressed his palm to himself, but he remained frustratingly limp.

He had overturned the north; some said he would soon rule it. Yet he had never fucked. What sort of man was he, if he could not even fuck?

She couldn't be more than fifteen. Ramsay liked them young, and Theon liked them plump, and Clegane liked them quiet and pliant; what did he like? Every time he wondered, he thought of Sansa Stark's pale legs around the Targaryen wolf's hips, and it made him want to die.

The girl's wrists were bound and she kept crying and it made it impossible to get hard. How can Ramsay want this, he wondered, staring at her as she sobbed and writhed. There was nothing desirable about the way she cried, and she looked so young that he wasn't even sure she knew what sex was yet. But a beautiful woman writhing beneath him hadn't been enough to get him hard, back at the Bael and the Blue Rose Inn. Nothing seemed to get him hard. He moved his palm harder against himself, willing his cock to harden, feeling his eyes burn with frustration.

He swore and kicked over a bench, and the girl sobbed harder as he turned away from her and stalked out of the room. In the dark hall, Ramsay was waiting for him.

"My lord, is she not to your liking?" Ramsay asked sweetly, in that eerie, musical voice.

"She does not want me," Dickon replied disgustedly. "How can I possibly—"

"—But do you want her, my lord?" Ramsay asked, rising to his feet. In the darkness he looked all blue, edged in silver. He was standing too close, and he embraced Dickon. Dickon's skin crawled and he froze as he felt Ramsay's breath against his ear. "What do you want, my lord? You can have anything."

Dickon tried to cringe away, but Ramsay's grip was tight.

"I don't know," he admitted in a rush. "I thought I'd want a young one, an innocent one, but—"

She reminded him of his little sister, he realized. He thought he might be sick, and he wrenched away from Ramsay. "—She is too young," he finally said, holding his head in his hands.

"Maybe it is not her innocence that upsets you?" Ramsay was standing behind him as Dickon looked out the window at the silvered courtyard. "Your father did not like women, either."

Dickon could not speak. No one had said it outright, ever. He felt Ramsay's hand on his hip, and he wanted to die. Ramsay was pressed against his back, moving his palm closer, closer...Dickon
gripped the wall, clenching his teeth, as Ramsay's hand moved over his cock, a ghost of a touch. Nothing happened. "But you do not want me, either..."

"It is a sin," Dickon countered, "of course I do not want it."

Ramsay's hand moved insistently, even so; yet he remained limp. He felt the Bolton man's breath on his neck, like a spider creeping beneath his collar. "Stop."

"You said you wanted to fuck. You're ashamed that you've never fooled. ...You're ashamed that you can't fuck."

"I can," he argued through clenched teeth as Ramsay's movements grew more insistent. "I can."

"But if not with whores, if not with fair-haired maidens, if not with men...then with whom?"

Pale legs wrapped around slim hips, and lips swollen from kisses, the air thick with desire...Dickon closed his eyes and rested his forehead against cool stone. For some reason he thought of that damned white stag once more. "Touch is just touch, my lord. Sooner or later we all respond to it."

Dickon reached down and stilled Ramsay's movements, wrenched his hand away. There was only one way he could fuck, he knew it; there was only one thing that had made him come. He would have that, or he would have nothing. He'd caught glimpses of it in his dreams, vague shapes and ideas...he knew what he wanted, he knew who he wanted. He wanted them both; he wanted the wolf to watch and know what Dickon was taking from him, wanted him to watch as he took from him what was supposed to belong to him, by law. He'd taken his home, and taken his people, and soon he'd take his woman, too; and he would make sure the Targaryen wolf watched it all, every last second of it.

"Take the girl away; I don't want her," he told Ramsay, and he left the Bolton man there in the darkness.
Sansa stared at the ground where Jon had been standing mere seconds before.

*You are so loved, Sansa.*

“Miss Stone?” she heard Thorne, distantly, but she could not tear her eyes from the place where Jon had been standing, could not tear her mind from the way his eyes had looked as he had spoken those words. *You are so loved.*

But if he loved her, why was he so quick to give her away?

He had never kept anything for himself, she realized. Whatever he got, he had always given away. Even as a child he had given up his own fish to Bran without a second thought. He’d given her his cloak, his name, his gold, and his blade...he had given her everything. He could not help but give to others. Even tonight, he was risking his own life to give Jory another chance at his.

He was as filled with love as other men were filled with blood, and just as driven by it, too. But he did not know how to be loved in return. He had never learned. He had never been loved, not in the way he should have been.

She thought of the dark quiet boy slipping into the godswood, disappearing into the falling snow, no one to wonder where he’d gone. She thought of Daenerys, so lost, and so angry, so consumed by a thing that could only bring her misery. She thought of the Targaryens that had come before, and she pictured them like a chain of paper dolls, stretching back to the beginning of old Valyria, all fire and blood and madness and grief.

From all of that pain and anger and power, Jon had been born: a tiny, perfect sprig of green from miles of ash. Perhaps it was a miracle that he could love at all—let alone be so utterly filled with it. Ensnared by the brutal legacy of Aerys’ madness, Rhaegar’s selfishness, and Daenerys’ rage, he had never become one of them. Abandoned and ignored at Winterfell, he had never become cruel or bitter. Controlled and used by Daenerys, he had never been consumed by her anger. He still loved; he loved so much that it hurt.

“Miss Stone,” Thorne tried again, and she heard him stepping out into the rain. She turned to face him. Her gown was drenched and she felt his gaze linger on her breasts for far too long. “You promised me a dance. It is rude to break one’s promises,” he said.

Dizzily she realized that it had only been a few moments ago that she had been swept away by
Anguy, yet it felt as though an eternity had passed since then. Everything had changed. She forced a smile.

“You’re correct, Mr. Thorne. I suppose I’ve behaved terribly,” she said when she had found her voice. Behind Thorne, Anguy looked wary. Sansa held out her hand to Thorne. “If you don’t mind dancing with a drowned rat, I would gladly keep my promise and dance with you.”

"Bored," Tormund was humming audibly from the other rooftop. "Bored, bored, bored."

"Shhh!" Gendry shot the red-bearded man a scowl and turned back to Jon, Davos, and Beric.

"My wife used to say that only a bore is bored," Davos muttered, earning a smirk from Beric.

"Tormund is many things, but a bore is not one of them," he retorted. Tormund began amusing himself in a low discussion with Bronn and Sandor, their heads bent low together. Jon watched them, feeling uneasy. Bronn and Sandor had been uncharacteristically enthusiastic, out of nowhere, to help tonight, and he liked it not. Why did it make him so uneasy? The men just were bored, was all; they were military men who were unaccustomed to having so many days of doing nothing. Of course they would jump at the chance to do something. But Bronn in particular had been so cynical about the plan until the very last minute...what had changed his mind?

Jon studied them for a long time, but the three men were simply crouched together like three vultures, sniggering about something in the alleyway beneath them. There was nothing to be concerned about, he told himself. As long as they kept relatively quiet and followed orders, worrying about them was a waste of his time.

He would go back there, and he would simply ask Sansa if she wanted him. The very thought of uttering such words was a hand squeezing his throat, making him gasp and struggle for breath. He crouched there on the roof, staring down at the blade in his hands.

What if she said yes?

It was an impossibility that left him reeling. There could be no way for them, he could see no path forward that would keep her safe, and give her the life she deserved. You know nothing, Jon Snow, about Sansa Stark. He had thought he had known what she deserved, but what if what she deserved wasn't what she wanted?

The look on her face when he had told her to annul the marriage, and the way her voice had broken when she had pointed out that he was only going to leave her...these were the only proof he had that there was a chance of love, that there was anything between them...and what purpose would it even serve, to ask if she wanted him? Why was he doing this? She might not want him, and even if she did, there was no path forward for them.

But he had to ask.

He’d go back to the hall, he decided, and draw Anguy's attention one more time, and talk to Sansa one more time. He only needed a minute, he told himself. He only would ask her if she wanted him. And, of course, she would say she didn’t, and that would be the end of it. He could move on, rescue Jory, and move on to Eastwatch, and ... that would be all. He would know for certain, and perhaps then he'd be free.

And if she said she did want him… He gripped the edge of the rooftop, breathless. He did not know what he would do. He could hardly imagine it. His hope was a knife-edge digging into his flesh, on the precipice of drawing blood. What if, what if, what if...
"There is something going on."

He hadn't even noticed Anguy had returned, but Anguy was with them now, a dark look on his face. "Thorne knows something, he's got some plan."

"Yes, he knows we're here. Remember?" Gendry said slowly, as though speaking to a small child. Anguy glanced at him briefly but ignored him.

"He's been angling all night for a dance with your wife and now he's gotten it," Anguy said to Jon.

"So? He's a perverted old man and she's a pretty young woman. Of course he's angling for a dance," Gendry dismissed, but Anguy shook his head, about to speak, but he was interrupted.

There was the sound of something shattering and then the shriek of a cat. The stocky Town Watchman took off in the direction of the noise at a gallop, drawing the attention of the other Watchmen, drawing them away from the jail.... The men looked between each other as they all realized the opportunity that had been handed to them suddenly.

"This is our best shot," Anguy said. He was right, though Jon was reluctant to do it now. It was earlier than they had planned, but he supposed that if Sansa was dancing with Thorne, then at least there was no way she could possibly be suspected if it happened right now. Still, they were not mentally prepared to go through with the plan now. It felt too soon, it felt wrong—and and that feeling, in his experience, often led to dire mistakes.

Jon looked at the town hall windows once more. He would have given anything for just a glimpse of her.

It would have to wait until after they got Jory out, he decided. Jon turned back to them.

"Let's do it."

Davos and Beric slipped into the night, where they would be waiting at the north gate with horses. Anguy skittered off to a nearby rooftop where he would stand watch and fire arrows. And Jon, Gendry, and Tormund all began making their way toward the jail, with Bronn and Sandor on their tail. The only guard actually guarding the jail at the moment was the skinny one with big ears, but what if there were more guards inside?

He couldn't think about that now. They reached a rooftop that overlooked the town square. The dais, where Jory was intended to hang tomorrow, was cast in golden light from the ball, and his stomach clenched. It was all too easy to picture the crowds forming in the chilly spring daylight tomorrow, holding their breaths as Jory was walked up to the noose. He thought of Sansa in that crowd and felt sick. He would do anything to make sure that Jory did not hang tomorrow. One way or another, she would never see another loved one executed again. He would make sure of it.

Jon gave Anguy their signal—the low coo of a dove—and Anguy drew an arrow, sharp eyes focused on the guard standing in front of the jail. But to their surprise, the guard shot up from his post, looking around.

"Who goes there?" he called, and they all froze, no one moving a muscle, watching as the guard looked around curiously. He took his rifle, which had been leaning against the door behind him, and Jon could feel Gendry rolling his eyes at how the Watchman held the rifle, so inexpertly and clumsily.

But Jon did not feel so glib. His dove call had been spot-on—they had used it many times before—so how had this guard known it was a man and not a dove?
They waited...waited...waited...

At long last, the guard lowered his rifle, though he still peered around suspiciously, expectantly. He went back to his post, and Jon saw his ears twitch slightly, reminding him ludicrously of a very alert mouse.

The fiddles from the ball died down, briefly, signaling the end of a song, and Jon thought once more of Sansa, being touched and grasped at by Thorne, and he felt sick with hatred. Of course a man like Thorne, so eager to wield power and so clearly repressed, would insist on dancing with Sansa, as a taunt, as a demonstration of control and power. But, he remembered, Sansa was well versed in men (and women) like that. She would not be cowed. And yet again, he forced himself to tear his thoughts from her.

The music struck up again, and Jon, Gendry, and Tormund readied themselves. They had wanted to do this without commotion, but now that the Town Watch knew they were here, they might as well exploit that fact. And so Anguy would make use of the precedent that Jon and Gendry had set during the last Direwolves meeting, and fire arrows, distracting the Town Watch, and Bronn and Sandor would be behind them, keeping the coast clear.

Anguy's first arrow took off the Watchman's hat and nailed it to the jail door. The watchman let out a squeak of surprise and snatched his rifle, and now it was Jon's turn to move.

He led the group, the rope ladder tied round his waist for safekeeping, and dropped from the roof into an alley. In the shadows, quiet as a cat, he made his way to the town jail. The fears that had boiled up about Sansa had been quieted for the moment; that strange calm overtook him as it always did when the moment of action came. He could never trust his own heart, could never rely on it or be alone with it, but he could always trust his mind, his eyes, his warrior's arms and legs.

The side of the jail loomed before him, tinged green with moss and years, weeds trailing up its walls, and it was all too easy to vault himself upward, by kicking off from the wall behind him, grabbing onto a ledge, swinging upward. He landed on the edge of the roof on his feet with ease; he had known precisely how he would land and had trusted his body. Why could his heart not yield to his command and intentions so easily as his legs did? He had conquered so many things in his short life but he could not even begin to conquer his own fears, his own heart. His legs belonged to him but his heart seemed a wild, feral beast that had taken residence within him against his will, an antagonistic force that breathed shadow fire and wished him ill.

He heard the scrape and thump of Gendry and Tormund landing with slightly less grace behind him, as he crouched down before the narrow hole in the roof.

It was jagged, misshapen, and as crude as if the First Men had constructed it. It would barely be enough room for Jon alone to slip through, let alone two men. He unwound the rope from his waist, squinting into the yawning darkness. There was a silver spot of rain-washed moonlight on the floor of the cell, but no sign of Jory. His mouth grew dry. That was a bad sign. Jory ought to have heard them above him, ought to be investigating what the noise was.

He handed one end of the rope ladder to both Gendry and Tormund; their eyes met and both men nodded to him, understanding his intent, and then Jon dropped the other end into the hole, watched the swinging knotted rope disappear into darkness.

Thorne's hands were clammy as they briefly joined to hers, the dance bringing them together for one moment. Sansa saw Sam and Gilly at the other end of the room, dancing with far more grace, but Sam kept shooting her fearful looks and being redirected away from her by Gilly's hand.
Sansa felt sick. She would have given anything to explain to Gilly that she could not imagine why Thorne would ever think that she was in any way involved with Sam; she wanted to believe that Gilly did not need explanation and would believe the best of her, but how could she be sure? She did not actually know Gilly very well, she reflected. She spun, feeling her skirts bloom outward, the silk swishing around her legs, and the dirk heavy against her hip.

"Did you know that the Brotherhood without Banners would be in Mole’s Town tonight, Miss Stone?"

"No, Mr. Thorne." She would have said more, but something told her to tread far more carefully. She thought of Jory, curled on his side in that horrible cell; thought of Jon crouching above the hole, peering into it, and her heart beat faster. Jon, Jon, Jon… Her skin pricked at the very thought of him once more and she felt her face flush; luckily, she was meant to spin round again, and it gave her a chance to quickly regain her composure.

"I do wonder why," he mused. The next step was supposed to involve their hands lacing as they spun around together—it was a dance she had always loved; it was so elegant, the way the two hands intertwined so briefly—but he grabbed her wrist painfully, clumsily, instead, and they did not spin. "It could not be to prevent Jory Poole’s execution tomorrow, could it?" he asked in a hiss, his foul breath washing over her.

"I’m sure I have no idea what the Brotherhood without Banners even does," she replied carefully, never breaking his flinty gaze. "As far as I know they are nothing more than a bunch of troublemakers who go round destroying property and causing trouble."

"A bit like the Direwolves, one might think," Thorne said now. Sam and Gilly were twirling closer to them, briefly, now, and Sansa avoided their eyes. "And yet now that we have been looking for the Direwolves they seem to have vanished into thin air. So many mysteries… broken glass, missing wolves, burning godswoods… one might think it all witchcraft, though we have no red women in this town." His gaze traveled downward, meaningfully, to her dress.

"A pity," Sansa said, her voice shaking, "I find the red women so entertaining."

"Yes, a pity indeed. They are entertaining. But I’ve been told that they have no actual magic—that they are merely full of tricks."

He was angling toward something. Why else would he bring up witchcraft, and tricks? Why were his eyes glimmering with victory? "And they are not the only ones who can play tricks, Miss Stone."

When he was certain that Gendry and Tormund had braced themselves, Jon did one last scan: he craned his neck, looking for Anguy, who had disappeared—though the telltale fwish of arrows whistling through the air told him Anguy was nearby. He couldn’t find Bronn and Sandor, but there was no point looking—it was best if he couldn’t find them, actually.

Jon took hold of the rope and began climbing down, the rope swinging under his weight so that he hit the rough edge of the hole, his sword catching as he went, and he had to duck his head sharply to avoid smacking into the rough edge. It had seemed, in theory, so simple, but reality was always more complicated, and he was beginning to think it would be near impossible to get Jory out of here if he was weak or unresponsive. In the distance, he heard shouting and glass breaking, but the thick walls of the cell swallowed him and then he dropped down the last few feet into the dark silence.
The floor of the cell was wet and gritty, and the air was damp. It took a moment to adjust to the darkness, and Jon stepped out of the beam of rain and light from the night to better help his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness.

In the corner a dark, unmoving form took shape. Jon went to the lump and knelt down before him, touching rough cloth. "Jory," he breathed.

There was no response.

"I suppose they aren't," she said carefully, her heart lodged in her throat.

There was only one trick that she could think of Thorne playing, and the blood drained from her head as she realized what he had done.

She spun to face him once more, meeting his glittering eyes. She tried to steel her features but her horror could not be hidden. No, no, no. It couldn't be. She had to warn Jon, had to get away, but it was too late now, surely, and now Thorne knew that she knew...

"I do hope the Brotherhood doesn't try to break out Jory Poole," he said. They stopped dancing as the others danced around them; Sansa could not seem to make any of her body move out of sheer horror. "Because Poole's been moved from that cell, you see, and if my men catch the Brotherhood, they won't wait for the noose. And it would be such a shame to lose the Brotherhood."

He smiled at her, now, and stepped closer. "After all," he began quietly, "they're such a nice story."

Jon pulled back the rough fabric and found a few bags of grain, nothing more, and he saw dark shapes—rats—skitter away. Someone, he thought, stepping back, has betrayed us, willingly or not, knowingly or not.

He thought back to the thing that had been bothering him ever since he had left Flowers' print shop.

"I had that list somewhere, but seems I've misplaced it again," Flowers had blustered. He'd been referring the list of what each member of the Direwolves planned to bring for Mance...In other words, a list of each member of the Direwolves.

And whoever had gotten that list had overheard their plans, too. He knew it with such pure certainty, though he had no evidence for this certainty, but he knew he was right all the same.

Sansa was on that list.

He had to get to her.

He turned to the dangling rope ladder and heard a cry of pain and then a silhouette passed over the hole as someone—Gendry or Tormund—was thrown, and then, the rope ladder dropped to a useless coil at his feet.

She had to find out where Jory was, she had to find a way of warning Jon and the others...Sansa felt her face seem to freeze into the mask she had worn in King's Landing for so many years, the mask she had never removed until the moment she had held a dirk to her own wrists before Jon's eyes, that night in the forest. She became a pretty, helpless, innocent maiden once more: a woman made entirely of the desires of whichever man stood before her, a woman tailored to fit whatever role he
wished of her. Joffrey had wanted her to be pretty and crying; Lord Baelish had wanted her to be her mother reborn; Dickon had wanted her to be in awe of him and utterly enraptured by him. Each time she had filled the necessary role as easily as water fills a cup. *But water shapes the earth,* she thought. Not like fire, rapidly burning away life, or like wind, abruptly tearing land from itself, but slow, immeasurable—and unstoppable.

"Your brilliance astounds me, Mr. Thorne," she said softly, lowering her lashes slightly. "I would never have thought to move Jory, but there's no doubt you'll foil the Brotherhood, if they do indeed attempt to break Jory Poole out."

"And now you try to play coy," he mused, "yet I now have proof that you are one of the Direwolves, Miss Stone...and proof that you are not who you say you are."

Her facade cracked.

"I-is anyone truly who they say they are?" she bleated desperately. People were starting to look, starting to take notice. He stepped closer.

"I have you," he hissed, eyes glittering with joy that sickened her. "I have proof, and you'll all hang, just after Jory Poole hangs, and I'll flay you and tie the noose myself. I'll have no traitors, no foolish resistance; I have worked too hard," he continued, his hiss morphing to a manic strangled voice. "I have the list, the list of every Direwolf in this town. You cannot deny it anymore."

There was a ringing in her ears as she thought back, so suddenly, to one particular moment in Gilly's storeroom. She had been so overcome by Jon's presence that she had hardly noticed when Sam had been unable to find the list of what everyone was bringing for Sam. She was so stupid. Why had they ever written it down? Why had they not used false names, or destroyed the list—why had she been so, so stupid?

She thought of Sam and Gilly and their son. She thought of Podrick and Brienne, and the life they had fought so hard to build. This was her fault, not theirs. She had been the one to push for collecting things for Mance Rayder; she had been the one pushing everyone to write their names down. She had thought it would make it feel more official, had thought it would hold everyone accountable...and it had.

Her only relief, she realized, was that Podrick had never written his name down.

"It was me," she told Thorne, her tongue so thick and clumsy in her mouth. This was her last chance. "You say that red women are only capable of tricks, Mr. Thorne, but that is a falsehood that I'm sure is comforting to believe." Her mouth was so dry, and her hands would not stop shaking. "The truth is that I have bewitched them all." She gestured to her dress. "I am a red woman, Mr. Thorne. I follow the Lord of Light...and he has told me of your fate...in his flames," she informed him, desperately trying to recall the words of the red woman who had foretold of Jon's fate at Dragonstone.

But Thorne did not balk at her words. He looked like he wanted to laugh, and he stepped even closer now, his grip on her arm tightening, painfully.

"You're no red woman, you're a Targaryen whore. You are Sansa Stark—or, rather, Sansa Snow."

How could he possibly know?

She stared at him in shock, her stomach dropping, a rushing sound in her ears overtaking everything else.
This was it.

She could deny it all she wanted, but the minute he found someone who would recognize her, she
would be lost.

It was over.

"Take me," she whispered now. The words were like blood from stone. She had sacrificed so much
—so many people had sacrificed so much for her—to stay alive, to stay safe...and now it was all
coming undone, all their efforts wasted. "If I come willingly, will you leave the others go? I forced
them all, I swear it."

No one was dancing, but no one dared get close enough to hear their words. The fiddles continued,
feeably. In the corner of her eye, she saw Podrick slip out. She could hardly blame him; he had
fought hard for survival. It was understandable that he would want to leave…but part of her still
stung. There is no such thing as loyalty, she thought.

She thought of her brother's eyes, just before his head had been taken off. He had known the risk
but had fought for what he believed in, anyway. She had to be brave like Robb now. She had seen
others die to save the lives of others; she knew how it must be done. "You can do whatever you
like, and I'll tell you whatever you want to know...just leave the others alone."

There it was. That flash in his eyes that she had learned so well, had seen in so many others...that
cold, calculating exaltation of power. It was the ugliest thing she would ever see. It had disgusted
her when she had seen it in Joffrey, in Lord Baelish, even in Princess Daenerys, and it was no less
hideous in Thorne.

"Come with me," he told her, and Sansa, holding her chin high, turned round to leave through the
double doors. The fiddles had stopped; everyone was looking at them. Her vision blurred and
silvered before her as they walked through the doors and up the darkened staircase to Thorne's
office. She thought, absurdly, of the night of her wedding: the last time she had climbed up the
stairs in a far too revealing dress to an unknown fate.

It was chaos. From nowhere, three Town Watchmen had come, firing arrows at the roof of the jail.
When Bronn and Sandor had jumped down to stop them, the mousy one with the big ears had
turned that stupid rifle on them. Thank gods it was clear he had never once fired a rifle before,
because he would have had a better shot at hitting the moon than hitting any one of them.

Bonn had missed chaos and violence; it felt so good, better than sex. Bronn drew his sword and
clashed with the thick-looking Watchman who had repeatedly gotten scared by the cat that
Tormund had been harassing out of sheer boredom earlier. But the Watchman, stupid as he clearly
was, was stronger than he looked, and the force of their swords clashing nearly knocked Bronn
backwards.

"Jon's stuck!" Gendry cried from somewhere above, and Bronn wanted to roll his eyes as he took
another swing at the watchman. They needed Jaime; Jaime was the only one who could direct men
to get a task done—his only failure that Bronn knew of had been at the Targaryen holdfast, a
failure that was still a mystery.

Beyond him, Sandor was approaching the mousy watchman, who was backed against the wall,
pointing his rifle at Sandor but failing to actually use it. Sandor let out a bark of a laugh and
snatched the rifle from him, and then smacked him so hard across the face that the boy was thrown
to the ground, a line of blood spattering as he went, black as ink in the darkness. It was starting to
rain harder, now, and it was making it hard to see too well as he fought the Watchman in the wet night. Abruptly he realized he hadn't heard any arrows for a minute; what had happened to Anguy?

And in the darkness, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure running, avoiding them in the refuge of the shadows, and he felt a bolt of recognition as their eyes met, so briefly.

He knew that man, knew the round face and plodding run, but from where?

He was fucked.

There was no way out of the cell except up...and there was no one above to hold the rope. He had nothing but the rope and his sword, and he couldn't exactly cut his way through stone. But the clashes and yells were becoming louder; he heard an anguished yell and then the tat-tat-tat of a rifle. It wasn't Gendry's rifle; he knew the sound Gendry's rifle made.

He paced back and forth, his heart shuddering as his calm began to bleed away. They were going to alert Thorne, and he was locked in here, with no way of helping...Meanwhile, Jory was somewhere else—but where?

And he hadn't asked Sansa yet.

He still didn't know if she wanted him.

If caught, he'd be hanged—there was no one to rescue the Brotherhood without Banners, of course—and he'd never have had the chance to ask her.

Why hadn't he just asked her before, out in the rain? His heart, that cruel, snarling beast, was breathing fire through his veins now, the burning acid of regret. He had never loved anyone or anything so completely as he loved Sansa, and she would never know it; she would watch him die thinking he had wanted to end their marriage when the truth could not be further. In marrying her he had truly understood what it meant to become blood of another's blood, bone of another's bone. He would die without her knowing.

He had faced death so many times before but he had never before had anything to lose.

He paced, his breath clouding in the cold cell. Think, think, think...he wanted to laugh as he abruptly recalled Beric's words. He's a crow...dark, and full of tricks.

Where are my tricks now, Beric? he thought sarcastically. If I were a crow I could fly out of this cell, but I'm no crow, nor dragon, nor wolf..I am just a man with a sword, with no way out except a hole that even my sword almost could not fit through. I've got nothing but a sword and some rope.

And then he stopped in his tracks, directly beneath the hole. The rain was coming down harder now. Just a sword and some rope, he thought again, looking up into the rainy sky.

Brienne and Jaime had been on edge all evening, sitting in the kitchen, arguing about literally everything under the sun. They had moved on to whether the well water tasted worse up north when Podrick exploded into the kitchen, soaked through from the rain, panting and gasping.

“Where’s Alayne?” Brienne demanded. They both had shot to their feet. Podrick looked between them, clutching at his chest.
“Thorne’s got her, and I think she’ll be f-framed for Jory’s d-disappearance, and the B-Brotherhood is here, and there are two re-doats,” he gasped, directing the last bit at Jaime.

“What part of I’ll cut your cock off and shove it so far up your arse that you feel it when you sneeze if Sansa is harmed did you not under—wait.” Jaime stared at Podrick in shock. “Redcoats?”

“Aye, they’ve deserted, I th-think, and they're part of the Brotherhood, now,” Podrick said with a nod. “I knew them both, recognized their f-faces. It was the Hound,” he began, “and the one who was always with you. D-dark hair. Skinny. Sings a lot. S-sort of mean,” he added, averting his gaze hastily.

_Bronn._ He felt winded as though he’d been punched. _Bronn._

If he weren’t so thoroughly horrified he might have laughed. _Sings a lot and sort of mean. Bronn will be so upset to hear he's only 'sort of' mean._

“Never mind that!” Brienne snarled, stalking past Podrick and pushing him aside so hard that he was thrown into the little table. She went to a small cupboard and shoved it aside to reveal a sword in an elaborate sheath. “I’m going to get her,” she informed them.

“I’m coming too,” Jaime said, but Brienne scoffed at him.

“And what exactly do you plan to contribute? Will you snark at Thorne to death? Bring him to his knees with cruel nicknames? Pierce him with your sharp wit?”

“No, I plan to pierce him with a sword, you stupid woman,” Jaime retorted. Brienne scowled at him, but Podrick was thundering up the steps.

“W-wait,” he called back down to them. They stood in silence, hearts hammering, as Podrick ran back downstairs, nearly tripping all the way down, and practically threw his sword at Jaime. It was the standard-issue blade from the army, and he knew its weight well. He tested it in his left hand.

“Let’s go,” Brienne said grimly.

Jon snatched up the rope, his fingers slippery with rainwater, and numb with fear. He had to undo the knots to make it long enough. It seemed to take forever, and he kept hearing shouts of pain that sounded like that of men he cared about, but at long last, the rope ladder was undone.

He looped the end of the rope into a slipknot, like a noose, and almost laughed.

_Well, _he thought, _this is the cell for the ones that hang. I’ll have a noose after all._

He took off his sword from his belt and slipped the noose around the hilt, looping it double to secure it, and then tightened the knot. He tested its strength, and looked up at the hole.

This was his only option.

He was about to throw his only weapon away.

Jon held his sword, bit his lip, and vaulted the sword upward as hard as he could, its point upward towards the sky. The sword hit the ceiling with a horrible clang and he gasped out an oath and ducked as it fell back to the ground, clattering and flashing in the dim light.

_If only Sansa could see me now, _he thought with black humor, picking up the sword once more. _What a hero I am._
He threw the sword again, hurling it as hard as he could, and it soared upward and landed on top of the roof. Heart pounding, breath bated, he slowly eased the rope and walked to the side, angling the sword...but it slipped over the side at the last second and clattered to the cell floor once more.

In a fit of rage and frustration—Sansa, Sansa, Sansa, his blood seemed to whisper—he snatched up the sword and angrily hurled it upward as hard as he could, and turned back, waiting to hear the clatter—but it never came.

Jon turned back to see the sword straddling the hole as he’d intended all along.

Heart beating a tattoo on his throat, he tugged on the rope, then tugged a bit more, waiting for the sword to fall.

It didn’t fall.

He tested its weight. It wasn’t the best sword; it might bow under his weight.

It didn’t bow.

He took a steeling breath, gripped the rope, and began to climb.

Thorne's office was dark. She was shown inside as though an honored guest, and he wordlessly offered her the chair she had sat in before, the day the godswood had burned, when he had interrogated her about Jory. Limbs numb, Sansa took her seat, her back straight even as her heart thumped so pitifully; its final beats, she thought miserably.

On Thorne's desk lay the piece of parchment on which the Direwolves had all written their names, crumpled and smeared, but still entirely legible.

Thorne walked so slowly around his desk and took his seat across from her.

"You can do whatever you like," she began, "so long as you swear you won't hurt any of the others."

Thorne smiled at her.

"Why on earth would I ever make such a promise...Sansa Snow? Why would I ever let any revolutionaries go?" He leaned forward. "You are too young and too privileged, too beloved, to remember the last northern uprising, to remember its horrors, its cost to the people."


"And yet you lived, in safety and in comfort, for years. You did not see towns torched, you did not watch dozens of your friends maimed and killed, all in the name of independence."

The smile was gone now and his eyes looked black. "You may amuse yourself with this game of resistance, enjoying the danger and the adventure, but you have not seen what resistance truly costs, Sansa Snow."

His eyes were wide, spittle gathering at the corners of his mouth. "Good men—men just doing their jobs—died because a group of idiots somehow got it into their heads that they were special, that they deserved better, that they somehow knew better than generations of educated men before them on how to govern a country. The north is spattered with their blood, Sansa Snow—not with yours. And now you come to Mole's Town, so certain, just like your father and your brother before
you, that you know better. But you're too young and too stupid to see, to know the cost of resistance and the price of independence, and you have never had to pay it."

"You don't think watching your entire family beheaded is a fair price?" she choked. The weight of the dirk shifted on her thigh. It wasn’t too far from her scar. Jon had lied, she knew it with sudden certainty: this was her dirk, the dirk that had cut her to protect her. Her scar throbbed with the beat of her heart, as though it knew the dirk was near.

"It counts for something," he conceded, “but they died in glory and honor, their names celebrated, their deaths mourned. They were not slain in anonymity, carelessly forgotten and trampled. The last time the north sought independence, the streets of Mole's Town ran with blood, and the old Sept burned. No one remembers the names of the men who died that day...but I do. You will not do this again. I will not allow it."

"But we have harmed no one."

"Not yet you haven't. It begins innocently enough. By the time it comes to a question of harm, it's too late." He was breathing heavily, his eyes wet. "You have become friendly with Pypar, I believe. Do you know what happened to his father?"

"No, I do not," she admitted stiffly. She did not want to hear.

"We did not, either. Not for days after the uprising—the uprising that happened when your father was executed," he clarified. "The dogs found his body, what was left of it. Pypar had no mother, though, and was forced to live on the streets until he was old enough to be accepted in the Town Watch. And tonight he stands guard while the Brotherhood without Banners storms the town to save a man who is a known thief. Maybe they'll kill him on purpose, or maybe they’ll kill him by accident. He's only doing his job. Does Pypar deserve to die so Jory can live in infamy a bit longer? Does Pypar deserve to die so that you can have your silly adventure a bit longer?"

Her eyes were burning with tears. Guilt and shame roiled in her gut. "I rebuilt Mole's Town after your father and brother had their little storm-the-castle fantasy, Sansa Snow. And now you're married to a man who carries on that cruel, violent fantasy, and who pays the price for that fantasy? Not you, certainly. You're special blood, you're chosen blood. Your father was important and his father before him was important and that makes you important and places you beyond contempt. And now," he paused to pick up the parchment with the names, "you've dragged others with you."

She opened her mouth to fight his words, to argue. The Direwolves had been started before she had come along—she was, in fact, their newest member. But she could not say that. She could not damn them further.

Jaime had warned her she was living on borrowed time—why hadn't she listened?

Something else was bothering her, and she thought she might as well ask. She was going to die anyway.

"How did you know who I am?"

Thorne turned away, and unlocked a drawer of his desk with a slow reverence. Her heart was pounding—what could it possibly be? What could he have possibly found that would identify her? He reached into the desk, and held up a small, silver object, and wordlessly set it down on the desk between them.
The Targaryen clasp from her wedding cloak, slightly tarnished, lay before her. "H-how did you get—"

"The same way I got this, Sansa Snow," he said quietly, touching the parchment. "I built Mole's Town from its own ruins, and I've earned the loyalty of the people."

Someone had been pawing through her jewelry box; the very thought made her sick, as theft had always sickened her. When had it been taken? The last time she had opened the jewelry box had been to take out the snowdrop hairpin, the night of her last Direwolves' meeting. It had been taken sometime since that night—but who had taken it? "You will be hanged for your actions," he said, "so I may as well tell you. Months ago, a very concerned little boy came to me, afraid for his life, afraid for his family. You see, he's grown up hearing stories of the last uprising, and he was apprenticing for a man who was talking quite a bit about independence, uprisings, and liberty... Clever of him, to come to me for aid. A wise boy."

Sansa thought of the uncertain, unhappy boy in Sam's printshop.

"Olly," she said softly, sadly.

"Yes, Olly. And in return for his loyalty, I did not come to his family to collect the salt tax. And as his father makes barrels, I told him that if he could do just one more thing for me, I would forget to collect the new shop tax from them, too, and he performed admirably. I never thought he might find anything, truth be told. I had been suspecting for so long that you were not Alayne Stone, that you were the missing Sansa Snow... and he found the one thing that could prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt to me. It was a risk for me, it's true, to make a promise to Olly like that. If the Crown ever found out, I too would be hanged, or at the very least, relieved of my position and disgraced. But I am willing to risk it, to keep trouble out of Mole's Town."

"Yet you'll hang me and a dozen others, all for making a list," Sansa countered. She shifted, feeling the dirk move against her thigh again, only separated by a few layers of silk.

"I'll hang you and a dozen others for threatening to bring ruin to Mole's Town, yes," he hissed, leaning forward. "I will do anything to protect this town from another uprising. I don't care if you despise me. It makes no difference to me. I'll make an example of you, and show everyone that I will go to any lengths to stop another bloodbath in Mole’s Town."

All her life she had been a victim, had seen just what monarchy truly cost. She had known the costs of northern independence but she had not truly felt them, not in the way she did now. She thought of Pypar, so foolish and innocent and kind, simply doing his duty. Thorne was right; the Brotherhood might kill him tonight.

Yet what would Thorne do to the other Direwolves? To Edd, who had drawn that beautiful depiction of the Brotherhood without Banners, who played the fiddle so well? To Sam and Gilly, and their son? To the plump and pretty blonde who had danced with Jory, who had been the first to side with her when she had suggested collecting necessities for Mance Rayder? Hot anger coursed through her, her eyes burning.

"Would hanging all of us not be a bloodbath too?"

"You signed up for this bloodbath, Sansa Snow." He held up the list. "The people of Mole’s Town did not."

He was right, but he was wrong. She was right, but she was wrong, too. Why was she so weak? Robb would not have felt so conflicted, would not have lost his convictions so quickly. Why was
she not brave like her brother, strong like her father, courageous like her mother? Why was she so breakable, so helpless, so useless? Tears were trickling down her cheeks, tears of shame.

"Please don’t—"

The door banged open.

"She didn't burn the godswood down! It wasn’t her!"

---

Jon gasped as he wriggled out the top of the roof and into the pouring rain. No one was on the roof with him, and it was too dark to tell if any blood had been spilled. He got to his feet and undid the rope from his blade as he looked round. In the town square, Bronn and Sandor were dueling with Town Watchmen. A horse lay slain in the mud.

Jon scanned the rooftops, but saw no sign of Anguy or Gendry, and he began to feel sick with horror. What if… but he had to get to Sansa…had to warn her…but he had to find Anguy and Gendry…They had become his brothers, but Sansa was the woman he loved…

“What!” Anguy called, and relief flooded Jon so powerfully that his knees grew weak. I would have chosen her, he realized with horror, even though they are my brothers. He went to the edge of the roof, where Anguy was wrapping up Gendry’s leg, with Tormund propping Gendry up. The blood was black in the night, watered down by rain. Jon skidded off the roof and dropped down beside them.

“Jory wasn’t in there. We’ve been tricked.”

“Aye, I realized,” Anguy agreed, tightening the knot, “and Gendry did too.”

“Fuck,” Gendry hissed through clenched teeth, gripping his leg, which had been slashed up the thigh. “Seven fucking hells.”

“We need some whiskey,” Tormund chuckled.

“He’s above the town hall, in the room next to Thorne’s office. I started looking through the windows for him,” Anguy continued, finishing off the knot. Jon held his hand out to Gendry.

“Can you stand?” he asked him. Gendry rolled his eyes.

“I’m not a fucking princess, Snow,” he said, testing some weight on his leg. “Aye, I think I’ll be fine.”

“Then let’s go.”

They rounded the town jail. The skinny Watchman lay in the mud, unmoving, as Bronn and Sandor each dueled two Watchmen. The stocky one was dueling Bronn with alarming ferocity.

“Sorry lads, we’ve got somewhere to be,” Anguy said, and cleanly fired two arrows into the legs of the two Watchmen.

“Could you not have done that just a bit earlier?” Bronn asked him irritably, but followed them as they stormed the town hall all the same. “Where were your fucking arrows before?”

“In the other Watchmen,” Anguy shot back as they ran, Gendry slightly slowed by the gash in his leg. “Really, I have to do everything around here.”
“Too bad you’re not good at any of it,” Sandor countered furiously, pressing at a gash in his arm. Jon kept thinking of the skinny Watchmen, laying motionless in the mud and rain. He hadn’t looked dead, but…

In the main hall of the ball, they could hear the fiddles playing and the rhythmic thump of the dancers’ shoes on the old wood. Jon sprinted up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and lunged into the first room.

The room was dark, and nearly empty. In the very center was a spindly chair, with a dark form slumped in it, tied in place, unmoving… But this was no trick. This was, at last, Jory Cassel.

Jory Cassel was on the brink of death. He didn’t react when Jon came to crouch before him, nor when Jon pushed and pulled at him, looking to see the extent of the ropes. He reached for his dirk to cut them, then remembered he’d given it to Sansa.

“Here,” Gendry said, leaning forward and handing Jon his own dagger. Jon sawed at the ropes. Jory coughed in his face, his breath sickly sweet. He is dying… If he even made it alive to Castle Black, Jon would be shocked.

“N-ned Stark?” he rasped desperately, brown eyes roving over Jon’s face.

“No, it’s Jon Snow,” Jon replied sadly, as he sawed the last rope and Jory fell forward into his arms.

“Aye, so it is,” Jory said weakly. “How you’ve grown. Gods, time is too swift. I remember when you were just a lad…” and he began coughing so violently that his whole body shook.

“We’ve got to move,” Gendry said quietly.

Tormund and Sandor hoisted Jory up. Anguy drew another arrow, looking round into the hall, as Bronn and Gendry looked back at him.

“Sansa?” Gendry asked simply.

“Sansa,” Jon confirmed.

Sansa and Thorne both jolted, and Sansa twisted in her seat to find Gilly standing there, shoulders rising and falling, face flushed. Behind her, Sam was gasping, only just catching up to her, crying as he panted.

"Miss Stone didn't burn the godswood down," Gilly reiterated, catching her breath, her eyes bright with unshed tears, "so don't punish her for that. It's not her crime." Her voice broke on the last word. "I-it was me," she said thickly. Behind her, Sam broke down.

"Gilly," Sansa breathed in horror, meeting Gilly's eyes. Gilly's mouth trembled.

"I-I heard you talking about it, downstairs," she said. "I can't—" her voice broke and she clapped a hand over her mouth, reeling, shaking her head. "—I can't let someone be p-punished for what I did!"

"Oh, we weren't talking about the godswood, but it's just as well," Thorne remarked. "You were on my list in any case, Mrs. Flowers."

And he held up the list of names, and Sansa watched Gilly's eyes widen in horror and recognition,
the blood draining from her face. "I won't tolerate revolutionaries, Mrs. Flowers, and you and your husband have signed your own death warrants. ...And you've so kindly delivered yourselves to me." Thorne rose from his desk. "Thank you for the courtesy; it is unnecessary, but appreciated nonetheless."

He came round the desk, advancing on Gilly with predatory grace.

"NO!"

It happened all at once.

Sam barreled forward, leaping in front of Gilly desperately, pointlessly, absurdly; Thorne lunged for them; Sam smacked into Thorne and hit him square in the jaw; Thorne, in a pained rage, drew his pistol from the ornate holster at his belt, his strong hand latched around Sam's jaw, holding him in place, and Gilly was screaming; and it was all Sansa’s fault, none of them would have been put in this situation if not for her—

_Stick them with the sharp end_, Jon's soft voice whispered in her ear as the dirk sank into Thorne's neck.

The pistol went off, marking the wall, as an eruption of blood black as ink covered her hands and Thorne dropped to the ground, Gilly's mouth open in a silent scream as Sam reeled backward in shock. The dirk was still lodged in Thorne's neck and Sansa, unable to let go, was pulled down to the ground on top of Thorne as he twitched and jerked beneath her. The blood wouldn't stop coming; she belatedly realized that she was sobbing: choking, ugly sobs that came from the depths of her soul as she began to realize what she had done.

This was a thing that could never be undone.

She had done this, and she could never take it back.

"Sansa."

Jon was standing in the doorway, drenched from rain, his lovely eyes taking in the scene before him, coming to rest on the dirk in Sansa's shaking, white fingers.

"H-he was going to k-kill—" she couldn't finish the sentence. "Thorne had a list, he had a list, he was going to _kill_ Sam, and everyone, and he knew who I was," she stammered, knowing she was making no sense but unable to fix it. Jon slipped past her to the desk, where the list of the Direwolves and the Targaryen clasp lay, and picked up the clasp, and turned back to her, slowly, in shock. "O-olly betrayed us," Sansa gasped, turning back to Gilly, who was still staring mutely at the dirk in Thorne's neck. "He took the list, he's been working with Thorne for weeks, maybe _months_. He told him everything."

"Wh-what are we going to do?" Sam whispered in horror, shrinking back from Thorne.

"I-I didn't—" she couldn't stop shaking. "I didn't mean—"

"You saved our lives," Gilly interrupted, shaking her head. "He was going to hang us all, remember?"

"But—" she stared at Thorne, who lay limp and white on the floor beneath her. "I didn't—I never meant—oh, _gods_." She couldn't breathe; she was rising, rising, disappearing from her body.

Thorne was dead—no, that wasn't right.
Thorne had been murdered.

*She* had murdered Thorne.

*She* had taken a *life.* "I should never—"

Strong hands gripped her upper arms as she shook, steadying her. "I only—I thought—" Why wouldn't the words come? Why could she not explain to them what she had meant?

"He was going to kill me," Sam said softly.

Gilly was already crossing the room, her face a frozen mask. She went to the desk, and took flint and lit a candle, and, holding the candle and the list of names, went to the hearth. They watched in silence as the flames curled around the list.

"We'll say that Thorne was going to rape you, Sam and I realized and tried to stop him, and you killed him to stop him," Gilly said, not looking away from the flames.

"But..."

"It's one life versus over a dozen, isn't it?" But Gilly's voice was flat, and Sansa realized she was in pain, too.

For a long moment, no one spoke. And then, at last...

"Sansa, I can't stay," Jon said softly. He released her arms. "I...I have to go."

She stared at Thorne's corpse, her hands slick with blood. It was down her dress, too, drenching the front like rain, dripping down between her breasts.

"What have I done?" she whispered. She felt Jon pulling her up to stand, pulling her away from Thorne. Sam was crying silently.

"I'm so sorry," he choked. "It was my fault. I don't know why I lunged like that; he threatened my Gilly and I just—"

"No, it was my fault. I wielded the dirk," Sansa said, shaking her head.

"Aye, or it was my fault, for I gave you the dirk. We all had a part to play. But I have to go now. I have to go to Castle Black, and..."

Jon let go of her, and Sansa stumbled away from him, turning to face him. His shoulders rose and fell as he struggled for breath, staring at her with such love and sadness. *You are so loved, Sansa.* "...If you want..." he began, "...you could come with me...to go to Jory."

His fists clenched and he looked away. "Or someone else could take you; you wouldn't have to go with me. Or...you can stay here. But I can't stay here. So...do you want to go?"

No one spoke; the very room seemed to be holding its breath.

"I don't think any of us can stay here," said Sam. Jon was still looking at her, looking at her the way he'd looked at her earlier, in the rain. *You are so loved, Sansa.*

"I want to go with you," she said. "But I h-haven't said goodbye to Brienne, I haven't—"

"—We'll tell her," Gilly said hastily. "We have to go get little Sam, anyway. You've got to go
now, though.”

There were shouts downstairs and the thundering of dozens of guests.

"If we’re going to go, it’s got to be now,” Jon said. He turned to Gilly and Sam. “The Brotherhood will be at Castle Black; you can join us there. After that, we’ll be onto Eastwatch with Mance Rayder.”

Jon turned back to Sansa, and held out his hand. She placed her shaking hand in his, felt his grip tighten, and their eyes met briefly—and then they ran.

Jaime ran with Brienne into the sodden night, their boots splashing in the mud, his legs and lungs burning from lack of use. He had not left the confines of the house and bakery even once, and it was so strange and alien to be out until the world once more, and something was billowing within him. Every part of him was waking up, coming back to life in a rush.

They sprinted toward the town square, and it was a grim sight.

A horse lay slain in the mud, and two Watchmen were writhing in pain in the mud, arrows sprouting from their legs. One of them was crawling towards the jail door, where another Watchman lay, face smeared with black blood, face contorted in pain as he gasped. The rain had left enormous, messy puddles, but it was letting up now, a bit, and the moon was peering out timidly, casting everything in dulled silver light.

"She's in the office," Podrick gasped, only just catching up to them, clutching a stitch in his side. They ran to the town hall, but the doors were swinging open, and the hall itself was empty.

“Upstairs,” Podrick insisted, and they ran up the steps, Brienne first, her long legs taking them two at a time.

The hall was dark, the air sharp with a coppery tang. Jaime knew that scent too well, and he ran harder, catching up with Brienne and nearly colliding with her in the doorway at the end of the hall.

Thorne lay in a pool of black blood on the floor, eyes open and unseeing, garbed in the scarlet of the royal army. A dirk, rough-handled and northern in its barbaric shape, was sticking from his neck.

“Oh, no,” Podrick muttered, sinking back against the wall.

Jaime’s blood was pounding in his ears. Something was glinting on the desk, in the moonlight that now streamed into the office. He went to the desk, his fingers brushing the silver clasp. A three-headed dragon reared; the symbol that had once branded every surface of King’s Landing, a symbol that had once branded his scarlet uniform where the Baratheon golden antlers now were emblazoned.

“Look,” he said at last, and he turned, holding the clasp in his palm for Brienne to see. “He must have found out who she really is.”

They ran, but there was no one in the hall, and no one on the stairs. The doors of the hall hung open, swinging in the rainy wind, the floor before it slick with rain. There had been a mad rush to leave the town hall, and deep gouges had been made in the mud of the town square. Black shapes, fallen among the town square, made ghostly, deadly silhouettes. *This is a thing I have done. This can never be undone,* she thought as she followed Jon at a sprint. They went toward the northern
gate, but no one stopped them. She hadn’t stopped crying, and she had almost forgotten she was
still crying as she thought of Thorne jerking and wilting beneath her; of Brienne smiling at her; of
the look on Jaime’s face when she’d handed him his new waistcoat. She was losing everything all
over again…and yet…

They reached the northern gate, where a brown horse had been saddled and tied, waiting in the
shelter of a magnolia tree, its heavy buds threatening to burst into bloom. Jon turned to her.

“I’ll help you up,” he told her needlessly, and she went to the horse and felt his strong hands on her
waist as he held her up. She awkwardly shifted onto the horse, and felt him swing up behind her
with ease. The rain had washed away the blood already, and she was soaked and only now
realizing she was freezing, shaking. She felt Jon sling one arm around her waist, holding her
tightly, and he took the reins in the other, and then they set off into a gallop, away from Mole’s
Town.

The rain had let up, and the moon set the mist aglow around them so that they were riding through
shimmering silver, like they had entered the realm of ghosts. The pure energy that had been
coursing through her veins was slowing, as the rushing in her ears subsided, and the horse, which
had been running for so long, began to slow to a trot, its hoofbeats softened by the grass beneath
them. Jon’s chest was hard against her back, one arm pressed against her middle, his other hand
holding the reins. She could smell his skin, could feel his legs brushing the backs of hers, could
hear him coax the horse in a low voice, feel his chin brush the back of her head every now and
then.

Once again she was leaving everything behind, shedding her skin, only this time she did not know
who the emerging woman was. So many layers had been peeled from her so many times, revealing
another woman underneath, but she did not feel like a whole person right now; she felt like a
jumble of hopes and fears, grief and disappointment, pain and guilt, and a shameful, terrible,
soaring happiness that billowed out like a sail. She had thrown a barrel of gunpowder onto her life
and then thrown the flame in, too, and now every remnant was fluttering to the ground. Nothing
could be repaired or salvaged.

The tears came again, horrific choking sobs that racked her whole body, and Jon’s hold on her only
tightened.

“I know,” he said softly. “I know.”

He was still holding her so tightly, and in spite of her pain there was a soaring, senseless joy at his
touch. How was it possible to feel such grief and such powerful happiness at once? “Sansa,” he
began gently, “Jory’s not well. I won’t hide the truth from you. I don’t know what we’ll find when
we get to Castle Black.”

She had known it might be the case, she had been warned, but it didn’t lessen the pain any. She
clutched at Jon’s arm around her waist for stability, for a lifeline, as she tried to fight down another
sob. She couldn’t keep crying. She had to be strong, had to be brave, but she wasn’t strong and she
wasn’t brave.

They rode slowly for a while, as Jon held her so tightly that she thought they might have simply
become one being.

“He said Robb married. But I’ll never know who, or why,” she said at last. “It’s selfish of me
but…”

“Married?” Jon blurted in shock. “When?”
“Right before he was executed, I think. Jory confirmed it but...he couldn’t tell me anything else at the time. He was in the jail cell, and Thorne had walked in on us.”

“And overheard you asking,” Jon guessed softly.

“Yes...some of it, at least. Enough to make him send one of his helpers to root through my jewelry box,” she replied, shuddering.

“You kept the clasp.”

“Of course I did,” she scoffed, the tears welling up again. “It was from my wedding cloak. All my life I wanted to marry for love, and I had been waiting for ten years to be married.” She laughed, a pained, miserable laugh, as she thought of his words from earlier. “The irony,” she remarked dismally.

“I don’t want to annul the marriage,” Jon said suddenly. His voice was still so soft. “I did marry you for love. And if you want to annul the marriage, if that would make you happy, so that you can marry for love, I’ll do it, of course, and I’d do it for love. But I don’t—”

He didn’t finish. Sansa couldn’t seem to draw a complete breath, and she clutched at his arm.

“You gave me away,” she finally whispered. “If you love me then why did you give me away?”

“Because I don’t deserve you, and I can’t give you the life you should have.”

She wrenched out another laugh.

“Even now? After I’ve killed a man, after I’ve ruined lives? You still think you don’t deserve me?”

“I know I don’t.”

She placed her hand over his, lacing their fingers tightly, so tightly that it almost hurt. “You don’t have to decide now,” he said into her hair. “And—and if you want to be part of the Brotherhood, if you want to join and help Mance rally for northern independence, you can do it; you won’t have to stay married to me to do it.”

“I kept your clasp,” she could only say, and he abruptly stopped the horse, dropped the reins from his other hand, and wrapped his other arm around her, holding her tighter than she had ever been held in her life. She tilted her head slightly, just in surprise, and felt him press the softest kiss to her temple. *You are so loved.*

They had been drinking all night, and Dickon felt heavy and stupid, like he might drift off at any moment. Around him, redcoats enjoyed wine and whores in varying stages. After his confrontation with Ramsay he had been avoiding the man, and the only way to properly do it was to keep Theon Greyjoy beside him at all times. Theon, usually so lively when women and wine were around him, had been quiet and brooding all evening. It suited Dickon just fine; he had not been in the mood to pretend to be lively. He’d noticed Theon looking down at something in his hand all evening, surreptitiously, furtively. It had been a small, grubby scrap of parchment. The Ironborn man kept looking down at it, then looking at General Clegane, studying him, as though he were a complex painting whose meaning eluded him.

“What is that?” Dickon finally asked, leaning closer to Theon. Theon glanced at him, a sly look in his eyes.
"I don't know …yet," he admitted. "But ravens from Lord Baelish, my sister tells me, are always worth a closer look."

"Baelish?" Dickon thickly, as though trying to see the bottom of a bowl filled with soup, recalled the little man with the jewels and pointed beard. He was the man who had intended to marry Sansa, instead of him...

"Aye," Theon hedged. "I went back the night before we took the Blue Rose Inn and got it from his tent. I've been asking around; no one knows who it's referring to. But if you mean to control the north for King Joffrey, then we ought to know who it is."

"Who? Who what is?" Theon so enjoyed being clever. Dickon considered punching him, but he was too drunk and tired. Theon gave him that sly smile again, and nodded to his hands beneath the table. Dickon watched him unfurl the grubby little scrap of parchment.

The whore has an heir.

Could it be Sansa Stark? It was the first name to come to mind. Dickon felt Theon staring at him.

"It could be Sansa Stark," he suggested. Theon nodded but looked doubtful.

"Aye, it could be, and it would certainly behoove us to get rid of that sprog," Theon conceded slowly. "But I don't think it's Sansa Stark."

"I saw them mid-bedding," Dickon told him. It was the first time he had ever admitted it, had ever brought it up. "At the red wedding."

"Aye, and I saw the bedsheets," Theon agreed, "and it didn't look like the bedsheets of a wedding night to me," he muttered, more to himself than to Dickon. Dickon looked up in surprise.

"But you weren't there," he realized. "You were too drunk. You never came into the room, you never fought Snow—"

"—You're right, I was joking," Theon said hastily. "I knew Snow as a lad, and I never thought he'd have it in him to take a girl, is all. It was a joke. Just a joke. Of course I never saw the bedsheets."

Dickon watched Theon make a show of examining the scroll again, flattening it on the table. "I've been wondering, waiting, trying to see if any of the redcoats let anything slip...but none of them know a thing," he was pondering, but Dickon was not listening.

He was thinking of how odd it had been, that the Targaryen wolf's breeches had still been laced...and that dirk had come from nowhere, too...yet there had been blood on the bedding, Sansa Stark's blood...

"It was a trick," he blurted suddenly. Theon looked at him sharply. Dickon's face and hands felt very cold. "He had a dirk in his hand, and he wasn't undressed when we went in. At the red wedding," he clarified at Theon's look. "The dragonwolf was still clothed, and was hard, too, but there was already blood on the sheets...and he had a blade in his hand when we had come in. He must have cut her, to fake the consummation."

He saw Theon's throat muscles flex as the Ironborn man swallowed, still staring at Dickon. "He never bedded her."

"Then she's not the whore, if she's not carrying an important child," Theon said finally, nodding to the scroll. "The question is, who is, and why do General Clegane and Lord Baelish care?"
"Could it be the beggar princess?" Dickon guessed. Theon's eyes were glimmering.

"Could be, but the Targaryens aren't the only ones with a shot at the Iron Throne...and, last I heard, the beggar princess is barren."

"Then who else?" He paused. "The Baratheon bastard? The one in the Brotherhood without Banners? Could he have knocked up a girl?"

Theon's smile was so cool, so cunning, so sly. He turned away from Dickon.

"Aye, perhaps a Baratheon."

The pre-dawn light was flat and lavender over the pines that were clumped at the edge of the forest behind the Mormont clan settlement. The clanspeople had all gathered near the mouth of the cave, all of them in their tartan, as well as the ceremonial paint slathered on their cheekbones and foreheads. For her part Daenerys had not donned the tartan, because she knew that it would be an insult to the clan. Instead she was garbed in simple riding leathers, her hair done back in braids that crawled over her head and then flowed free at the nape of her neck.

A few clansman stood by on the hilltop overlooking the cave, their faces unreadable in the flat light of dusk. They stood over her, baring their drums, beating out the traditional rhythm of Beltane, and of the rhythm of the bear.

The woods around her were thick and dark and unknowable, ancient trees that had seen thousands of Beltanes and would see thousands more.

But this wasn't really Beltane, and it was that fact, more than anything else, that made bile rise in her throat. It didn't feel right; she could not feel the approval of the gods looking down at her, though she knew that she was meant to do this, that this bear was one more step closer to the throne, closer to home. She was more aware than ever of the weight in her belly and the scalding stares of dislike from the Mormonts. The paint on her cheeks of faded blue and milky, jade green made her skin itch and every time she moved her face she felt it flaking off, dusting her shoulders, chest, and arms with sea-green flecks.

She had wanted to wear something Targaryen, but she had nothing Targaryen left but her own blood.

And as Tyrion had drunkenly pointed out, she would soon be wearing plenty of that.

"What could be more Targaryen then to be covered in your own blood after having done something stupid to prove yourself and your greatness?" he'd mused earlier. There had been a wild edge to his voice, as his panic became increasingly clear. Daenerys had pretended to ignore it, pretended to scoff at his protests and fears.

And now the moment had arrived.

She could see Dacey and Lyanna from the shadows of the trees; Dacey’s face was impassive and unimpressed, Lyanna's contorted in something like disgusted concern and maybe a little pity. The drums were pounding louder. Her baby kicked in her belly, she thought. She was not sure if it was her baby or her fears.

The mouth of the cave was dark, a darkness with such depth that the cave could have reached to the center of the earth. She squinted into that darkness to decipher shapes; thought she saw movement and mutations, but it was only her eyes playing tricks on her...maybe.
The horn sounded from the clansman, Jeorgen, atop the caves. That mournful cry was like a wolf's howl, reminding her of wolves, reminding her of Jon, and Daenerys braced herself. The cry echoed throughout the pines as shapes shifted in the mouth of the cave. Was it the drums or her blood pounding throughout the earth? The chanting began, as Maege came to her, solemnly, holding a copper cup of something bitter and thick, and Daenerys drank it in one long, drawn gulp, and then handed it back to the stony-faced woman.

The liquid coated her insides, and she felt sick, but she would not vomit. Maege stepped back, fading into the darkness of the pines, and the drums beat louder, as the Mormonts chanted in that ancient tongue, older than Valyria, the sound rising around her. On a hot night in May this might feel like heady magic, like the coming of human nature, the propelling of their race, a riotous and strange descent into the world of the faeries, but it was a cold dawn at March's end. It was not Beltane, but it would have to do.

She knew the very moment that the ritual really began. The drums seemed far off, and she no longer felt the cold seeping through the cracks in her riding leathers. She felt as solid as stone, and as alone as stone as well. The bear would come; she had never felt so certain of something, nor so unafraid. This was her bear. She had never felt the gods unless in dreams, but in this moment, she was surrounded by the gods, their hands linked as they circled her, like a chain of paper dolls, watching her.

The darkness shifted, and this time she knew it was her bear. There was a stamp in the dirt, and then that great black shape emerged from its darkness, as though the darkness itself had become solid, was being pulled from the cave like ink. Daenerys stood there, watching, waiting, as the enormous bear crawled forth.

It was pure black, save for dusty brown across the bridge of its snout, with inky black eyes that fixed on her now. A shudder rent through Daenerys and she nearly dropped to her knees. This was no bear, and there were no gods linking hands around her. She was seeing the face of a goddess—the goddess—at this very moment. Those eyes were older than men, older than stone, older than time, and would long outlive her or the pine trees around her. She had never felt so small.

No one had advised her on how to win this battle; there was no one to ask. Jorah had only seen a few Beltane challenges in his time, all of them women twice Daenerys' height and strength and speed. Tyrion had suggested tricking the bear, but Daenerys did not know how to trick anyone. Jon would have known, she thought, staring at the bear. He was a liar, full of tricks and secrets. That complicated man, as made of twists and turns as the darkness from which the bear had come, would have outsmarted this bear, but she had no tricks. He was no true dragon, she thought, staring at her bear. He had never welcomed her to his bed, he had been so nearly overtaken by sickness, and he had tricked her, again and again. She was the last true dragon...save for the baby inside of her.

She touched her belly as she regarded the bear in silence. The bear was a mother, too; surely they had this spiritual connection, if nothing else.

The war drums were slow, rolling, a wall of noise separating her from the rest of the world. Daenerys shifted, holding her chin high, never breaking the bear's gaze.

And then it began.

The bear's roar was splintered and gnarled; Daenerys cried out a yell, too, a sound that came from so deep within her that she thought it was her baby, not her, crying. Not my baby, she thought, as the bear lunged in a black blur, my son. Gida.
She too lunged, and rolled beneath the bear clumsily, scraping the palms of her hands on the rocky soil. The bear was behind her, and she was dizzy, and she noticed a tendril of hair tickling her neck but she did not stop to push it away as she scrambled to her feet. Her son was fire in her belly as she turned round to face the bear, and took a running leap.

Fingers clawed at stringy, matted, dense fur; jaws flashed and she clung to the bear's shoulder while throwing back her head to avoid the jaws. The claws razed at her back, but she was covered in thick leather, and the claws only scratched it. The drums were beating faster and she was so warm that sweat was dripping down her back as she was thrown backward, landing on her back so hard that the breath and sight was knocked from her. She might have lay there, coughing and gasping, but something—Gida, her strength, her dragon—made her rise again to face this goddess once more.

The chanting was louder, a rush like a powerful waterfall, as Daenerys regained her bearings. She knew, in a flash of insight, what she must do.

She took another run.

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

She jumped, latching around the bear's neck, and they swung around together.

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

She was thrown behind the bear and she nearly lost her footing, but swayed dangerously to keep upright, the bear still twisted away from her.

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

She lunged again, grabbing hold of the bear's arm.

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

Blade of bone cut into her face, ripping into her jaw, but she barely felt it.

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

The bear swung her, and she was thrown against rock, her head smacking into it with a crack.

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

The world was green and the goddess was approaching her.

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

Daenerys struggled to sit up, feeling hot wetness trickle down the back of her head, seeping through her silver braids, gasping as the bear goddess loomed, and then shimmered and disappeared, revealing the white stag, in the shape of a man, silhouetted by the dawn, eyes glowing bright, burning blue. A crow landed on his shoulder, and a dragonfly, glittering and iridescent, landed on the highest point of the antlers. A magnificent lion lay slain at the white stag's chalky feet, that gleaming sword buried in its chest. And a huntsman was coming for them, the arrowpoint gleaming like a star, gleaming like the white stag's blazing blue eyes...

\textit{BA-BA-BA-DUM.}

"NO!" she screamed, and she struggled to her feet, gasping, heaving. The air was filled with the
sound of dogs barking, a horrible clamor, as a storm brewed overhead.

The dogs had barked all night, the night she had been born.

This was her rebirth.

She lunged for the sword, but everything shimmered once more, and her outstretched claws dug into the bear goddess once more.

*BA-BA-BA-DUM.*

The sound of barking mad dogs drowned out the war drums, drowned out the chants, drowned out everything, save for her gasps and chokes and the bear's growls and snarls. Fingers dug into flesh, and her jaw was on fire, and she screamed through her teeth as she grabbed the bear's paw in both hands, and pushed back with all of her might.

The bear screamed and slashed, claws catching her up the side of her head, and those great, slavering jaws came for her, so she twisted back, still clutching the claw with everything she had. Her belly was pure fire. Gida's strength was her strength. He was a true dragon, she knew it, she knew he was her true dragon son, and she would destroy this ancient goddess for her son. There was wetness between her legs, sopping the inside of her leathers, running down her legs.

There was a horrific crack; the bear reared and stumbled. Daenerys clutched the paw, and when the moment was right, she ripped the bear's claws from its paw. Black blood was everywhere; she tasted it in her teeth. Gasping, choking, covered in black blood, she held the bear's claws in her fingers, and then she threw herself at the bear.

Barking, chanting, thumping all came together in a rush. The air was green and thick. The bear's own claws sank into its neck, and its shriek was of rocks breaking.

The world itself was smashed in half.

As the tepid sun rose, casting Bear Island in faint gold light, the bear stumbled back, blood black as ink spattering the ground, spattering Daenerys as she watched the animal die.

It crumpled to the earth louder than any drum, the dust rising. No one moved; no one spoke. The dogs and the drums were all silent as the pines held their breath.

The dust settled at last, as gold peered between the pines and edged the bear goddess in gold. The ground was turned black beneath her. Her claws rose up from her neck, white bone blackened with blood. There were no gods to link hands; no white stags or crows or dragonflies or slain lions.

Daenerys was the only god that remained here. She had defeated the bear. She had won.
Part III: Chapter One

Chapter Notes

This might be the fluffiest chapter I have ever written. Enjoy it while it lasts...

I'm in London for a business trip and keep feeling the urge to work on another Jonsa fic I started months ago that takes place in present-day London (angsty detective Jon, yay) BUT I promise I will focus on this fic until it's done. *snuggles up in bed of lies*

As always, just want to say thank you to everyone for the wonderful, wonderful comments. And thanks for sticking with this LONG AF story!

Joff's apartments reeked of powder, wine, whore's perfume, and sex. The morning light streaming in on the riotous tableau was nauseating, and Tommen's first thought was for the poor servants who would have to clean everything up.

Joff was draped on his bed, the red silk curtains partially torn from the canopy in a fit of drunken revelry, with Margaery and three courtesans in varying stages of undress slung over him like discarded dresses. A goat was at his writing desk, slowly chewing through blank parchment. Of course, Joffrey was never inclined to actually use the writing desk, so the goat had plenty of paper to enjoy.

A naked man lay on the mint-green Myrish silk chaise longue at the foot of the canopy bed, with a whore draped on him, her face half-nuzzled against his manhood, her naked arm curved around a bottle of the finest Arbor gold—though the bottle was empty, of course. The harp that the Tyrells had given for Margaery to play for her husband had been destroyed; its painted blue and gold carved frame smashed, strings in disarray, smeared in the half-demolished towering cake, from which a naked whore, painted to look like a golden sprite, had sprung earlier. Said golden whore was still smeared with cake—it was in her hair, her florid golden wig askew—and was lying atop a dresser, arse pressed against the gilded mirror behind her.

He opened and closed his mouth a few times. He had never liked waking Joff up under the best of circumstances, and after a night of debauchery, Joff was hardly likely to be any more amenable to being awoken. Mother had sent Tommen to wake up Joff…because Mother doesn’t want to do it, he thought, then felt guilty for it. But the Lord of Light forgave, through the cleansing power of fire. He would worship before his flame tonight.

Tommen stared at his older brother. My brother, the King of Westeros. Joff had got fatter in the months that Uncle Jaime had been gone. Uncle Jaime's constant snarking about his physical prowess had forced Joff to at least occasionally take up his sword and do a bit of fencing. But now, Joff was fatter than Tommen had been when he'd been a boy, though the weight was centered at his gut, unlike their father, King Robert, who had become big all around. But then, he’d always been a bigger man. None of them had inherited anything of their father: his black hair, broad shoulders…Tommen clenched and unclenched his fists.

Margaery lifted her head to send a sleepy smile his way over her bare shoulder. Though she was older than Joff, she had looked younger for so many years—he had so often heard Mother cattily remarking that Margaery’s enduring beauty was Tyrell witchcraft involving ritualistic sacrifices of
virgins—but he noticed in the harsh morning light that time seemed to be catching up to Margaery at last. Her skin looked roughened; there were fine lines around her mouth, and her eyes were puffy and bloodshot with too many nights of revelry. And no heir yet, he could not help but echo what everyone seemed to be remarking from behind fluttering, painted fans. No heir and yet she is old enough that she could be Mother’s sister.

“There’s a message for Joff,” he said softly. “From the north.”

Margaery winked at him and rolled over, no thought to modesty as her naked breasts were revealed by the movement, and Tommen looked away sharply.


And then with a groan she rolled over once more, onto one of the whores, and fell back to sleep.

He preferred Dragonstone. He liked the cold salty air, the harsh marble, the barren beaches...one felt closer to the meaning of things at Dragonstone, closer to god. It was stripped bare, unfrivolous. He’d hated it when he first landed there. The ghosts of his uncles Stannis and Renly seemed to chase him through the halls, like pale, shimmering stags, and he couldn’t enter the war room without picturing Stannis there, swinging stiffly from his noose before the great table that depicted all of Westeros. But with time he had come to love it. It felt like breathing after being in King’s Landing. He could hardly breathe for all the foul, competing odors of this room.

Tommen could take it no longer and turned on his heel and left.

The morning air was humid and too warm already. Tommen walked along the breezeway swiftly, to where Myrcella and her husband were staying. Everyone had come to King’s Landing for Joffrey’s name day celebration, but, like Tommen, Myrcella and Tristane had retired early, declining another flute of champagne, begging off another dance. The Dornish were supposedly infamous for their revelry, yet Tristane was even less inclined to enjoy large parties than Myrcella was.

Across the courtyard, between two enormous palms, Tommen knocked frantically on the door. Myrcella would be awake; Myrcella would handle Joff’s wrath.

As expected, Myrcella was awake and dressed, and answered the door with a look of curiosity and an aroma of coffee—to Tommen it was the scent of Dorne.

“Mother wants me to wake Joff up,” Tommen told her before he’d even got through the door.

The apartments that Myrcella and Tristane were staying in were less lavish than Joffrey’s, of course, but still lovely. Mother, so keen to give Myrcella reasons to visit, had had everything decorated in the Dornish style. The warm, deep colors were at odds with the pastels and silvers and golds of Joff’s apartments, and Tommen felt as though he’d stepped through a magical portal directly into Dorne.

Tristane was at a table before the unlit hearth, sipping coffee and robed in a splendid peach silk dressing gown, his dark curly hair still mussed from sleep.

“Why?” Myrcella laughed, leading Tommen in. “Oh, and would you like some coffee?”

“No, thank you.” He still felt so anxious he was sick. He had not even been able to eat his breakfast. He stood awkwardly before the table—he had never gotten very comfortable around Tristane, or any Dornishman, really; they were all so pleasant and familiar in a way that was really nice but still intimidating, somehow. Why can't I just enjoy it? he wondered, as he always did. I so
long for a kind face but then I run from the first one I see.

“Suit yourself,” she said lightly, taking a seat across from Tristane.

“Good morning, Tommen,” Tristane greeted with a salute of his painted cup.

“Good morning,” Tommen said rather snappishly, then felt badly for it. He looked to Myrcella. “It’s urgent. A message. From the north.”

Myrcella and Tristane glanced between each other, and Myrcella snorted.

“Why on earth would she bother Joff about it?” Myrcella asked. “She knows he’ll be a mess for days from his name day party, and she knows he doesn’t care about the north…”

“…and he makes no decisions anyway,” Tristane finished, in that light, almost-joking Dornish way. He turned his golden-brown eyes on Tommen. They were glimmering with amusement. “Why prod a cranky lion for no reason?”

“Stag,” Tommen corrected reflexively; he’d done it all his life. “Cranky stag. Apparently, it’s bad. A-and involves the T-targaryens,” he stammered, face growing hot. “That’s all I know.”

“Targaryens? Has he been sent a ghost story?” Tristane snorted. But Myrcella was studying Tommen thoughtfully.

“Daenerys Targaryen hasn’t got anything left,” Myrcella reasoned aloud. “Unless it’s about Uncle Jaime? They think she took him.”

She only called him ‘uncle’ for Tommen’s benefit. Myrcella had developed a ridiculous, disgusting theory many years ago that she had shared with Tommen, and she still clung to that theory, but out of basic respect for Tommen’s wishes, as well as basic decency, she did not continue to force that foul opinion on him. Oh, just thinking of it made him sick…

“I really don’t know, and I don’t want to know, and I don’t want to wake Joff either, so could you just please—“

“—Ugh, fine.” Myrcella got to her feet and leaned over to plant a kiss on Tristane’s hair. “Really, Tommen, it’s like you’re still five.”

“I really would just rather not deal with it, alright?” Tommen replied tightly, watching his sister saunter through the door and into the balmy courtyard. He followed her anxiously. “You know, there’s a reason I stay in Dragonst—“

“—and I in Dorne,” Myrcella tossed over her shoulder, her waist-length blonde hair catching the light. “I like him no better than you do; in fact, I’ll bet you I like him less. You still think of him as your brother, that’s your problem,” she informed him, as they reached the door to Joff’s apartments. They paused.

“And what do you think of him as?” Tommen countered desperately. Myrcella fixed her catlike green eyes, just like his, just like Mother’s, just like Uncle Jaime’s, on him now.

“A monster,” she said, unwavering, before pushing through the painted, gilded door. “Joffrey, time to be king,” she called loudly. Tommen stayed outside the door, picking at the skin around his nails. Years ago, before he’d been given Dragonstone, he’d so often picked his hands bloody that he’d been made to wear gloves.
He didn’t stay to hear the aftermath. Tommen turned, once he heard the shouting of Joffrey and the sound of ceramic and glass shattering—amid the goat’s bleating and the whores’ whinging—and marched back through the breezeway. Tristane was in the doorway of their apartments, watching for Myrcella’s return, his feet bare and peach silk dressing gown fluttering, and Tommen simply nodded shortly to him before leaving the Red Keep entirely.

From the balcony, he could see Baelor’s Sept. He had stopped attending the Sept years ago—shortly after retiring to Dragonstone—and he had only memories of the stuffy incense and the droning of the Septons, but it was what took place outside of the Sept that gave him comfort now, in the humid dawn.

The servants of R’hllor—the infidels called them red women, or witches—were filing up the great steps, their bloodred cloaks and skirts billowing with the movement like so many beating hearts. They’d only come back down again; then go up, and down, endlessly, all day, chanting prayers. Just seeing them soothed him, and Tommen felt his worries seep away like bloodletting as he watched them from the balcony, from afar. Soon he’d be back in Dragonstone, with nothing to bother him, surrounded by saltwater and flames. He closed his eyes, offered his fears to R’hllor, and promised a cleansing fire later for the sin he had witnessed, for the sin that he had thought of, for the sin that Myrcella so fervently insisted had been committed by Mother and Uncle Jaime, for his own sins of fear and ill will towards his brother.

He thought of the woman who had saved him, who had shown him R’hllor’s light. Without her I would be a sinner just like Joffrey, just like Mother, just like Uncle Jaime, and even Myrcella and Tristane.

He did wish he could let her out of the dungeon—really, he felt terrible about it; sometimes he couldn’t sleep over it—but he didn’t like to get involved in politics.

Everything had been a blur after the bear had dropped. Out of nowhere, rearing, screaming pain had torn her face apart; Daenerys had, briefly, thought her face had caught fire. A few of the clanswomen had helped her back to the great house, but no one spoke. It did not matter, because her face was consumed by fiery pain. She had some notion of being led to the room she had been given, and laid down on the bed by rough hands, and something thick and foul-smelling and cold was being smoothed over her face; the cold was soothing at first, then even more painful than the fire. And she couldn't stop shaking and gasping, as though being lit up by a lightning strike.

The crow, the dragonfly, the stag, the slain lion, and the hunter...She had not reached the burning sword in time, or had she? In killing the bear had she saved the sword from the white stag? She tossed and shook, writhing in pain, crying, thinking of those blazing blue eyes, and thinking of the wetness she had felt between her legs.

Gida, Gida, Gida...

Soon, the pain began to settle. When Daenerys sat up, Tyrion, Jorah, and Missandei were there, seated around her bed, their faces grim and grey.

Everything hurt; even wincing in pain lit the fire on her face all over again. Daenerys touched her cheek and her fingertips came away coated in a pale, half-dried paste that smelled like mud and herbs. She looked to Tyrion first.

"I did it."

"I cannot believe it," he said, "but they are skinning your bear as we speak, so you must have done it. A dead bear did not simply drop out of the sky." He took a long swig of whiskey from a nearly-empty decanter. His mismatched eyes flicked to her belly. Even drunk Tyrion did not miss a thing.
"I need to relieve myself," she said, and waited for everyone to awkwardly file out. Missandei hovered, but Daenerys dismissed her, though it pained her. She had never kept anything from Missandei before; their bond had been severed. She did not know when it had happened.

When everyone was gone, Daenerys shifted off the bed and got to her aching feet. In the mirror across the room, she saw herself. Her left jaw and right cheek were covered with paste; it was lumpy over the gashes in her face. She looked shadowed, haunted, but strong. She touched her belly, and undid her riding leathers, heart pounding. She knew how it felt to lose a child, she had done this before, she could fucking get through this no matter what—

No blood stained her thighs.

Had she imagined it?

She touched between her legs, feeling for blood, and indeed there was dampness, but when she withdrew her fingers, no blood coated them. A rush of giddiness, of relief and joy—and shock, too—flooded her, and she fell to her knees, and stuffed her hand into her mouth to stifle sobs of relief. She had felt such a rush of power as she had fought the bear, but she had known the risk, had known what could happen to her beloved Gida—but it had not been death that had dripped down her thighs. It had been desire, and lust. It had been life.

She rocked back and forth with silent sobs. Sobs of relief, sobs of horror at what she had done, sobs of joy. The door creaked, and the uneven footsteps told her it was Tyrion. The door clicked shut.

"Well?"

"Gida is safe," she choked, and she heard a scoff. She looked sharply to Tyrion.

"Gida?" he asked dryly. "So we're giving it a name now? I thought you planned to give it up."

"Of course I plan to give him up," she said furiously, struggling to her feet, feeling Tyrion watch her as she struggled. "But he is my son and he will have a Targaryen name."

"He won't be your son the minute he shoots out your cunt, and he won't have a Targaryen name, either," Tyrion retorted. "He'll have a nice, normal, anonymous name." He paused. "What about Jon?"

She slapped him, hard, and he fell to the floor, and the decanter of whiskey shattered. Jorah and Missandei burst in, but froze in the doorway at the sight.

"Do not anger a woman who has killed a bear, Tyrion," she breathed, watching him sit up, cringing in pain and touching his jaw. There was a streak of moisture on his jaw, from her fingers.

"Do not anger the only allies you have, Daenerys," he replied quietly. "The ice on which you stand is so much thinner than you ever seem to understand."

After Jon's kiss, they did not speak again as they rode through the mist and silvered trees at a slow clip. The path was uncertain, even more so in the mist, and the brown horse hadn't been bred for picking its way between trees and over lumpy roots.

Exhaustion soon overtook Sansa; she would have never thought she could feel sleepy, of all things, after having murdered a man—and, on top of that, not knowing whether Jory had survived or not—but it seemed that there were simply too many things to feel, and she therefore, for a time, felt none of them.
She had slumped back into Jon's arms, eyelids heavy and aching from all the tears, head pounding, limbs weak, and drifted in and out of something not quite sleep. She took in the savage, ragged wet black wood around them; the embrace of the mist around the trees; the strange noises of the night, with no fear. After everything that had happened, these woods could not scare her.

As they went deeper into the tangled wood, she found herself thinking, increasingly, of her father, and her uncle Benjen, and Jory, and all of the other wild northern men she had known and cared for. Wild northern men had roamed these woods since the beginning of time, and it was no wonder that they had been forced to band together in clans, in this unknowable place. Time had not touched these woods; just like time had not touched the clans... This place was too wild, too untamable, too filled with magic. Only a wild northern man could understand the strange yearning in her, eerie as the call of faerie music, when she looked into the tangled trees around them. She could only ever really love a wild northern man, she knew that now; just as she could only ever be truly loved by a wild northern man.

She was split: two people in one, part of her belonging to these savage, mythical woods, the other a gleaming girl polished by King's Landing. And Jon, too, was split: part of him as much a wild northern man as her father, as Benjen, as Jory; the other part a scaled, gleaming dragon that had flown the world and seen all of it, all of its shapes and all of its failings.

"It's so beautiful here," she said, as dawn turned everything to lavender shadow.

"Aye, I was thinking that too," Jon said softly into her hair.

His arm was still around her waist, holding her tight, and her hand was still laced over his. She could feel the blood pulsing in his strong veins; feel the bones shifting beneath the muscle, as his body moved in infinitesimal ways to keep balance atop the horse, and dazedly she reveled in how alive and real he was under her hand, against her back. She thought of the vows of the old gods: *blood of my blood, and bone of my bone... I give you my body that we two might be one.* The words were as ancient as the woods and just as primal, and so much more barbaric yet so much more honest and striking than those of the new gods. Her wedding vows—*I am his and he is mine*—seemed so empty, now. They were just words bearing a veneer of sweetness, of meaning; they held no real meaning for her anymore.

What was it to belong to someone? To belong to someone was to be in thrall to them, to owe them, to be *owned* by them. And now that she had tasted what it felt like to not belong to anyone, she could never go back. Jon had said the vows of the new gods to her, had cloaked her in his cloak, but the truth was that he had given himself to her in order to free her...and in return this bond had been forged between them, a bond of the old gods, a bond of ancient magic. Perhaps that was why she had felt such yearning for him these months, a bone-deep yearning that she could not really explain. She had told herself it was loneliness, had told herself it was her old fantasy of a happy wedding haunting her, had told herself it was his pretty mouth and the lovely lines of his body taunting her, but maybe all along it had been the magic of the old gods, souls forged together the moment Jon had sacrificed his body, his name, his safety, his family, for her freedom.

She still did not understand why he had done it. He had told her she was loved—by him?—but why should he love her? What had she ever done to earn such love? She could have asked him, but she did not dare break the perfect spell cast over them. Soon enough the spell would be broken; she wanted just a little more time of simply being held in his arms, hearing his heartbeat if she turned her head a little to the left, reveling in having him all to herself at last, *at last.*

It was just as the purpled, shabby silhouette of Castle Black took shape before her in the distance, through a break in the trees, that she began to wake from her trance. As they emerged from the
wood she felt the magic running off them, washed away by the grim reality set before them.

The wall of ice loomed up before them, and even as far as she was from it still, she could already feel the cool from it, and she shivered and felt Jon's arm tighten against her, his hand starting, instinctively, to move against her waist in a caress and then halting abruptly.

Castle Black was a crop of crumbling stone buildings tacked to the base of the wall, as though a forgotten project that someone had never finished—though in spite of its unfinished appearance, the castle was from long before the days of knights and tourneys. The castle was large by most standards, but next to the smooth enormity of the wall it looked pitiful and sloppy.

*It's a sanctuary for invalids; a place people go to die,* Jon had said. And indeed, the way the mismatched stone buildings cropped up from the pitted, pale ground, it looked like a graveyard writ large.

"He won't survive that," she breathed, as Jon stilled the horse. She wasn't even certain that she could survive this desolate place.

"I'm not sure he survived the ride here," Jon warned again. "He was in bad shape when we found him."

She felt him draw in a breath. "Are you...ready?" he asked softly. "We might run into some of the Brotherhood before we get to Jory—and Mance and his family, too."

Sansa didn't speak for a moment. She didn't feel ready to face anyone. She thought she could have simply ridden on with Jon in the woods forever, lost to the faeries like the tales that Old Nan used to tell, holding her so tightly that they were one. But they were both shaking from cold, and she needed to be with Jory—if nothing else, he deserved to have a Stark with him in his last moments. And she had to face the Brotherhood, too—after all, it was thanks to their efforts that Jory would not be facing the noose in a few hours’ time. She owed them, she owed all of them.

She had to ready herself. She had to put her grief and horror at her actions in Mole’s Town aside, though, as the spell of the woods wore off she was increasingly approaching her panicked state once more.

"Why do I feel...nothing?" she asked. She knew she didn't have to explain; she knew Jon would know. She felt him laugh a little.

"You're numb now. You'll feel it later. It's like a blow to the head," he replied. "Give it a day and then you’ll feel it for a long time."

"I thought--"

"Sansa, don't think about it now," Jon said suddenly. "Let's go see Jory. I'll deflect any questions and I'll explain what happened to them, later. One thing at a time."

"What will you tell them?"

"That you saved the Direwolves," Jon said wryly. "Come on; I don't think we've got much time."

He urged the horse onward, and they reached the gate of Castle Black.

The gates were made of decaying wood, and the muddy ground was sodden and rutted from wagon wheels and horse tracks. A figure was waiting by the gates in the pale dawn—it was Davos. The man looked younger than when she had seen him last, the way she’d noticed that Jon did, too. He
was garbed in a dark green cloak, wrapped around him like a blanket.

"Snow," he greeted, shaking himself awake. His eyes took in Sansa's gown and the blood spattering it, but he didn't comment. He smiled at Sansa, in spite of everything. "Lady Sansa. It's been a long time."

Neither she nor Jon corrected him. Mrs. Snow. Jon was going to let her dictate this, she realized. Maybe he still thinks I might want to annul the marriage.

"I'll take care of the horse. Cassel’s in the east wing," Davos told them as he knocked on the gate. The wooden gates opened with a groan, revealing a muddy, dismal courtyard with a few last clumps of blackened snow in the corners, and, unexpectedly, Gendry and Anguy, their faces pale and puffy from lack of sleep. Jon jumped down to help Sansa off the horse; no one spoke but she felt their gazes silently taking in her blood-spattered gown as well. She must have looked terrifying, like a witch from a child’s worst nightmare, with her blood-spattered seductress’ gown and her wild hair and her face raw from crying. She angled her face away from them, ashamed. She had only ever known how to be a pretty delicate girl.

"That way," Gendry told them, as Sansa regained her balance; her legs had nearly locked up from riding for so many hours. He pointed to shabby wooden steps tacked on to one of the crumbling stone buildings, that led up to a breezeway that connected two wings.

Inside the east wing, it was dark and smelled of skin and sickness. They passed rooms overflowing with sick people crammed on pallets on the floor, with white-robed Septons and grey-robed Maesters slipping between them, tending to them like kind-hearted ghosts. The moaning, the crying, and the horrible, racking coughs were inescapable; they became a maelstrom that overwhelmed her. Jon walked ahead of her, glancing into each room, and she was grateful for his calm, because she was so consumed by her horror at the sights that greeted her that she felt like crying all over again. Each room was more horrible than the last. It was like walking through the seven hells themselves, and as they went further away from the door to the breezeway, the stench of illness and death was ever more overpowering.

Jon had been right: this place was more likely to do Jory harm than help, though the faces of the Maesters and Septons were as benevolent as could be. They scurried from room to room, the younger ones scrubbing floors and dumping out pots, the older ones sitting by the sick, holding their hands, peeling back bandages, murmuring prayers and kind words.

In the very last room they found Jory, on a pallet in the corner beneath a window. This room was less crowded and far quieter, and a Maester, ancient and blind, was seated by him and tending to him. On the Maester’s other side, a young man lay limp and soaked in sweat, with a young woman, half of her face horribly disfigured, crouching before him, an infant clutched to her breast, fussing. Jory had aged ten years since she had seen him a few weeks ago: the man lying on the pallet was shrunken and gaunt, his face sweaty and pale, with sores on his mouth. He was moaning and muttering, while the Maester whispered reassurances and dabbed at his forehead with a damp rag.

Her whole body seized up at the sight. Seeing Jory so weak in the cell that first time had been painful, as he had been a man so defined by his liveliness, his strength, his youth and energy. This was unbearable. She could not do this. She did not want to remember him like this…but she couldn't be so selfish. He needed to be with someone who loved him. She couldn't let him die alone and anonymous in this castle full of sick people, just because it was disturbing to her to see.

Jon squeezed her hand.
"Go sit with him; I'll explain what happ--"

"Stay with me," she pleaded, not looking at him. But she didn't know where to look in a room so filled with pain and grief and shame. She was intruding on the private pain of so many at one time. Had she been any one of these people lying on the floor, she did not think she would have liked to have some stranger staring down at her, bearing witness to the various indignities of slow death. "Please."

She didn't want to do this alone. "He should be surrounded by Starks."

"I'm not a Stark."

"Yes, you are," Sansa insisted, as she walked to Jory's pallet. She heard Jon follow her after a moment's hesitation.

"So the man has family after all," the ancient Maester wheezed as Sansa sat across from him. Jon knelt down beside her. "Not long now," the Maester added, placing a gnarled, white hand over Jory's heart.

"What is it?" Sansa asked, reaching to take Jory's hand, which hung limply over the edge of the pallet, but Jon reached out and snatched her hand back, shaking his head mutely.

"Hmm. I think a cancer, but he's for certain been around rats, this one," the Maester mused, "though I haven't found the bite yet." His hands traced over Jory curiously, feeling for the bite.

"He was in a prison cell for weeks," Sansa said. Jory's eyelids were fluttering, and he was muttering something, in between nasty fits of coughing that left a spray of blood on the Maester's robes.

"The boy's too young," he moaned, his speech slurred. "Robb... too young. He needs help."

Once again tears were running down her cheeks, dripping off her chin. Soon she would have cried enough to drown the world in saltwater.

"I know he was," she said softly. "I know he was too young. We were all too young."

She could not stop thinking of how her parents had not even reached their fortieth name days. They had seemed old when she had been fifteen, but with every passing year they had seemed younger and younger to her, their deaths all the more tragic and pointless. She often thought of how she might feel if she lived to her own fortieth name day, knowing she had outlived her parents. She would feel so old, no matter how 'old' was defined.

"He... help," Jory said, more panicked now, writhing even as the Maester pressed his decrepit hand on his chest. "They're going to find...going to kill his mother..." His words were lost to another fit of bloody coughs.

She was enduring it all over again: the way her brother's eyes had filled with angry tears as he'd watched Ned and Cat's heads come off. Gods be good, I'll kill them all, he'd cried, just before they'd taken his head, too. And she had simply watched, useless, helpless. Jory had watched it, too; no wonder he had been unable to simply run off and make a new life for himself. No wonder he was reliving that pain in his final moments now. Seeing that—a boy forced to watch his own parents’ execution just before his own—stayed with a person forever.

"Who did he marry, Jory?" she whispered, leaning close, voice desperate, still just as useless and helpless as she had been then, the day she had watched her whole family die. Jory's eyes were wide as they fixed on her, wide and filled with panic, with terror.
For one terrible moment he seemed entirely lucid; it was like a flash of lightning illuminating a
darkened room for one split-second.

"He... needs help," he said again, reaching for her, but he was too weak and his hand dropped once
more, and he was lost to his coughing.

"He shouldn't have ridden through the wet night," the Maester said suddenly, shaking his head.
"But those boys told me it was either this or the noose."

Which was worse: a slow death in a room full of sick people—a death chamber—or a swift but
public and shameful death? He would not even have been conscious for the hanging, Sansa
thought; he was so far gone that they would have had to carry him up to the dais.

And the cost for all of this? A life—Thorne's life, but a life nonetheless—and now so much chaos
and loss. It was her fault, all of it. It would have been kinder if she had simply stabbed Jory in his
cell that day.

Daylight could not brighten the room, for the only window faced the wall, casting the room in
permanent muted blue-grey. They sat there for hours. The light shifted as the day progressed, and
Jory's mutterings became fewer and farther between, and his breathing slowed, becoming
increasingly jagged and labored. The Maester gave him milk of the poppy after a time, and his
breathing was no longer so labored, and his horrific coughing subsided.

It was, in some ways, worse than an execution. It lasted so long. Some moments she wished it
would simply end, and she hated herself for her boredom. Other moments she was on the verge of
panic, thinking that it was unbearable how quickly the time had passed. The room had grown dark
again, and it seemed shocking to Sansa that the universe was simply carrying on; that time was
passing for the rest of the world, that the sun had gone down and the moon had risen, indifferent to
how the world had changed for Sansa within that time. She wanted nothing more than to hold
Jory's hand, but Jon—and the Maester—stopped her every time she tried to touch him. And so,
instead, she allowed Jon to lace his fingers with hers, and they did nothing more than sit and wait
with Jory as his life came to a close.

Her thoughts drifted about like a loose cloud, and at times she almost burst into laughter, absurd
and out of place, and she hated herself for that, too. She thought of Jory calling Arya 'Arya
Underfoot,' with that loving, wry tone; of how, on Sansa's ninth name day, he had given her a
bouquet of wildflowers and had told her she would be his only sweetheart for the rest of his life,
and how he'd 'stay chaste' for her, and every man in the Great Hall—even her father, a man who so
rarely laughed—had roared with laughter and she hadn't known why they were laughing. She had
only thought, rather brattily, that Jory wasn't very handsome and that she would grow to be much
too pretty for him, and that he really ought to take such proclamations more seriously.

She thought of him jokingly sparring with Robb and Theon Greyjoy—strange; she had not thought
of Theon Greyjoy in years—and how it was he who had noticed, one day, that Jon had gone
missing, and it was he who had led the search for Jon. And it had been Jory who had found Jon,
just a little boy, asleep in the crypts beneath Lyanna's statue, and had carried his sleepy little form
back to the Great Hall in his arms. A year later Jon had gone missing for good, and it had been Jory
to lead the search then, too... Sansa wondered if Jon remembered that, but she couldn't bring herself
to break the silence to ask him. So she squeezed his hand tighter, as though she could impart the
memory through touch. She remembered Bran, just a tiny little boy, barely having learned to speak,
looking at her and asking her if trees could talk to each other, one day in the godswood. She and
Jeyne Poole, her best friend, had screeched with laughter at the idea. Of course trees couldn't talk
to each other. Then Bran, so solemnly, had said, "I bet they talk through their roots to each other,
underground,” and right now she felt she and Jon were trees, their language impossible to hear or perceive, speaking underground, through roots, amid dirt and decay.

At one point, Jon slipped out briefly, and she felt every moment of his absence, and was relieved when he returned.

And, at last, when the room was all quiet and grey with the moonlight reflected by the icy wall, Jory drew his last breath.

The Maester, who had kept his hand on Jory's chest to follow his breath, fluttered his unseeing eyes open. "And now it's done,” he said kindly. Sansa and Jon stirred. "They'll burn him in the godswood, tomorrow. You should rest, child."

She wanted nothing more than to hold his hand, but Jon was pulling her to her feet. Suddenly the hours of boredom had seemed too short; she was staring at Jory, trying to memorize him, trying to drink him in, but she wished he looked like Jory, and not like this mask of death before her. But Jon was pulling her away, so she let him, stumbling over her feet as she followed him blindly.

The corridor was dark and silent. Sansa finally looked at Jon. He was pale and drawn with grief.

“Flowers and his wife came a few hours ago with their son,” he explained in a low voice. “They said Mole’s Town is in chaos, but no one else died, at least. They told Payne where you’d gone,” he added, looking oddly uncomfortable, “and he said he would pass what had happened onto Brienne and the other Direwolves.”

“Oh,” Sansa could only say. She suddenly felt so tired that she thought she might faint.

“There’s a hot spring here,” Jon continued on, “if you want to bathe. And Val got together a change of clothes for you; she said she left everything at the spring. Everyone’s staying inside throughout the castle for the night, and I found us a spot away from everyone else, so you won’t have to meet everyone just yet.”

So that was where he’d gone.

“A bath would be good,” she admitted, looking down at her ruined gown. “And some clothes.”

“Aye, I think so too,” Jon replied softly, and he took her hand, leading her back down the hall.

Sansa took his hand, wondering vaguely who Val was, but also not entirely caring. The notion that she would be sharing a bed with Jon, likely, occurred to her, but she did not have the strength to feel anything about it. She had never been so thoroughly empty. She was barely conscious of Jon leading her down the steps, into the cold night.

\textit{Hot spring}, she thought vaguely, as they reached the west gate of the courtyard. \textit{Just like Winterfell.}

Jon, by contrast, was utterly focused on the task at hand. He lit a torch from the brazier sheltered by the overhang, and pushed open the west gate, which led to a pathetic excuse for a garden, with a little rocky path winding through it. The stones crunched under their shoes as they came to a wall of stone with a triangular gap. Even from here she could feel the steam from the springs. They had to duck to enter, and when they did, the cavern before them glowed orange with the flame in Jon’s hand. It was almost oppressively warm after the frosty air. The pool before them, set into smooth white rocks, was wider than the room they’d been sitting in, and it looked deep. Steam billowed from it. Beside the pool’s edge there were two neat bundles of clothes, and a pair of black leather boots. Jon went and fixed the torch between two rocks in the wall so that it lit a path into the pool,
and then turned to her.

“I can leave, if you want,” he began awkwardly.

“I need help getting out of my dress,” Sansa replied, not looking at him. Her heart was pounding now. She heard him walk to her, and she turned her back to him and gathered her hair, pulling it over her shoulder. “It unlaces—and then there’s the corset, too,” she added. Brienne had been the one to help her into the dress. She heard Jon draw in a breath and felt his gentle touch at the small of her back, where the top of the dress laced together. He slowly untied the knot and she felt the damp, ruined silk slacken around her.

“Just pull it through?” It was like they were talking about gardening, or cooking.

“Yes, I need to be able to slip it off my shoulders,” she explained.

“Aye, right.”

He was loosening the ties carefully. It was probably a waste—after all, the dress was ruined. She could have simply cut herself out of it. She looked down at the billowing, ruined skirts. In the low torchlight the wolves at her feet glittered and shimmered. “Like this?”

Together they pulled down the top, and Sansa reflexively covered her naked breasts by crossing her arms as he pushed the dress down over her hips. She had nothing covering her breasts; she had not been able to wear a full sark with the gown, nor a full corset. They awkwardly maneuvered her out of the gown, both of them knocking into each other, muttering apologies, her bare skin shivering at every accidental touch, until she had stepped out of the gown and was standing there in her half-sark, and the half-corset she had made, arms still crossed over her breasts.

“That one comes off the same way,” she said needlessly. Of course he knew how to undress a woman. How many thousands of times must he have undressed Daenerys? It was ridiculous to be providing instructions for it, and her face burned. She heard him clear his throat.

“Right.”

The corset ties were a stronger lace than her dress, by necessity, and as Brienne had done the knot, it was quite tight. It took Jon several tries to undo the knot, and then, suddenly, she felt the corset loosen and her whole body relaxed with its new freedom. He undid the corset, so that it hung at her waist, and she felt a rush of air against the nape of her neck. He had laughed, softly.

“W-what?” she stammered, self-conscious, heart in her throat. No man had ever seen so much of her bare skin.

“You have just one freckle on your back,” he said. “I don’t know why it surprised me.”

“Is it?” she asked curiously. In all of her years of being laced into corsets by maids, no one had ever mentioned it. “What does it look like?”

“Like a freckle?” he suggested wryly. Sansa scowled.

“I mean is it…strange-looking? How big is it?”

“Small. Like a dot of ink.” He drew in a breath. “It’s not strange-looking at all,” he added quietly. Every hair seemed to prickle to attention over her body.
“Where is it?”

He did not say anything right away; she felt his fingertip brush the skin at the very center of her back, the touch as soft as the kiss of a snowflake.

“Right here.” His voice was rougher, lower. Abruptly he stepped back. “I—I’ll just leave—”

“—No.” She looked over her shoulder. Jon was facing away from her, looking up at the rocks above them. “I don’t want to be alone,” she admitted. “Besides, you need a bath too,” she added with a pathetic attempt at levity. She saw Jon’s lips twitch, and he turned back to her.

“Aye, I do,” he admitted, and he began unbuttoning his coat. Now it was her turn to look away hastily. She heard him unlacing his boots, pulling off his coat, unlacing his breeches...She heard fabric rustle to the ground, then bare feet padded against the rock, and then there was a splash that echoed loud as a wave crashing off the cavern walls.

Jon resurfaced, gasping.

“Seven hells it’s hot,” he coughed, mopping his wild hair from his eyes. Sansa grinned, looking at him over her shoulder, though the expression felt alien. She had not thought she'd ever smile again.

“What a surprise,” she teased. Jon bobbed in the water, his wet neck and shoulders turned gold by the torchlight. Across the water and through the steam their eyes met, and his gaze was blazing.

“I won’t look,” he reassured her gently.

It was time.

When she was certain he had turned away, she dropped her arms, her hands clumsy as she untied the waist of her half-sark and let the sheer fabric crumple at her feet. She was naked now. When she stepped out of the sark she felt her scar rub against the soft skin of her other thigh.

Jon was still resolutely turned away from her, his upper back and shoulders visible. The vitality of his body struck her in stark comparison to the room they had spent the last day in, and she felt a wave of desperation wash over her. She wanted to be alive, she wanted to be so alive that when her life ended she simply burned out like a fire doused. So she drew in a steeling breath, and jumped in.

She gasped and choked at the scalding water and heard Jon snort at her coughing, though he still did not turn around. Her skin was so on fire that she felt as though she had dropped beneath ice and she writhed under the water, waiting for her skin to stop burning and freezing all at once. Slowly the pain seeped away, and she relaxed into the water, closing her eyes and slipping below the surface.

The scalding water felt good on her aching eyes, and she held her breath under water, relishing the feeling. So much of her body was aching, but now she was weightless and warm and nothing hurt quite as much. She didn’t resurface until she could not hold her breath another second; when she breached the surface once more, gasping, Jon was closer, and facing her.

She had always thought him beautiful, but he had never looked more lovely to her than he did now, wet hair clinging in thick clumps to his temples and jaw, skin gleaming like he had been painted gold by the fire. But I must look like a nightmare, she recalled in horror, thinking of how she could only look after having been crying for so many hours. She dropped beneath the surface again, feeling the heat at her aching eyes.

But with her eyes closed the pain came back: Thorne jerking and twitching, blood surging from
him in time with the last desperate beats of his heart, like a pot of water boiling over again and again; Jory writhing, reaching for her, he needs help. He’s too young… And Brienne, whom she had betrayed though she had never meant it; and Jaime, now alone with Brienne and Podrick; and all of her customers and the life she had left behind—no, the life she had set on fire, the life she had ripped to shreds. She stayed underwater, eyes scrunched shut, desperately willing the hot water to burn away the images, and felt a hand on her cheek that slid down—tentatively—to her shoulder and pulled her up.

She gasped and choked, briefly blinded by the hot water, and realized Jon was even closer now. But even that prospect could not eclipse the horrors of all she had seen, all she had done…

“I’ve hurt—“ she couldn’t finish the thought. “I’ve—“

The words wouldn’t come. She covered her face with her hands.

She did not know if it was she who moved closer or if it had been Jon, or if, perhaps, they had come together at once. Her footing was unsteady on the rocky floor of the spring, and her legs brushed his as she pressed her forehead to his chest, and felt his hands on her arms, bracing her. Her arms were folded over her breasts, keeping their skin from touching. They were so close yet not quite close enough to touch completely. She did not know for certain if she wanted to or if she was too afraid to.

She did not know how long he held her. She was grateful that he did not speak, grateful that he did not try to reassure her. No words could have helped; it was love that she wanted.

Too soon, Jon finally spoke.

“You need to sleep.”

“Sleep will make the morning come too fast,” she said into his chest.

“Aye, I know, but the morning’s coming anyway, and you’ll need your strength.” He released her arms and she floated backward, looking up from her hands finally. His gaze was so warm, his lashes stuck together from the water, and she was gripped with the mad urge to kiss him, but she held back. It didn’t feel right. Not right now. Not with all this grief and pain. “I’ll get out and get dressed and then I can help you,” he said, looking away, his shyness returning. She turned away, listening to the rush of water as he climbed out, and then the rustle of fabric.

Val—whoever she was—had given Sansa a man’s clothing, and she didn’t realize it was Jon’s until she slipped the shirt over her head and was awash in the scent of his skin. She’d also, thoughtfully, given her a long strip of softened white cloth, which she could use in place of stays to wrap around her breasts. Jon’s shirt and coat hung loose at her shoulders, sagging, but his breeches were tight around her hips. When she was done dressing, he turned around and blinked in surprise. Sansa looked away, face flushed. She had never worn breeches before—the feeling was odd. She felt as exposed as if she were naked once more, standing before him. She risked a glance back at Jon—he wasn’t looking at her, and she watched him swallow.

They left the warmth of the cave, the torch beginning to die down, and made their way back to the courtyard in silence. The whole world seemed asleep, and the only sound was of their boots crunching on the stone beneath them. The cold air seeped into her wet hair, making her shiver as she hastened to follow Jon to a darkened little doorway beneath a set of wooden steps. He pushed the door open, revealing a dark storeroom filled with hay and old crates of glass bottles. The room had a faintly medicinal odor, like that of Gilly’s own storeroom, and, out of nowhere, Sansa suddenly had the desperate wish to stand in that storeroom one last time.
“Here,” Jon breathed, as they came to a pile of hay with a few blankets. He must have done this when he’d left her briefly with Jory. “It’s better than sleeping in a tent,” he added, still in a low voice. “The wall makes it so cold here.”

And now the moment was upon them.

They had slept together before, but not since they had been married. Jon was biting his lip, studying her…he is nervous, she realized, as nervous as I am. He doesn’t know what to do or how to be either.

He had been leading her since they’d left Mole’s Town, pushing down his own fears and uncertainty. Now, she thought, this was her chance to lead. She dropped to her knees and crawled onto the hay, pulling at the blankets, and she turned on her side, facing away from Jon, her heart pounding in her throat. He was still standing there. Waiting.

“I-is there enough room, or should I move over more?” she whispered into the darkness, unsure of why she was whispering.

“No, that’s enough,” Jon said softly. She held her breath, body tensed, as she heard the rustle of hay as he crawled behind her, and before he had settled, before there was a chance of questioning, or uncertainty, she shifted backward, and pressed against him. Nothing had ever felt so safe. “Do you…” he didn’t finish the thought. His hand, so tentatively, touched at her waist, and she reached and took it in hers, and pulled it so that he was embracing her, her fingers laced with his once more.

The world was silent but for the pounding of her heart, but as they lay there, and the slats of moonlight shifted along the floor before her, the pounding lessened, and she relaxed against him. She did not want to sleep—she wanted to spend a little more time in a world where Jory was not yet ash—but her eyes were so tired, and her heart was so broken, and yet, at the same time, so warmed by love. Jon’s breathing became so even, rushing along the nape of her neck, and at last, she drifted off too. You are so loved.

He had forgotten how different the cold was at dawn. It was slyer than the cold at night, it got to your bones faster. The way the world looked flat and blue was unfamiliar, but it came back in a rush. How many years of his life had he spent on horseback, trundling through the dawn, bleary-eyed and weighed down by his pack? He had been doing it since his thirteenth name day, and he was nearing his forty-sixth name day now, though he disliked to think too much on that number.

Brienne rode ahead, of course, but Jaime was having some trouble controlling his horse one-handed, and, to his humiliation, was forced to go a bit slower. Podrick, to his great irritation, rode beside him, like some sort of act of fucking charity. Had he had any ability to do so, he would have unhorsed Podrick out of spite, but he was having enough trouble staying on his own horse as it was.

It had only taken a day to make the decision. The bakery had been closed up for now; Brienne would return, but Jaime knew he would not. He could not say what Podrick’s plans were. Castle Black was only a few hours away, but it would take them half a day at least, thanks to him and his one-handed horseriding. They’ll have to write a new song for me, Jaime thought with some black humor. Maybe Bronn himself will write it. After all, he is ‘sort of’ mean...

He both wanted the time to move faster and yet wished it would slow down, but time, disobliging as always, moved at its own pace. He was more aware than ever of the stump on his right arm, and though he had pulled down his cloak to hide it, he knew it must be seen, it must be known. Bronn would find out, and what might he think of him now? Bronn followed strength, Bronn followed
what was convenient for him. A one-handed man on the run from, seemingly, the entire world was
not convenient for Bronn.

He had never been terrified before, not like this. Not in battle, not at court, not even in the bowels
of the Bolton's Dreadfort.

_You'd better have a clever idea for a song, Bronn_, he thought as he rode. And it was, rather
pathetically, this thought that kept him from turning around and going back. He really wanted to
see what Bronn, always so clever, would come up with.
Daenerys stared at the open, unseeing eyes of her bear. The face was eerily sunken and deflated. It was just the skin left. She wondered what they had done with the rest of it.

“You could have it mounted,” Maege began, “but Lannister thought it would be put to better use if you wore it, the way we Mormonts used to when the ritual was first started. Then we could show everyone proof of what you have done.”

The way we used to. Maege spoke of her ancestors with such unity and pride, the same way Daenerys knew she spoke of the Targaryens who had come before her. But why speak of savages with such pride? Daenerys wondered, tracing the bear’s cold, stiffened snout. The Mormonts have only ever wrestled bears on this tiny island. They have never aspired to anything greater than that.

“How do I wear it?” she asked, turning to Maege. Behind her, Dacey was staring at the bear, her face impassive as always.

“The head goes over your head,” Maege began, and Daenerys reached out to pick up the bearskin, but Dacey, quick as lightning, reached out and smacked her hand away.

“There is a ceremony,” she said in explanation. “If you’re going to wear our bear, you’ll do it our way.”

“Our bear? I was the one who killed that bear—not you, or anyone else on this island,” she replied hotly. Dacey stared back at her steadily.

“Our island, our bear…our money…our rules,” she said levelly. Maege shot her daughter a look as Daenerys’ stomach writhed with discomfort and shame. She thought of the woman and her babe that she’d met on the road to the Bay of Ice; thought of her husband sweating and shaking in his fit; thought of the horse and gold she’d given away. It wasn’t mine to give, and I knew it, she remembered, but how could they live with themselves by just letting that little family die on the side of the road? She wondered where they were now, wondered if they had made it to wherever they were going…

“Princess Daenerys is going to be our queen, Dacey,” Maege said, her voice just as iron-hard and level as her daughter’s. “You’ll have to learn respect fast.”

“Is she going to be?” Dacey retorted dubiously. “You think parading her around in a rotting bearskin will make her queen of Westeros?”

This had been a long time coming.

Daenerys stared at Dacey.

“What are your objections to me? Let’s make it all known,” she said, her heart hammering in her chest. Why should I fear this? I am the blood of the dragon. She had fought a bear, and its skin was next to her, now, and all the harm she’d got had been a few scratches to her face. Let’s see what happens if I fight you, Dacey. What will my face look like—and what will yours look like?

Maybe I’ll wear your skin, too.
Dacey’s flinty gaze turned on her now: so chilling, and as cold and black and unfriendly as the waters around Bear Island.

“Bear Island knows no king nor queen whose name is not Stark,” Dacey said. “You have harmed Starks—and the Mormont clan swore fealty to the Stark clan generations ago.” Dacey held up the tartan she wore. Ugly, green and grey. “Our tartan is the Stark tartan with green in it.” She turned to her mother. “Do vows mean nothing to you?”

“Our commitment to the Stark clan ended when the heads of all the Starks were cut off by the Lannister abomination,” Maege said to her daughter. Daenerys placed a hand on her belly.

“All of the Starks?” Dacey asked, eyes flashing. “Sansa Stark still lives. Jon Snow still lives.”

“And they’re both Targaryen now,” Maege said before Daenerys could speak. “If you still wish to serve the Starks then you’ll serve Princess Daenerys—“

“—You only support her because, for whatever stupid reason, you think once she’s Queen she’ll give you the north and get rid of the Boltons and the Greyjoys and the other clans that you don’t like,” Dacey seethed, “but why the hell should she?”

“I am loyal to those who are loyal to me,” Daenerys interjected, blood rushing to her face, making her cuts throb. Dacey turned that chilling gaze on her again.

“You are loyal to nothing but your own whims, just like every other Targaryen has ever been. Your father was an entitled and destructive king, your brother was an entitled and destructive brat, and now—“

Daenerys’ hand flew out to slap Dacey, but Maege caught her wrist in an iron-strong grip. Daenerys looked to Maege in shock. Maege would not look at her.

“I am loyal to your cause, Princess,” she said frostily, still not looking at her, “but you will not strike my daughter.”

After too long a moment, Maege released Daenerys’ hand, and turned back to Dacey. “You have gone too far. Go muck out the stables—“

“—No, Mother. You have gone too far,” Dacey countered, nostrils flaring. “You’re going to bring ruin to our entire clan with this stupid little quest! Look at her! She is with child, Mother. Swollen and fat as a bitch dog in heat, with her own abomination—“

“—Gida is no abomination—“ Daenerys shrieked, lunging for Dacey, but Maege stepped between them, her face red with anger.

“—No one will ever let a Targaryen pregnant with her own fucking nephew’s child sit on the throne!” Dacey finished breathlessly. She stepped back from Maege and Daenerys, eyes wild, shoulders rising and falling, her limp, fine hair coming free from its leather tie. “And I will not be part of any clan that supports such a queen,” she added.

“You cannot simply stop being a Mormont, you ridiculous brat,” Maege snapped. “It is your blood.”

The silence was ringing in their ears.

“I am going,” Dacey said. Maege drew in a breath so sharply that she almost choked.
And there was a burning pain in Daenerys’ chest as she watched mother and daughter stare at each other in agony, in mutiny. Maege’s eyes were wet with unshed tears.

Dacey swallowed, gaze fixed on her mother. She seemed to be waiting for something—something that did not come. “I will not be part of this.” She cast her angular hand at Daenerys’ belly. “I will not help you replace a Lannister abomination with a Targaryen one. They are both abominations; it does not matter which family they came from.”

Dacey turned on her heel and left the hall, her boots echoing on the stone. Maege stared after her daughter, furious tears running silently down her cheeks.

Neither Daenerys nor Maege spoke for a long time. Daenerys stared at her bear. She knew she ought to say something, ought to apologize, and ought to explain that she had never meant to tear mother and child apart, but Dacey had called her son—her beautiful, perfect son—an abomination. Dacey had compared her baby to Joffrey Baratheon, a monster of twisted cruelty and rage. *Gida’s got Stark blood, too,* she thought furiously, pressing her hand to her belly protectively. *If you really were so loyal to the Starks then you’d be loyal to Gida too.*

“Don’t wait for a ceremony,” Maege finally said, her voice curling in on itself in bitterness. She still wouldn’t look at Daenerys. “Just put it on and be done with it.”

Sansa awoke in the dark with a jolt. Gilly was kneeling in front of her, her face turned grey with exhaustion and grief.

“They're going to do it soon,” Gilly whispered, placing a hand briefly on Sansa's arm. Behind her, Sansa felt Jon stirring. "Come out when you can. We’ll be waiting."

Jory, Sansa remembered with a lurch. Gilly rose from her crouch with a last sympathetic look at Sansa, and left the little storeroom.

For a moment, Sansa lay still, willing herself to be numb to the pain seeping back into her as she slowly awakened. Flashes of the night before—Jory’s last breath, Jon’s strong hands pulling her back above the surface of the water—came back to her. *It’s too much,* she thought, feeling so weak. Too much pain, too much grief, too many things to feel…She wished she could simply stay here, in this storeroom, curled up with Jon, hidden away from life—even just for a little bit longer. Their hands were still laced together, and his arm was wrapped around her so tightly. They hadn’t moved throughout the night, hadn’t pulled apart from each other.

“’S’it time?” Jon mumbled into her hair, voice rough with sleep. Her chest ached at the sweetness of it, contrasted with the pain of what was about to come. How was it possible to be so happy and so sad in one moment?

“Yes,” she whispered, not moving yet. She moved her thumb over the back of Jon’s hand, trying to focus on the feel of his skin against hers, the scent of his skin, the heat between their bodies, the weight of his arm over her waist. “I can’t do it,” she confessed, hating the weakness of her voice. “I’m not ready.”

“It’ll hurt worse if you don’t go,” he said.

He was right, of course. But either way it was going to hurt. “Come on,” he said softly, and he shifted away from her, the hay rustling beneath them. Sansa sat up, feeling sick with exhaustion and hunger. Through the narrow windows she could see it was barely dawn—they had only slept a few hours, if that. She brushed the hay out of her hair self-consciously as she watched Jon get to
his feet and rake his hands through his own hair as well. He turned and held out his hand to her, his eyes warm and kind, and she took his hand and let him help her to her feet.

They left the storeroom. Gilly and Sam were waiting for them, with Gendry and Anguy. No one spoke; Anguy merely led them to a gate at the base of the wall, which had been left open. Sansa looked at the yawning darkness of the tunnel before her.

She had never been on the other side of the wall before.

She was guessing the rest of them hadn’t, either.

They followed Anguy wordlessly into the frigid tunnel, the air damp and metallic, their boots scraping on the stone floor beneath them. Daylight was a white point at the other end. He’s been carried over to the other side, she thought wryly, and almost smiled, and hated herself for her irreverence. From the mouth of the tunnel she could see the godswod in the distance, the crimson leaves vibrant against all of the pines, and a few figures gathered round the heart tree, dark shapes in the mist.

The first thing that struck her was the sensation of openness. They were beyond the edge of the world, now. There might be people on this side of the wall, but no countries, no government, no cities or villages. It was unsettling…exhilarating…

The Maester who had tended to Jory was seated on a stone bench beneath the heart tree. Other members of the Brotherhood were already standing around Jory, who lay on a bed of kindling, as well as two women, one of them so shockingly beautiful that Sansa felt a little sick. Even in the meager dawn light her blonde hair was a brilliant gold, her skin luminous, and the look she cast on Jon was familiar…and then she turned her lovely eyes upon Sansa with a look of utter fascination…and something like delight. She looks at me like we have been best friends for years, Sansa realized in confusion. She did not know why she would.

Mist still lingered among the trees when they reached the godswod and Sansa felt the damp chill like she’d walked through a ghost.

Another Maester, his hair fluffy white, had joined them, too. He was standing near Jory, holding a torch.

“IT seems everyone is here,” he said solemnly as they gathered around. “So we will begin.” He looked among them. “Would anyone like to say a few words for…?”

“Jory Cassel,” Jon finished, but he didn’t continue. Sansa looked at her boots. She ought to have spoken, but what could she possibly say? She felt Jon’s hand slip into hers, and she gripped it.

“I-I would like to, actually.” Sam said suddenly, stepping forward. Everyone looked to him in surprise, as he walked around to stand next to the Maester by Jory’s head.

He looked at Sansa anxiously, and she cracked a smile of encouragement as best she could. “Jory Cassel was the spark of revolution in Mole’s Town,” Sam began, wringing his hat in his hands, “The big ideas about revolution and independence were only things I’d read about, just stories, really, until I met him. Suddenly, it all became real. He came to Mole’s Town and people started talking, started hoping…He didn't seem to fear anything, and it made the rest of us braver, too."

Sansa’s eyes burned and throbbed. She stared at Jory. He had been washed, his hair combed, but he looked nothing like the man who had strolled back to the Great Keep holding Jon in his arms as easily as if he’d been holding a pup, like the man who had chased pretty girls all over Winterfell,
like the man who had so fiercely loved her father. “And in that way he gave everyone quite a gift. So thank you, Jory,” he finished awkwardly, his voice high, and his chins wobbling, brown eyes bright.

No one spoke for a long time. The wind whistled through the pines. They should have been at Winterfell; he should have been buried with his clan, but instead they were here at the edge of the world. Sansa heard the Maester step forward, and then there was the rushing sound of flame catching on the kindling surrounding Jory, and everything became a blur of silver and flame.

Jon made himself watch as the flames danced along Jory, and the smell of burning flesh, sharp and noxious, filled the morning air. The mist made the smell more powerful, and on an empty stomach it was so much worse. He had to press his lips together, for he really thought he might be sick. The only comfort was that it had been so long since he’d last eaten that he was certain there was nothing for him to vomit.

Sansa was gripping his hand painfully tightly, and her grip did not loosen as they stood there. There was a shameful part of him that reveled in the way she needed him in this moment, in the way that she had needed him for the last day and a half. He had had her all to himself, he had seen so much of her bare skin, and he had woken up with her in his arms. It had been so easy to linger in his imagination when he had awoken before the dawn, feeling his arm rise and fall with her even breathing…

But it could not last—after this was done, decisions would need to be made. Would she still feel so certain that she did not want to annul the marriage on this side of Jory’s death? Now that the chaos had passed, she might feel differently, and he would have to ask her, and he dreaded it. She had clung to him so tightly this last day and a half, but decisions made in fear and in pain were not real decisions. Who knew this better than he did?

It was one thing for her to hold onto him when she had no other choices, when it seemed that the world was ending—but what might she feel when she realized she did have other choices?

She might choose to let go.

It took hours to burn Jory completely. The sun never quite came out; the clouds were gloomy and grey and thick with the threat of rain, so that it felt like dawn still even well after the sun had risen.

When at last the flames began to die down, the Maesters bowed and left them all standing there in the godswood. Jon felt Sansa shift on her feet and heard her clear her throat.

“Thank you, everyone,” she said, looking around the godswood at everyone. She was pale, her eyes rimmed with red, cheeks wet with tears. “I know it was an enormous risk to rescue Jory, and I’m sorry it’s turned out this way. But he didn’t deserve the noose, and I thank you all for saving him from it,” she continued, her voice wavering.

“This is the very reason that I started the Brotherhood without Banners, child,” Beric said, and Sansa’s gaze snapped to him. “The people need protection from the Crown, and every man in this Brotherhood shares that belief and is willing to risk his life for it. You don’t need to thank us.”

“…But she does need some food…and some whiskey, I’d imagine,” Mance put in wryly. “As we all do.”

They walked back toward the wall together. One of the Maesters had been keeping an eye on Sam and Gilly’s son Sam, and the little boy exploded into the courtyard as soon as they exited the
tunnel, and hurled himself into Gilly’s arms.

Gendry and Anguy had gone hunting the day before, and they set up a fire in the courtyard to cook. Jon and Sansa were ordered to take logs to arrange around the fire so everyone could sit, and they were both grateful to have the mindless task.

Val kept looking at Sansa with fascination, and Jon could tell that it was beginning to bother Sansa, though she did not comment on it. He waited for a free moment, when Sansa was on the other side of the fire and occupied with keeping little Sam away from the fire, and he knelt beside Val, who was helping Anguy to skin the rabbits.

“Stop staring,” he said in a low voice.

“Stop ordering me about, Jon Snow,” Val shot back easily, and there was a nasty ripping noise as she pulled the knife downward.

“Why do you keep staring at her?” Jon pressed, ducking his head when he felt Sansa glancing at them. He met Val’s eyes. She was smiling.

“I like her,” she replied almost smugly, though she kept her voice low as well. “They told me she killed a man to protect the Direwolves.”

“She’s not a killer.”

“No, she’s not. I wouldn’t like her if she were,” Val said, sounding amused. “I’m glad she’s worthy of you.”

Jon felt irrationally irritated by her words. He knew he was being ridiculous. There was no reason to be so bothered about it.

“Well, stop staring, anyway,” he snapped, rising from his crouch.

He went back around the fire to Sansa. Beric and Mance had sat down with her, and he felt uneasy about that, too. The world suddenly seemed much too crowded.

“Here, have some whiskey,” Mance was saying, passing Sansa a flask. “Jory was your father’s man, was he not?”

“He was.” She looked down at the flask before taking a reluctant swig, and Jon watched as she grimaced. Beric and Mance chuckled as Mance took the flask and handed it to Jon. He didn’t want any but he’d learned not to decline Mance’s whiskey, so he took a quick swallow as well. It went right to the pit of his empty belly.

Dalla and Gendry were cooking as Anguy and Val skinned the other rabbits; the fire crackled and Jon tried not to think of how, just moments earlier, they had stood around another fire and watched a man turn to ash. Judging by the look on Sansa’s face, she was thinking something similar.

It was nearly noon by the time the food was ready, though the day was so grim and grey that it was impossible to tell that it was midday. Everyone gathered round the fire on the logs that Jon and Sansa had placed, and Mance passed round the whiskey again, and to Jon’s surprise, Sansa took the longest drink of them all. She passed the flask to him without looking at him, and he felt another clench of grief, as bitter and burning as the whiskey. He had vowed to save Jory from the noose, to save her from watching another loved one die, but she was still in pain, and he could offer nothing, could do nothing. He was useless, helpless.
The whiskey dulled things a bit, but at least Jon was next to her. His presence alone was soothing, and she had to actively stop herself from grabbing his hand again, and holding him tightly.

“Might as well introduce everyone,” the man next to her said, once everyone had been settled with food around the fire. He had the look of a man who had once been handsome, and highborn, too, but time had worn it away. His red-gold hair was streaked with grey and thinning at his temples. “I’m Beric. I was once a soldier in the royal army, but I deserted years ago,” he told her. “It was around the time of the last uprising—when your family was killed. I started the Brotherhood without Banners. Anguy was my first member,” he added with a wry look across the fire. Anguy waved to her and winked.

“I’m Mance. Flowers tells me you enjoyed the White Stag’s essays,” said the man on the other side of Beric, leaning forward to smile at her. He was slight, and had clever, dancing eyes. “I’m the one who’s been sending them to Flowers.”

“Do you know the White Stag?” Sansa asked in surprise, forgetting her grief for a moment. Mance grinned.

“No, only Dalla knows who the White Stag is,” he said, nodding to the older of the two women. “But she swore she’d never tell. She won’t even tell me.”

“I like to picture him as a man who went grey early.” Sam confessed suddenly, absently smoothing his son’s hair, “and he sits at a writing desk all night and writes by candlelight.” He looked to Dalla. “Am I right?”

“Not even a little bit,” Dalla replied pleasantly. She was plumper than the other woman—Val—and older, by several years, but she had a kind face, and Sansa liked her immediately.

“I’m Tormund Giantsbane,” said a large man with a wild red beard sitting next to Mance and shoveling food into his mouth. “I joined the Brotherhood right after Anguy.”

“Why did you join?”

“Wanted something to do, at first,” Tormund said honestly, his mouth full of rabbit, “Met Dondarrion and Anguy at a pub in Winter Town and we got to talkin’ and I thought they had some good ideas. Then Waters found us right after that. He was on the run and thought we were gonna turn him in. Took a bit of time to catch him.”

Sansa glanced at Gendry, who went a bit pink as everyone chuckled.

“It was a good deal of gold!” Gendry said defensively. “When a couple of wild-looking men come after you with guns and you’ve got a bounty of thousands of gold dragons on your head, you run!”

Sansa couldn’t help but laugh at the image, but the dark-haired man next to Tormund cleared his throat, and the laughter died on her lips.

“You already know me, Lady Stark,” he said in a light, musical voice. He had looked familiar but she hadn’t been able to place where she knew him. He had a thin face, and though his hair was long, he was clean-shaven. He was slender, as slender as Jon, though he did not look as strong. She studied him now and he studied her back. The look in his dark eyes was not friendly. “Think on it,” he said slowly, nodding to her, as Sansa racked her mind.

“He’s a redcoat,” Jon said suddenly, shooting the man a chilling look. “His name’s Bronn, and he was Lannister’s man.”
“You’re no fun, crow,” said Bronn before snapping up the flask and taking a swig.

Sansa drew in a sharp breath. She could remember him standing beside Jaime, the two of them always laughing at some private joke. He had never worn the scarlet uniform with much pride—she had always gotten the impression that the royal army was a detour for him, not a destination the way it was for other men. “I’m only here because I’m looking for Lannister. Don’t know if you’ve heard, but he’s gone missing,” Bronn continued dryly. “I’ve looked over the whole fucking north for him, and as the northerners all think he raped you, odds are one of them killed him in your honor. If you’ve seen him, do mention it, will you?” He went to take another swig of whiskey.

Sansa’s fingers went numb, her mouth dry, and she knew the exact moment that Bronn perceived that she knew something. Their eyes met for one rushing instant. He stopped mid-drink and set down the flask.

Quick as a cat and just as silent, he lunged.

It was a chaotic scuffle; before he could reach her, Jon had tackled him, nearly pushing him into the fire. Beric had lunged forward as well, helping Jon to pin him in place, and Val was on her feet, already halfway around the fire, pulling a pistol from somewhere in her skirts.

“Where is he, you fucking cunt?” Bronn snarled, struggling against Jon. Jon was crouching above him, face contorted in fury.

“Try that again,” he said coldly. “With manners, this time.”

“Where is he, you fucking cunt, please,” Bronn said irritably, going still beneath Jon. Sansa stared at him in horror.

It was too late to hide it—somehow he had seen it in her face. She thought of Jaime, crippled by his own shame, hiding in his room like a ghost, strangled by his own humiliation. She knew the army was looking for Jaime… but Jaime did not want to be found.

“Why do you want to know?” she asked instead. Now everyone was staring at her in surprise. The disfigured man who had been sitting next to Bronn looked at her sharply.

“You know where Lannister is?” he asked. Sansa bit her lip.

“I-I do,” she said, feeling the heat of everyone’s combined gaze—particularly that of Jon. “He’s alive,” she continued, heart fluttering.

“And?!” Bronn demanded, attempting once more, unsuccessfullu, to throw Jon off of him. “Where the fuck has he been?”

“He doesn’t want to be found,” Sansa said desperately. “He’s—he’s been through a lot. I don’t even know all of it,” she confessed. “I won’t betray his trust.”

“I just risked my neck for your pox-ridden clansman—“ Bronn began scathingly, but Gendry snorted so loudly that he stopped.

“You only did it because you were bored,” he said, shaking his head. “Don’t pretend you did it for any noble reason.”

“All the same, I did it,” Bronn continued furiously. “And now this cunt owes me. Where the fuck is Lannister?” His gaze bored into her, his clever eyes searching hers. She shrank back in horror; it
was like he was plundering through her belongings, thieving from her. “He’s in Mole’s Town, is he? Who took him? At least fucking answer me that, because I know he didn’t just run off.”

There was so much pain in his eyes that it took her breath away. Sansa swallowed.

“I’ll tell you,” she conceded, “but it won’t help you find him.” She looked down. “It was Dickon Tarly.”

There was a sharp intake of breath; Sansa looked up in time to see Sam burst into tears and Gilly cover her face with her hands. The disfigured man let out a short bark of a laugh.

“Everything’s coming back to Tarly,” he scoffed, shaking his head. “This one’s his brother.”

So that was why Sam’s eyes had looked so familiar to her.

Sansa stared at Sam.

“It’s why I burned the godswood,” Gilly confessed, lowering her hands from her face. “He was going to come to Mole’s Town and find Sam, and I just—” she hid her face again. But Bronn did not care why Gilly had burned the godswood. He was still staring at her, still having to be pinned in place by Jon.

“Dickon Tarly? That boy is one step up from a fucking tadpole. I’m shocked the moron can even breathe unaided. How did *Dickon Tarly* manage to kidnap Jaime fucking Lannister?” Bronn demanded.

“They ambushed him,” Sansa explained, with a glance at Sam. “Dickon confronted him and Bolton…” She trailed off, thinking of the look on Jaime’s face when she had pinned the sleeve over the stump where his right hand had been. It was not hers to tell. “Bolton surprised him when Dickon was confronting him,” she eventually continued cautiously. Bronn was staring at her hungrily.

“Bolton,” he repeated. “Which Bolton?”

“The younger one,” she said. “Ramsay.”

“That’s it? Two stupid fucks took down Lannister?” the disfigured man asked in shock. “Do you have any idea how many thousands of men have tried to kill Jaime Lannister and died trying?”

“He was armed,” Bronn was saying, almost to himself. “I saw him leave. He had his sword and his gun. He’s the best dueler and the best shot I’ve ever seen, and he doesn’t give a fuck about mercy. So how did they best him?”

“He said he wasn’t expecting it, and that Bolton got lucky. I’m sorry; I don’t know any other details—“

“—Except the most important one, which is *where he’s been all this time,*” Bronn practically growled, and he lunged forward again, throwing Jon aside with surprising strength, but the air cracked with a gunshot and everyone froze. Val had fired her pistol into the air and was looking at Bronn.

“You can either try that again and get killed by any number of the people standing here, or give it some time, earn her trust, and then find out where Lannister is,” she informed him coldly, tucking her pistol back into her skirts. “How does she know you’re not hunting him down for Bolton and Tarly? You should be thankful that such an honorable person’s been protecting your beloved
“Honorable?!” Bronn scoffed. He looked to Sansa once more. “Tell me this, Lady Stark: why the fuck does Jaime not ‘want to be found’?”

He was breathing heavily, dark eyes searching hers. He was like a wild animal, pushed to the edge, cornered. She could not help but feel for him. It was like looking into a mirror. She knew precisely how he felt.

It had always been her weakness. She felt too much, was swayed too easily.

“He’s not thinking straight. He lost…” she hesitated, searching for the words, “…something important to him. The most important thing… Maybe the only important thing.”

And just like that, she knew that Bronn knew. The tension melted from his body; he looked away disgustedly.

“Your brother is a cunt,” Bronn informed Sam. Sam shook his head.

“H-he’s not,” he insisted miserably. “He was good, he was kind. He would never have harmed anyone,” he continued through the tears. Val scoffed and dropped down onto her seat again.

“He very nearly raped me, as I told you yesterday,” she said coolly.

Sansa felt sick. She thought of the sweet boy who had pressed a chaste kiss to her lips. I cannot wait until we are wed, he had confessed in such an innocent rush. And then, not even a month later, she had watched him try to kill Jon. But at least that had been well meaning, she thought sadly. He had thought he was doing the right thing, even if he was wrong about it. …But even Jaime knew it would be cruel to take me back to King’s Landing.

“Why are you hiding from him?” Sansa asked Sam, as Jon shifted off of Bronn, having decided the danger had passed. Bronn got to his feet and went back to his own log, and stared mutinously into the fire.

“Our father hated me,” Sam explained, after blowing his nose on his cloak loudly. “I was too feminine, too fat, too embarrassing.”

Sansa noticed how Gilly’s fists clenched so hard her knuckles bleached. “He tried everything to make me ‘man up,’” Sam continued, almost wistfully. “And I mean everything. I was his heir, after all. But as we got older, it became more and more obvious to everyone that Dickon was the heir he was looking for. Dickon was handsome, and tall, and strong, and good at hunting, and he didn’t care about poetry or dancing or singing or sewing, and Father told me, one day, that if I didn’t leave, he’d make sure an ‘accident’ happened.”

“An accident?” Jon blurted disgustedly. “You mean—“

“—Like he’d kill me and make it look like an accident, yes,” Sam finished for him, surprisingly calm about it, in stark contrast to his sobbing from seconds before. “So I left. Dickon even walked me to the gate,” he recalled sadly. “He was really cut-up about it.”

“Not cut-up enough to stop it,” Anguy snorted, though he too sounded disgusted. “What a strong man,” he added dryly, earning a few chuckles from around them.

She had met Randyll Tarly; she had thought him an uncommonly cold man, and had thought that Dickon’s relationship with him was odd. At times he was distant and unaffectionate, at others,
overbearing and controlling and too close. And Jaime had hinted at something, once—it had been just a passing, quick comment, and she hadn’t even thought anything of it until later, and by then he had refused to elaborate… The things we do out of shame, she reflected sadly, thinking of Jaime alone in that room, thinking of Jon’s face when she had asked him about what he did with Daenerys.

“Gilly always said that Dickon would try to find me,” Sam continued, ignoring Anguy, “and that if he did find me, and Father found out about it, there would be hell.”

“Thus you burned the godsdowood,” Anguy said tersely to Gilly, “even though you could have, for example, simply not gone outside on the day Tarly came into town.”

Gilly did not look at Anguy; she stared into the fire, blinking rapidly, looking like she might be sick. “Because some of us,” Anguy continued, “actually believe there are gods in those trees—“

“—Stop it,” Sam insisted desperately, “please. Leave her alone!”

“Let’s see how righteous you are when your family is under threat,” Dalla said to Anguy now, as cool as Val had been. Anguy shot her a look.

“You’d burn down the gods to save your family?”

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to save my family,” Dalla said. “I shot a redcoat, remember?”

“Damn good shot, too,” Gendry remarked.

“Well, redcoats are fair game,” Anguy said, holding up his hands, though Sansa saw the surrender and apology in his joke.

Sansa felt overwhelmed, quite suddenly. It was too much: Bronn’s near-attack, Sam’s secret, Gilly’s grief… Beric cleared his throat.

“We got off-track a bit,” he said wryly. “Moving on, as you’ve still not met everyone…That’s Sandor; another ex-soldier.” He gestured to the disfigured man.

“And you already know me,” Gendry said.

“I still can’t believe you’re Sansa Stark,” Sam, who was next to Gendry, breathed, shaking his head. “I mean, it makes sense, of course, and it explains ever so much…”

“I’m Dalla,” said the plump woman, waving at Sansa. “Thank you for the clothes, by the way.”

“You’re welcome,” Sansa stammered.

“I’m Anguy,” Anguy said now with a flourish, “you may have heard tales of—“

“—Do you ever shut up?” Val demanded. She turned to Sansa. “I’m Val.”

“You know me already, too,” Davos said, from Jon’s other side. “Though last time we met, things were a bit different,” he added with a chuckle, elbowing Jon.

“And this rather sad, pathetic puppy—“

“—He’s a crow, remember? A crow—“

“—You may know him as the dragonwolf—“
“—Covered in scales and ten feet tall, eh?—“

“—This is Jon.”

Jon was looking at Anguy, brows arched in disdain.

“It was funny!” Anguy said defensively. "Flowers started it."

“I’m sorry,” Sam said desperately. “It was just a story; I didn’t know I’d ever actually meet you!”

“No wonder Tarly wants you dead,” Davos was laughing to Jon, “if those are the stories he grew up hearing about you.”

“Tarly went right after Snow,” Tormund said, shaking his head. “He meant to kill him.”

Sansa looked at Jon, catching his eye, but he looked away hastily. *He’s remembering it too,* she realized. Moments before Dickon had burst in, Jon had kissed her with such profound desire that the memory alone still sent a ripple of something through her, a shiver that shook her whole body.

“So now you’ve met everyone,” Mance interrupted. His eyes were glimmering. “Sansa Stark… You’ve got your mother’s look, but—” he broke off, looking amused, “—offering up your life to save the Direwolves…that’s Eddard Stark.”

“You met my mother?” Sansa asked in surprise.

“Only once, and she wouldn’t have remembered me,” Mance replied ruefully, “but no man could forget Catelyn Tully’s face…or hair…or spirit.” He was smiling at her. “And now you’re on the run. So what will you do?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Sansa admitted.

“We’re going to Eastwatch,” Beric said, nodding to the group at large. “The Brotherhood’ll be joining Mance. It’s time for us to think bigger.”

“Bigger?”

“Revolution,” Mance said, leaning forward. “And revolution’s in your blood, child. You just risked everything for the Direwolves…so it clearly means something to you.”

He had been angling for this; she had sensed it from the moment he’d introduced himself to her. She had quite a bit of experience with people who wanted something from her. It was different, this time—it wasn’t just her name or her maidenhood that he wanted—and yet it wasn’t different at all.

“I wouldn’t be of any use,” she protested. “I can’t fight, or do anything of value—“

“—You organized an entire group of people to put their names down for a cause,” Mance countered, “and inspired the Brotherhood to break out Jory Cassel. You killed a man. Not to mention you survived how many years in King’s Landing, under the Lannister thumb? Don’t tell me you’re not a fighter.”

“But I didn’t—“ she began weakly…but the clang of an old bell pierced the courtyard and drowned her words.

They all jolted as though struck and turned to look at the gate. Someone was pounding on it. Jon, Gendry, Val, Tormund, and Anguy were all on their feet instantly, hands on their weapons. Tormund stepped forward and went to the gate warily.
“Who is it?” he yelled through the decaying wood, hand on the iron latch.

“Brienne Tarth,” came Brienne’s smooth deep voice, “and Podrick Payne.”

“Freerider!” Anguy cried delightedly, and Tormund’s entire demeanor changed and he wrenched open the gate.

“Where is he?!” Tormund boomed as the gate swung open.

It wasn’t just Brienne and Podrick, though.

Jaime was there, too.

“Freerider?” Jaime blurted as the gates opened. Podrick ducked his head. “Why is that familiar?” he wondered, curiosity consuming him…or perhaps he just wanted to be consumed by something, rather than notice how his blood was pounding, thick and hot, through him; how the place where his right hand had once been seemed to throb and ache…

A giant of a man, with a wild red beard, was beaming at them, looking between Podrick and Brienne like a faerie had come and given him everything he’d ever wished for, all at once. Beyond the giant man, there was a whole crowd of people…Jon Snow included…and Sansa, too—and even that moron Beric Dondarrion, and Sandor Clegane…

And there was Bronn.

Their eyes met across the courtyard. Bronn was twisted to look back at him, dark clever eyes taking in everything about him…and coming to rest on where his right hand should have been.

Not even months of ill care could dull the beauty and power of Jaime Lannister, though he was utterly transformed from when Bronn had seen him last. He’d aged significantly. His hair wasn’t quite as bright gold, and it was wild, hanging around his jaw in shaggy clumps. He’d always been perfectly clean-shaven—it had been a compulsion—but now a silver-and-gold beard, short though it was, covered his angular jaw. He looked thinner, and he didn’t sit quite so proud on his horse…and his right arm was pinned in a sling, uselessly, to his chest, the sling visible through the gap in his cloak.

And yet, in spite of everything, all eyes went to Jaime Lannister helplessly, moths to his flame.

The man had never been able to enter a room without an audience, and though in the past he had always seemed either careless of or delighted by the attention, Jaime now seemed wary, distant, and cautious against their gazes. He rode into the courtyard last, leonine eyes narrowed as he scanned them all.

Bronn had known it the instant the Stark girl had said it. The most important thing…the only important thing… The only thing Jaime cared about was his ability to fight, and the only thing that could diminish his matchless abilities would be the loss of limb.

But seeing it was still a shock that Bronn was careful to mask from Jaime. If Jaime had been a lion before, he was a cat now: he still had to be approached with care. No sudden movements, of course, and above all, he could not make a scene. This Jaime was a stranger to him and yet so very much the same man he had known and fought beside for decades; Jaime had always been the proudest man he’d ever known, and now that pride had been wounded, perhaps fatally so. He had to tread very carefully around this Jaime.
For months he had been imagining what might have happened to Jaime...for months he had been skirting around a thought, an idea, with such caution... It had been a faint glimmer, a mere whisper of something, so easy to drown out with other noises and color... but now it was blaring loud as a war horn.

He would have thought by this age he would know everything there was to know about himself, but evidently he could still be surprised, and yet it wasn’t all that surprising, not really... He had known it all along, in a way, but he had never had to face it. Now he was facing it, for he had no choice.

There was a searing pain in his chest so profound he was not sure he could stand on his own at the moment. Relief made him weak but there was anger, too, and joy, senseless and wild, and betrayal, and sadness, and shame... Everything rushed through him like water; he was being soaked with all of the feelings that he had been hiding from, tiptoeing around, for months—no, for years, really. It had been so easy in King’s Landing, for there were endless ways to distract yourself from the inner workings of your own heart.

But here, in the north, there was nothing but sky and stone and trees and you, and all of your failings and all of your secrets and all of the things that you wished were not true about yourself. He did not want to feel this way about seeing Jaime again. He did not want to feel this way about seeing Jaime’s loss and pain. He wanted things to go back to how they’d always been: they’d train new recruits and make petty jokes about the people they knew and Bronn would drink and whore and make fun of Jaime for not drinking and not whoring and they could simply carry on like that forever...But that door had been closed, and that time was over.

There was no getting that innocence of his deepest nature back; there was no way to retrieve the freedom of willful ignorance of what you really were. He knew himself now, and they could not go back to King’s Landing, anyway. That time was over.

“Brienne,” Davos greeted behind him, and Bronn heard the older man get to his feet.

The woman was as tall as Jaime, and broader in the shoulders and the waist, and blonder, too. She had a blunt heaviness to her features, but she sat atop her horse with a soldier’s confidence, and Bronn did not miss the sword at her hip or the way her eyes swept the courtyard reflexively. On her other side was Podrick—the man Bronn had seen running through the town square the other night.

“Sansa,” Brienne said, dismounting her horse, and the Stark girl ran to Brienne and threw her arms around her.

“I’m so sorry,” she was saying into Brienne’s shoulder, but Bronn did not care about them. He glanced back at Jaime, carefully. Sandor and Beric didn’t make any comments, yet—they seemed to be waiting for Bronn’s move, though he knew they recognized him too, of course.

“Been looking for you,” Bronn said at last, getting slowly to his feet.

“All over the fucking north,” Sandor cut in with a scoff.

“Well, he was in one place the whole time,” Brienne told them, shooting Jaime a glower as she relinquished the Stark girl. “One room, really.”

“You look like hell,” Bronn said lightly. Jaime arched a brow at him.

“Still better than you, then,” he parried. His green eyes were scanning the courtyard again. “Is this what passes for a party in the north?”
“A funeral, actually,” Beric corrected. “For Jory Cassel.”

He met Jaime’s eyes reflexively; for a split second it was like nothing had changed, and they were younger men, making faces over Beric Dondarrion’s pompous self-righteousness behind his back, rolling their eyes. *A funeral, actually....gods, what a fucking dirge he is.*

They each looked away, quickly.

“I’m so sorry,” Brienne said, shaking her head.

“I’ll tie up your horses,” Bronn cut in swiftly. He didn’t give a fuck about Cassel, or the Stark girl, or Podrick Payne, or any of them. He watched Jaime slide off his horse clumsily—he’d not learned how to do it without his right hand yet.

No one stopped him. Not even looking at Jaime, he breezed past him and went to Brienne’s horse, and took its reins. Behind him, he heard Jaime lead his horse as well, and followed him around the corner to where the other horses were stabled.

It was too awkward, too painful. Simply having to dismount his horse in front of everyone had to be some sort of payback for the things he’d done in his life. He would have preferred to be flayed than to feel their pity. Jaime followed Bronn, watching the slender man lead Podrick and Brienne’s horses so easily, so casually, as though there was nothing out of the ordinary about any of this, and he was so relieved he could not speak.

Castle Black made Mole’s Town look like the Red Keep; it was the most pathetic dump he’d ever set eyes on. The stables were mostly empty, save for a mismatched band of horses as motley as the Brotherhood without Banners had looked.

“I guess invalids don’t do much riding,” Jaime remarked as they reached the stables. Bronn snorted as he guided Brienne’s horse into an empty stall.

It was dark and warm inside the stables, the air thick and pungently sweet with the scent of manure.

“Here,” Bronn said, taking the reins from Jaime. Their eyes did not meet. “By the way, I almost killed the Stark girl not twenty minutes ago,” he said casually.

“Did you?”

“She wouldn’t tell me where you were.” Bronn closed the stall, and then there were no tasks left, nothing to occupy them. He turned to Jaime now, and Jaime had to fight against the urge to turn away.

“Poor strategy—if you killed her, then you’d never learn,” Jaime replied.

“Well, that’s why I’m not a general,” Bronn conceded with a nod.

“I’m not either,” Jaime said, and then silence fell once more.

“How can I see it?” Bronn asked plainly. He nodded to the stump, bound against Jaime’s chest.

Riding had been so painful—he had kept forgetting he didn’t have his right hand, kept missing the reins, and Brienne had finally made them stop and had forced him to bind his right arm to his chest, insisting that it would help. He would never admit she was right, of course, but it had
helped. It was strapped to his chest, hidden beneath his cloak, but of course Bronn had seen it immediately.

“Did Sansa tell you all about it?” Jaime asked instead of agreeing.

“No. She wouldn’t tell me a damn thing except that you’d been taken in by Tarly and Bolton.”

“That was the most humiliating part!” Jaime said in outrage. “Bested by Randyll Tarly’s son and a \textit{northman},” he continued disgustedly. “Can you believe—“

“Let me see the fucking stump, Lannister,” Bronn ordered plainly.

Jaime swallowed.

“It’s tied up,” he explained quietly, reaching into his cloak for where Brienne had tied the fabric. Bronn stepped forward.

“Here, I’ll do it,” he said, and suddenly he was too close. He pushed aside Jaime’s cloak with no thought to his dignity, and roughly undid the fabric. Jaime reflexively pulled his arm in closer, but Bronn’s hand closed around his forearm and pulled it back anyway. “Did Tarly cut it off?”

“No, Bolton shot an arrow at it and it became infected. When Brienne and Sansa found me, Brienne cut it off,” Jaime explained. He hadn’t had to explain the story yet; it was harder than he’d expected. Bronn unpinned the fabric that had been folded over and pushed it aside, revealing the stump.

They stared at it in the quiet. “Sansa sewed it,” Jaime added, as Bronn twisted his wrist, examining it.

“She did a good job,” Bronn remarked, as though admiring the coat Sansa had sewn, and not his ruined flesh.

“Does it matter?” Jaime breathed, hating how his anger twisted his voice. He had never revealed much to Bronn, to anyone, really. That was the nature of their friendship. They made jokes and laughed at people and killed people, and Bronn accepted Jaime in spite of his relationship with Cersei, and Jaime never prodded Bronn about his past, about the many, many secrets that the man had.

“I guess it doesn’t,” Bronn agreed. “Good job or not, you’re still down a hand.”

They were quiet again, as Bronn examined the stitches. Jaime wished he would stop looking, and yet in a way it was a relief. It was out in the open now. He could not run from it any longer.

“Clegane’s general now.”

“Yes, too bad about that,” Bronn said mildly, still looking at the stump.

“Have you actually been hanging about with \textit{Beric Dondarrion}?” Jaime asked now. Bronn snorted and dropped his wrist abruptly. “Of your own free will?”

“It wasn’t my first choice, and I’ve almost killed the fucker many times,” Bronn admitted, “but options were a bit thin on the ground.”

“Options?”

“No one knew where you were.”
“That is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me,” Jaime snorted. “You’ve willingly submitted yourself to perhaps the most profound boredom that mankind has on offer, all for me.”

“Don’t let it get to your head—you’ve always been such a humble man, wouldn’t want to get a big ego now, at your age,” Bronn parried. “It’s unbecoming in an older man.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about my ego,” Jaime said bitterly, looking down at his stump. “That got cut off.”

“Should’ve kept it in your cock like a normal man,” Bronn said lightly. “Then you’d at least have that.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “Then again, that cock’s already destructive enough. After all, it is responsible for Joffrey.”

They had never openly acknowledged that, either, before. Their eyes met. Jaime scoffed, looking down again quickly. It had never been hard to look at Bronn before.

“Technically, I think it was the balls responsible for that one, but I guess the cock played a part, too.”

“A group effort,” Bronn agreed.

The horses whickered. Distantly, they could hear laughter coming from the courtyard, brief and intense; then it stopped abruptly. Laughter seemed inappropriate here in this dismal place. “What I want to know,” Bronn began slowly, leaning against the stall, “is why Tarly and Bolton took you.”

“Oh, that.” Jaime rolled his eyes. “Tarly was convinced I raped Sansa Stark. Wanted revenge, or something.”

“You should’ve taken Stark at the holdfast.”

“That has occurred to me in my many months of exile, yes,” Jaime said tightly.

“So why didn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I told her Baelish had bought her, and I just kept thinking of his stupid, sneering face—“

“—He does have an annoying face—“ Bronn agreed.

“—and I just…decided not to do it.”

“You did always do whatever you wanted,” Bronn mused.

“Yes, and now we can all have a laugh at how the consequences have finally caught up with me,” Jaime snapped. “Ha ha.”

“Well, it is kind of funny. Not that any of those fuckers see the humor in it,” Bronn said dismally, crossing his arms. “Dondarrion wouldn’t know a joke if it cavorted naked in front of him, and that Jon Snow has all of the sense of humor of a dead cow.”

“I take it you don’t like him.”

“Not particularly,” Bronn admitted. “Tiresome, condescending, sulky little fucker.”

“Oh, you have suffered for me,” Jaime observed. He laughed, a giddy laugh, a laugh harder than was warranted, and he watched Bronn’s lips twitch as he tried not to laugh, too. But the laughter
bubbled over, helplessly, and then they were both roaring with laughter, clutching the railing of the stalls, red-faced and gasping.

“Freerider,” Tormund was yelling, hugging Payne as though they were brothers. “I have waited so long to meet you!”

Podrick was nearly crushed by Tormund; Brienne was looking at them disdainfully.

“You’re Freerider?” Val asked with interest. Gilly was scowling at Sam.

“I told you that you shouldn’t spread that around!” she was hissing.

“I’m sorry; I forgot!” Sam hissed back desperately. “I thought it was quite clever, that’s all!”

“What is Freerider?” Sansa asked, but no one seemed to hear. It was chaos. Anguy was clapping Podrick on the back; Gendry was laughing so hard that he had to simply sit down and bury his face between his knees; Dalla was chuckling, shaking her head with Mance and Beric and Davos.

And Jon was staring at Podrick with pure ice. She turned to him, touching his arm. “What is Freerider? Why does everyone know what that means?”

Jon said nothing. A muscle in his jaw leapt.

“Don’t think on it, Ala—I mean, Sansa,” Brienne corrected loftily. “It is a disgusting, embarrassing joke. I’m ashamed of you, Podrick.”

“Ashamed?! He’s a legend!” Tormund told her, swaying with Podrick and nearly choking him in the process. “Up and down Westeros. The greatest man who ever lived!”

“Yes, a legend, but not exactly the sort one ought to strive for,” Brienne said stiffly.

“But what is the legend?” Sansa pressed. “Why won’t anyone tell me?”

“Because they’re scared the crow will kill them,” Tormund informed her, nodding to Jon, while still clutching Podrick, who was struggling to break free, gasping for breath. Jon would not look at her.

“This man is a legend told in every brothel in Westeros, and possibly beyond,” Anguy told her with great reverence. “I’ve heard many a tale of his greatness. He is the Great Freerider—“

“—Just how much time do you spend in brothels?” Val asked Anguy, her brows arched. He shot her a roguish grin.

“Could be less, if you’d be willing to lend me your hand, or your—“

“—Well! This has been fun,” Gendry interrupted hastily at the look of utter revulsion on Val’s face. He turned to Sansa. “Podrick Payne is known in brothels as the Freerider. I will leave you to puzzle that one out with the clues provided,” he said politely, with an anxious glance at Jon. Sansa stared at Podrick in shock.

“Oh my—“ she clapped a hand to her mouth, face going molten red.

“Oh, wait. that’s right,” Sam said suddenly. “Mr. Payne kissed you the other night, Sansa! Was it transcen—“ he let out a squeal of pain; Gilly had elbowed him sharply, but the damage was done. Podrick suddenly seemed to melt back into Tormund, no longer so eager to break free but rather
“Well, to be fair, I did too,” Anguy admitted. “It was the sort of night for it, I think…and the sort of dress for it.”

She had forgotten about them both: Podrick kissing her full on the mouth and then, later, Anguy kissing her neck.

“The question is how he does it,” Davos said now, an almost philosophical air to his voice. “What’s your secret, lad?”

“Nothing,” Podrick muttered, finally breaking free from Tormund and shooting Jon fearful looks as he massaged his neck.

“Nothing! I could do that,” Anguy joked, earning a few groans and reluctant laughs. But quite suddenly, everyone went quiet again, and for a moment there was only the sound of the wind whistling through the courtyard. No one seemed to know where to look. That was the strange thing about grief; emotions ran wild and unbridled, unpredictable and inappropriate and swiftly transforming from one to the next without warning.

“We came to check on Sansa,” Brienne explained at last, breaking the silence.

“How is Mole’s Town?” Sam asked as Brienne and Podrick sat down by the fire. Everyone sat back down uncomfortably, their faces grey with grief again.

“It’s chaos. Clegane is supposed to come appoint a new commander of the Town Watch,” Brienne explained. Sansa looked down at her hands.

“Clegane? Why would he?” Beric wondered. “Mole’s Town’s not important.”

“No, but everyone knows it was the Brotherhood,” Brienne replied grimly. “You’d do best to avoid Mole’s Town for a long time.”

“Well, that’s the plan. We’ll be heading on to Eastwatch. Mance has a friend there who inherited a place. We mean to organize,” Beric said.

“Organize?” Brienne asked doubtfully.

“Aye, it’s time for revolution,” said Mance. “The people are hungry for it. We didn’t have a plan, last time, and things got out of hand. This time we’ll be ready.”

Sansa felt Mance looking at her. “And Sansa Stark still hasn’t given me her answer,” he remarked.

“Why do you want me to join?” Sansa asked desperately, looking up at Mance at last.

“Partly because you have a name that means something to people,” Mance admitted, surprising her with his honesty, “and partly because you’ve already demonstrated that your beliefs are more than a passing interest. You’ve risked your life now against the Crown’s power, and that’s no common thing.”

“I didn’t, though,” Sansa protested. “I risked my life for my friends. I risked my life because it was my fault that Thorne knew the names of the Direwolves.”

“Aye, and did that happen before or after you started reading the White Stag’s writing?” Mance pointed out almost coyly.
Sansa looked away. She did not know what she wanted. She knew that she did not like Mance—though she was not quite sure why—and she knew that she could not go back to Mole’s Town and resume her life as Alayne Stone.

But she didn’t know anything else. “And didn’t—” Mance began.

“—Stop.”

Jon’s voice was hard and cold. “We’re not leaving until the morning. She doesn’t have to decide now. Leave her be and let her decide on her own terms.”

“I’m merely making a case,” Mance countered.

“And you’ve made it,” Jon said, his tone still cool. “There’s a line between making a case and forcing someone. Don’t cross it.”

“Maybe you ought to let your wife speak for herself,” Mance shot back. “If she wanted me to leave her alone, she could just say it.”

“Any fool could tell you’ve made her uncomfortable,” Jon said, his voice now icy. “Why must you keep pushing? Why should she have to tell you to stop when you can tell that she wants you to?”

“Why are you still speaking for her?”

“I’m not speaking for her, I’m speaking for myself. Words are weapons, and if you use the sharp ones to get what you want, you’re no different than the people you say you’re fighting.”

“This is a sore spot for you,” Mance observed, studying Jon.

“Aye, I won’t blindly follow someone for the ideals they spout—not if their actions contradict those ideals.”

“Not again?” Mance suggested. Jon’s gaze was flinty and cold and unflinching.

“Aye, not again,” he agreed softly.

Mance looked to Sansa.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a nod, “and I don’t mean to force you—or anyone.” He shot a look at Jon. “I’m surrounded by people who have witnessed the abuse of power, and it seems I’ve failed to listen to them. I hope you can forgive me. You too have seen it—in so many different ways—and that’s just another of so many reasons for why I think you should join us. We all have different truths—even Beric and I have different ideas.”

“That we do,” Beric admitted, the air growing a bit taut. “But I consider it as taking different roads to get to the same place.”

”Think on it, Sansa Stark,” Mance said, and then he left her alone.

Conversation began again around them, but Sansa did not feel like talking. She was weak with exhaustion, and so lost. Sam and Gilly slipped away with their son who had begun to whine and whimper for home, and Bronn and Jaime hadn’t returned, and eventually Tormund and Anguy stopped badgering Podrick and started drinking quietly, as the exhaustion of seeing death took its toll on all of them. It wasn’t even evening yet, but Sansa’s eyes ached; she could barely keep them open.
“You ought to sleep,” she heard Dalla saying to Jon quietly. “I heard he didn’t pass until late in the night.” She felt a hand on her arm. “Come on, dear,” Dalla was saying gently, helping her up. “Get some rest, and don’t worry about Mance.”

Sansa walked with Jon, back to the storeroom.

In the cool darkness, he turned to face her, stopping her from collapsing on the pile of hay in the corner.

Sansa looked at him, startled. His heart was pounding. He knew what he had to say, but it was so hard to say it.

“I’m sorry,” he forced out.

“For what?”

“For interrupting Mance, just now. I should have let you speak.”

“I was grateful; I didn’t know what to say,” she admitted, looking down in shame. He turned away. “Do you believe in Mance?” she asked as he paced away from her. Jon stopped, and stared at the stone wall in front of him.

“I don’t know yet,” he confessed. “I believe in Beric, and the Brotherhood. But I don’t know about Mance, yet. I don’t think any of us do for certain yet.”

“I feel like I’m being used.” Her voice was tight, constrained. “I didn’t feel used as Alayne Stone. No one knew I was Sansa Stark, no one could profit from me or my name. You gave me that. I didn’t know what it felt like to just …be... until I became Alayne Stone. I didn’t know what it felt like to not be a pawn.”

“Hardly makes up for what I took from you.”

“It was everything,” she countered fiercely, and he could not stop himself from turning to face her in shock. “And yet…” she let out a sad laugh, shaking her head, “the minute I feel used again, I lose all of that strength.”

He thought of Dany, her hands pressing down on his abdomen the first time she had come to him. Why hadn’t he pushed her away, that first night? Why had he only been able to utter a feeble, pointless, ‘no’? How many times had he been told he was the best swordsman, the best fighter—and yet what good was any of it? When it had mattered most he had been helpless. He still didn’t know if it had meant that he had somehow, deep down, wanted Dany—or if it meant he really was that helpless. He still didn’t know which would be worse.

And it killed him to know she was feeling that way, and he could do nothing about it. There were no words that could ease that shame, and trying to protect her—as he had done just now—would only make it worse. He’d known it even as he’d been speaking to Mance and yet he hadn’t been able to stop himself; he had been blinded by anger.

The only thing he could do, he realized with startling clarity, was to do for her what she had done for him. That night she had looked at him in the darkness, touched his face, he had felt her reach into his soul, had felt her picking up all of the broken pieces and handing them back to him. She hadn’t put him back together—but she had shown him that it could be done.

“Well,” he began slowly, watching her gaze flick up again almost fearfully, and that killed him too.
He did not want her to look at him in fear ever again. “What does Alayne Stone want?”

She wrapped her arms around herself.

“She wants to do something with meaning, with purpose. She wants to help the north, she wants to make the world better, kinder. She wants to make dresses,” Sansa confessed almost shyly. “She wants…” And her gaze slid to him, so briefly, before she looked away once more, her lovely face flushing, “…to be kissed.”

“It sounds like she is kissed quite a bit,” Jon replied, thinking of Podrick Payne, and even Anguy —when had Anguy even found the time to kiss her, and why?

“Not by anyone who understands her.”

“Does that matter in a kiss?” His heart was a stupid weak thing fluttering like a helpless bird inside him.

“Do you think it does?”

He thought of Dany’s lips on his skin. Dany had loved him, had loved him fiercely, and yet…

“Aye, I think it does,” he agreed at last. “Maybe more than anything else.”

“And,” Sansa continued, still not looking at him, “she can’t kiss him; it’s got to be the other way around. This person who understands her, I mean.”

“Why?”

“Because she understands him, too,” she said in a rush, “and she just knows that that’s how it has to be. H-he’s only ever given of himself,” she added. “He’s never said what he wants. He never thought he was allowed.”

She looked at him at last. Why did she want him? It wasn’t possible; it didn’t make any sense. He could not breathe for his disbelief. He dared to let his thoughts run to the freckle on her back, the scar on her thigh, and he snatched them back before they could linger too long. He never thought he was allowed.

Her eyes were so lovely. She was so gentle, so good, and he was so afraid. Even after all of the pain and grief of these last few days, her first instinct was to love, to heal. He had always turned his sadness inward.

Each step toward her was agony. He didn’t know how to start, didn’t know what to do with his hands. It had been so easy to hold her against him, earlier; even pressing a kiss to her temple had been so effortless, but this was so different. It was not the heat of the moment, it was not the inevitable conclusion of movement. It was a choice.

He touched his hand to her cheek, and slid it into her hair; he touched his forehead to hers, and closed his eyes, and finally pressed his lips to hers. Something was painfully tight in his chest, and she was clinging to him, slender fingers fistng in the fabric of his coat as his hand fistned in her hair, tilting her head, and he could not help but slide his mouth against hers, for no reason except that he wanted to do it and he thought he might lose his mind if he didn’t. He pressed his other hand to her waist, holding her close to him, reveling in the singular pleasure of her body against his, her mouth against his, the way she was clinging to him. How was it possible that all of the things he had not been able to find the words for could be said like this?
They broke apart, breathless. He felt drunk, clumsy, mindless. She turned away from him, blushing, touching her hands to her cheeks.

“We should—“

“Let’s—“

“Let’s sleep,” Jon said, not looking at her. He heard her crawl onto the pile of hay and he turned back to her, still dizzy with the urge to kiss her again, and crawled behind her. And, as indulgent and mad as if he really had been drunk, he let his thoughts return to her scar, and how much he wanted to kiss it, again and again, until the last of the daylight faded, and night crept in, and he fell asleep at last.
Part III: Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

TW for mentions of self-harm. Also, some sexual content.

Time for the plot to pick up again. Thanks as always for the lovely comments and kudos! I hope you all enjoy the chapter.

Dickon watched the redcoats load the box into the trunk in the lavender dawn.

The air had the metallic tang of the threat of rain, but it hadn't broken yet, and Theon Greyjoy had said it wouldn't rain for hours. Dickon wondered how he knew, but not enough to ask. He was preoccupied with his own troubles, which had multiplied since yesterday morning, when his mother had asked for word from his father.

"It's packed well, m'lord," said one of the redcoats, slapping the box.

"It?" Dickon blurted out, unable to take his eyes off the box. "That's my father's ashes."

"R-right, of course, m'lord. I meant the vase it—he—they—are in," the redcoat stammered, and the man slinked off, leaving Dickon with Ramsay and General Clegane. Theon was still inside, getting ready for their journey south.

He was taking his father's ashes home.

He estimated that the journey would take about a week in total, from Winterfell to Horn Hill, and then back again. He had no intentions of staying in Horn Hill for too long. He did not want to be around his family. He didn't deserve it.

"We'll keep Winterfell safe while you're gone, my lord," Ramsay said soothingly, placing a hand on Dickon's arm, but Dickon flinched and stepped away from Ramsay. "Safe travels, my lord."

"Thank you," Dickon said, not looking at the Bolton man.

They heard footfalls; Theon was approaching from the Keep, dressed for riding. The Ironborn man had helped Dickon shave his head again this morning, and the cool air ghosted over his vulnerable scalp like a shiver as he watched Theon stride toward them, looking bright and carrying an air of adventure about him. He did not understand why Theon had been so insistent on coming with him. A few of his father's men were with them as well, though Dickon did not speak to them and they did not speak to him.

He did not know what they might tell his mother about his father's death once they all arrived at Horn Hill. It seemed that no one had broken the truth to her, but, perhaps, they did not know the truth. Or perhaps his mother did not care. Both options seemed equally plausible to Dickon. The more time Dickon spent in the lord's chambers, nursing his angers and grievances, the more he had recalled of his childhood, of his father's violence and failings—not just to him, or to Sam, but to his mother and sisters as well.

Perhaps she might even be glad he'd done it.
"All packed up, then?" Theon asked when he reached them, with an air of optimism, as though they were merely going on an extended jaunt, complete with a picnic. One day Dickon would wipe that smile off his face.

"Yes, all packed," Dickon said shortly, and he swung up onto his horse. "Let's go."

Winterfell, at least, would be fine in Ramsay and General Clegane's hands; at least he could feel certain of that.

They rode south. Dickon rode ahead, harder and faster than he knew was wise, and it was of course not for any desire to get home sooner. He couldn't say why he did it. Maybe he just wanted to get away from everyone.

Lately, being around people seemed impossible. They always were talking, and expecting you to talk in return, always obsessed with mundane things that did not matter. He preferred to be alone, in his room, sleeping when he could, though that was as uneven as usual. At least he had recently developed a pursuit that interested him, though he knew he could not tell anyone about it. They might find it unseemly. He had to hide it, had to do it in places where no one could see. If they saw, they might ask, and he did not know how he could possibly explain the fascination of it. He'd discovered it by accident, and it hurt, but it felt good, too; it was almost a relief.

He could feel what he had done throbbing along his skin as he rode, pulsing with each stride of his horse. He'd brought the blade with him, hidden in his breeches. It was a blade that Father had given him when he had first started hunting; it was a child's blade, and he'd kept it all this time, a relic of one of the only uncomplicated memories of Father he had left, and perhaps that was how he had come to this pursuit, in obsessing over this blade. Yet he'd tainted this memory, now, too. Father had been smiling as he'd given him the blade, that reluctant half-smile—for Randyll Tarly was so afraid to show any feeling—and he had pressed the ivory-handled blade into Dickon's small palm. It's all the way from Essos, he had told him. The handle comes from an elephant.

Dickon had asked what an elephant was, and, Sam, crying, had told him later. He'd shown him a drawing of an elephant from a book. It was a massive thing. Look how lovely they are. They're big, maybe the biggest of all the animals, but they're gentle, and dead clever, too. You have to slay them to get the tusks, Sam had blubbered, and Dickon had stared at him in confusion.

What of it? he'd asked. Of course you've got to kill it. That's how you get fur, and leather, and meat, isn't it?

And of course Sam had only cried harder, because he cried more than girls did, though, to be fair, Dickon wasn't even sure he'd ever actually seen a girl crying. He had been glad that Father hadn't seen it; he would've beaten Sam bad for that, and it would have ruined the blade for him.

"Lovely day for a ride," Theon's voice came up behind him. Theon was riding to catch up with him, so Dickon rode harder.

"We're delivering my father's ashes to my mother," Dickon said flatly, though the force of his horse’s gallops punctuated his words and took the deadpan quality that he’d been aiming for out of them.

"He's already dead," Theon countered. "Been dead, for months." Theon was looking at him as they rode. "What's that?" he asked curiously, nodding to Dickon's thigh.

A thin line of blood was seeping through his breeches, a thin cut that the ivory-handled blade had made just hours ago. Dickon looked at it, then looked ahead.
"No idea," he said. "Must be from training."

Theon didn't reply. For a time they rode in silence, but Dickon wished the man would take the hint and fall back a bit. Sadly, his horse couldn't keep up the intense pace forever, and after an hour, the horses began to slow. There was no escaping Theon now.

"So," Theon began, almost eagerly, "bet you're wondering why I wanted so bad to come along."

Dickon didn't give him the pleasure of admitting it, and they rode in silence. "Well, I've been looking for something, for years, now," Theon continued desperately, clearly deciding he required no response from Dickon, "and I think I've found it, so we'll just need to make a small detour—tiny detour."

"You could go alone," Dickon pointed out, still not looking at Theon.

"Aye, I could have," he conceded, "but me going might draw attention to it. If we just happen to make a stop on the way to Horn Hill, there's no suspicion there."

"Suspicion?"

"Aye, I don't want to draw the wrong attention to this treasure I've found," Theon said slyly, almost smugly. Dickon finally looked at the man. He was looking at him, eyes dancing with some thrill.

"Wrong attention?"

"Are you a bloody parrot?" Theon asked him, looking almost irritated for a second. "Aye, the wrong attention. Lord Baelish and his little spies are always looking, especially with the redcoats hanging about, and I don't think he's found this treasure. I thought it, at first, with that little message, but I think not."

"What little message?"

Theon looked at him, dumbfounded.

"The whore has an heir," he said slowly, as though speaking to a stupid child. "Remember? The scroll from Lord Baelish to Clegane?"

"Oh, right." He'd forgotten about that. The revelation that the dragonwolf had never fucked Sansa Stark had eclipsed the contents of that scroll. He wondered, as he often had in the last few days, if anyone had fucked Sansa Stark.

"So," Theon continued haltingly, with relish, as though about to give Dickon a great gift, "we'll need to stop at the Crag. Shouldn't add more than a day, all told, to our journey."

"The Crag?" Dickon blurted. "Why the hell would we stop there? There's nothing but seashells there."

"Seashells, and a girl...A girl I've been looking for."

Dickon stopped his horse abruptly, and stared at Theon.

"You spend day in and day out in brothels, and you're telling me we need to make a daylong detour to the middle of nowhere...for a girl," Dickon said now in disgust.

"Oh, I don't want her cunt," Theon reassured him, resuming riding ahead of Dickon. "That's already been had."
"I didn't know that bothered you," Dickon said bitterly as he dug his heel into his horse and went after Theon.

"It doesn't," Theon conceded, "but that territory's been marked."

This might be the only girl in the world that Theon would not consider fucking. Dickon did not want to admit it but his curiosity had been piqued.

"Marked by...?" Dickon asked, riding alongside Theon. They were already angling west. It had been decided… yet he’d never actually agreed to it.

Theon turned that sly smile on him again.

"Aye. Marked by Robb Stark."

Sansa awoke before dawn, with the feeling that she had slept so hard and for so long that her eyes had been sealed shut and she now had to crack them open. Her stomach ached with gnawing hunger, and her mouth was dry, but on the other hand, she was warm, and there was a comforting weight on her side.

It was Jon's arm, and his legs were tangled with hers. It was probably, she reflected, just a little pathetic how much she reveled in this moment, this feeling of being held so tightly and so lovingly. She had never just been loved before; there had always been some motive, some end to which she was a means. And, in her half-asleep state, she was awash in a warm, sweet joy at this realization, and she buried her face in the hay to hide the silly smile, until she realized there was no need to hide it. There was no one waiting to steal her joy from her, no one lurking in the shadows, waiting to find out what mattered to her. There was just she and Jon, buried in hay, tangled up in each other. Jon, Jon, Jon...

Jon had kissed her. It had been a real kiss, she thought; a kiss that had taken all of the parts of her that had been left cracked and broken by the events of the last few days and begun to fit them back together. She had not known that simple touch could be so healing, so transforming. Impulsively she turned over, extricating her legs from Jon's, and rolled onto her other side to face him. His face was half-buried in the hay, hair wild from sleep.

He slept so quietly, stayed so still. He was the loveliest thing she had ever seen. She touched his cheek, then his jaw, feeling the roughness of his beard beneath her fingertips. It had scratched her chin when he'd kissed her, and even though it had burned, she had liked the burn. She liked being able to feel the differences between them: he was hard where she was soft, and rough where she was smooth, but his lashes were longer than hers and his lips softer too. She watched his eyelids flutter at her touch, felt his breath rush along her wrist as he sighed in his sleep...

This was her husband, and she could have a life with him, the sort of life she had always dreamed of—though not at all in the way she would have ever expected. They could live together, do something meaningful together, even have children together...It wouldn't be at Winterfell, but none of her family had been buried at Winterfell anyway; that was a part of her that she had had to shed to stay alive, to make it to this point where she was finally, finally going to get something she had always wanted—perhaps the only thing she had ever really wanted. She was going to live with and be loved by someone who also wanted to make the world better, who also wanted to have a son named Robb, who also loved the north in all of its wild, tangled, untamed beauty.

She still was unsure of how she felt about Mance, though it helped that she was not the only one unsure of him. And she liked Dalla, and she thought she might like Val, too, even if there was a
shameful little flare of jealousy every time she saw the woman. Val was so beautiful, and so strong —she had fired that pistol without hesitation, while Sansa had been reduced to a stammering mess at Mance’s questioning. And Val knew Jon, too, and liked him, and he liked her—Sansa had seen him the day before, kneeling next to Val, and when he'd seen her looking at them, he had turned his head away...It was pathetic to feel jealous, but she couldn't help it. She couldn't help but wonder if he thought Val beautiful, if he had compared her to Val, if he had ever thought about Val. It would be natural; Val would turn any man's head.

But he kissed me, she told herself. And besides, she had thought about other men. She had tried to imagine a life with other men, while they had been apart. She had even thrown herself at Jaime in a drunken fit of desperation...for the second time, she thought with shame. But there will never be a third time, of course.

It wouldn't be fair to expect Jon to not think of other women. There had never been any actual agreement between them. He had told her that he had married her for love, but on the other hand, he had never intended on seeing her again...And she had always been told that men had different needs than women did; they needed sex more than women did. Though, the hunger she had felt for Jon right now seemed so intense it was impossible to imagine it could possibly be any more powerful than it already was.

And she wondered if he missed Daenerys, too. She still did not truly know the nature of their relationship, though she did not feel jealous of that particular connection, so much as fearful of it and what it might mean for him, now that it had been severed.

Jon's eyes fluttered open, and she was staring into dark grey. She began to withdraw her hand from his cheek, but he reached up and held onto her wrist and closed his eyes again.

"Not dawn yet, is it?" he murmured against her skin. It made something flutter in her like a string plucked; she felt heat gather between her legs.

"Not yet," she whispered.

"Have you made a decision?" he asked, eyes still closed, voice still rough with sleep. She moved her thumb against his cheek. Her heart began to beat a little faster. She didn't know why she was afraid to say it.

Maybe because she was afraid that she was being foolish as usual, afraid that she was thinking she was about to get everything she had ever wanted but would only have it be snatched from her yet again. What if he didn't actually want her? What if they were wrong for each other? What if all of this desire, all of this painful hope strung between them, was based on nothing but a physical desire that would be sated and tossed aside the minute they lay together?

What if, what if, what if… Hiding from her fears, hiding from him, would not protect her. Hadn't she learned that yet? She thought of how she had stammered before Mance the night before, so fearful. She might never be strong like Val but she could be strong in her own way. She knew she could be.

"Yes," she confessed. His eyes fluttered open again. "But I'm scared," she admitted, still whispering.

Whispering was easier than saying it in a normal voice. She didn't know why. "I want..." Her heart was pounding now. "...I want..."

Why was it so hard to just force the words out? She thought of the night before, when Jon had
asked her what Alayne Stone wanted. How had he known that that would make it easier? "I want to go to Eastwatch, and I want to have a life there...with you...if you want that too. I want to fight for the north with you."

"I want that," he said softly.

"But what if it doesn't work?" she asked in a rush. "What if we're terrible together; what if Mance's plans turn out to be horrible, what if—"

"—I told you that no one else was sure of Mance yet, either," Jon interrupted firmly, though his voice was still barely above a whisper—although she suspected that was because he was worried that someone might be listening. "The minute that we decide we don't want to work with Mance anymore, we'll leave. Beric will be the first to leave, believe me, but even if he isn't...we'll leave."

"But...what if..."

She didn't know how to explain it. "We don't really know each other that well," she finished desperately. "I don't even understand my feelings for you. I don't even know that much about you, or what you've been doing since you left Winterfell."

"Well, you have a fair idea," he said. "Better than most. Better than almost any of the Brotherhood."

It was hanging in the air between them: the question of what he had felt for Daenerys, what he still might feel for Daenerys...and whether anyone could come after Daenerys.

"But you know what I mean," she insisted desperately. "Old Nan used to tell me stories of maidens who lay with men who had promised their love to them, only to find them gone in the morning—"

She was cut off as Jon snorted so hard he almost choked, and then broke down, shaking silently. Unbelievable. He was actually laughing at her. She had never seen him laugh so much. He covered his face and turned into the hay, shaking with silent laughter. "Don't laugh!" she said indignantly, watching his shoulders shake. "Stop laughing! It's not funny! What if when we lay together—"

Even saying the words made her face flush, but it didn't matter because Jon was still quite occupied with laughing at her, so much so that he was still buried in the hay, shaking silently. "It's not funny!"

"But it is," he gasped, rolling back onto his side again, his face red with laughter, chest heaving. "I'm sorry, but it is."

"Stop laughing at me!"

"Sansa, we're already married," he pointed out, voice constrained as he tried not to laugh, rolling over to face her again. "I'm no expert on cautionary tales, but I'm fairly certain the point of those stories was that the maidens should have waited until marriage."

"Yes, but you've only offered to annul the marriage nearly every three seconds since—"

"—Because I thought you wanted to, and I didn't want you to feel obligated to stay with someone you did not want," he interrupted swiftly. "I wanted to give you a choice—a real choice. I didn't want to trap you in something that you did not want. I still don't. And if you decided you didn't want to go to Eastwatch...then we wouldn't have to."

She watched him swallow, the laughter gone from his eyes.
We wouldn’t have to, he had said.

“‘We?’ she prompted, unsteadily.

He didn’t speak right away. He drew in a breath.

“Aye, we. We’re married,” he affirmed quietly. “As long as you want to be.”

“Not completely married,” she pointed out, heart pounding.

They both held still, staring at each other in fear and hope. His eyes looked so dark they were almost black. “We never consummated it,” she added, her mouth dry. “So we’re not really completely married.”

“You’re right,” he said softly.

“A-and,” she continued in a shaking voice, her skin growing too hot at the look in his eyes, “it would be terrible—scandalous, really—for me to just run off to Eastwatch with you, with us not being completely married.”

“And we’ve been so free of scandal ’til now,” he said with a wry twist of his voice.

“Exactly. So it’s best if we’re really married…if we’re going to run off to Eastwatch together.”

If he didn’t touch her soon she thought she might simply lose her mind. It was his eyes, she decided. How could such a cold color convey such heat? It was like being burned by ice, frozen by fire. *Is this normal,* she wondered desperately, *to want someone this much? Is this usual, is this how it always is between a man and a woman before they touch?*

“No better place than a pile of hay to consummate a marriage,” he said at last, looking at the hay between them.

“It’ll be like the cautionary tales,” she said, heart beating faster, “a romp in the hay.”

Jon’s lips twitched with the threat of a smile and he looked down. “I-If you want to, I mean,” she added. He let out a scoff, and the breath rushed along her neck.

“I want to,” he admitted, his voice rough, as he met her gaze. She remembered telling him about her fears of being bedded by Dickon. *I can promise you he’s given it quite a lot of thought,* he had said. His voice had been rough from whiskey then. Now it was rough with desire.

When had it happened? When had they started wanting each other? They had been strangers, and then enemies, and then, somehow, it had all been transformed. Perhaps it was because they had been strangers and then enemies that made this desire so much more painful and unwieldy, so much more powerful and mysterious. Or perhaps it was him: the man that Sam had told ghost stories of, the man that all of Westeros feared, the man, so slender and dark, who resembled the otherworldly, magical creatures that Old Nan had told her stories about. *The faeries and the elves, the children of the forest,* Nan would tell her, sending sly glances to Jon, always kept separate from them, *are dark and slim and made of twists and turns, and they like to steal pretty maidens from their home forever, and take them to the land of the Faeries…*

“H-have you thought about it?” she asked.

He waited a beat.
"I have."

"Me too," she confessed quickly. "A lot."

Something in his gaze changed, then. He looked surprised but that melted away as something more primal took over. He took her hand in his once more, the hand that had traced his jaw, and pressed a lingering kiss to the inside of her wrist, closing his eyes as he kissed her. It brought every part of her to life.

And it was that simple kiss that seemed to open a dam: she needed him, felt it as a shuddering, almost painful, ripple in her chest, somewhere behind her ribs, that made it hard to breathe. She reached forward just as he turned to her, and then he was kissing her, lips sliding against hers.

He was afraid of hurting her. He was afraid of scaring her. She didn't have the experience, didn't have the understanding, yet—she didn't know what they were entering into—but he thought if he didn’t feel her skin against his he might simply die.

He was half on top of her, afraid to roll onto her fully, lest he crush her, but her arms were already slipping around his neck, fingers twining in his hair, as he pressed his mouth against hers, feeling her sigh into the kiss. Her body was so soft beneath his. He could feel her breasts against his chest and remembered that she had bound them with cloth, and his fingers twitched with the urge to find the tie and undo it, but he held back, even through the rush of blood, through the dizzying need to rip off her clothes and kiss every inch of her skin.

He shifted further onto her, careful to keep his hips angled from hers. He was already hard and he didn't want to scare her with the feeling of his desire...yet she was shifting beneath him, one leg wrapping around his, and he felt her heat through the fabric between them.

And even so there was a knot of dread forming…this can never be undone, he wished he could tell her. There's no turning back, and it will change everything. He thought of the shriveled, lifeless thing between he and Dany; that blackened curse that had smothered every touch between them. It seemed impossible that this feeling of lightness and heady warmth—this feeling that made him think of humid late spring nights and pendulous blossoms and warm saltwater over his skin and laughter and wine and honey and enchantment—could ever turn into that pain, but he was so afraid. He could not bear the thought of it, but he could not bear to not touch her, either. There was a dark spectre hanging over him and he could not escape it.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered against his lips. She seemed impossible to ruin; after all, she was still sweet and filled with love and flowers even after all that had been done to her. She was not like him. Perhaps he had not been ruined by Dany; perhaps he had been twisted from the start. He did not know and he was so tired of wondering: was he evil or had he allowed evil to be done to him? And was it evil if its intent had not been evil at all?

"What do you want to do?" he asked, pulling away from her slightly. "What did you think about?" he tried. He wondered what she had thought about, and whether her body had reacted to her thoughts. Her chin was red from his beard and her eyes looked darker blue, almost navy, in lust. She looked away, flushing further, biting her lip.

"I..." She swallowed, "...I want... I want you to bite my neck. I just want to know if it feels good."

He stifled the laugh that threatened to come up. She looked so embarrassed. He pressed his lips to hers again helplessly, as he pulled her up with him, so that they were sitting upright together. He gently tugged on her hair, exposing her neck, and he felt her draw in a breath sharply with the
movement. The sound stirred something in him, made his mind go blank; made him forget his fears.

He kissed along her jaw, down her neck, and, ever so gently, ran his teeth along the soft skin just below her ear and felt her shiver against him and gasp softly, fingers digging into his shoulders. He pressed a soft kiss to the same place and moved his hands along her waist, up to her ribs, holding her in place as he scraped his teeth along her skin again, and felt her twist and writhe against him as she let out the softest sound.

She twined her fingers in his hair and pulled him up again to kiss him more fiercely, some of her shyness ebbing away. He guided her to lay down again, her legs around his hips this time, and when his body pressed into hers she sighed into his mouth so softly, tightening her legs around his hips, and he gasped. It had been so many months since he had last done this, but it had been Dany, and that was different. He felt uneven and unsure of himself, clumsy and desperate. He had felt in control at first, but suddenly it was as if he had never touched or been touched at all.

Her fingers fisted in the fabric over his shoulders, pulling at it gently, cautiously. She wanted him to take it off, he realized with a thrill, and he broke away, grabbing at the hem of his shirt and pulling it over his head. He felt her pulling with him, and then it was over his head and her hands were on his skin, running over his chest and shoulders clumsily, for no other reason than to feel him, his skin burning with every touch, her gaze raking over him with uncertainty and desire. "Should I take off...?" she began, averting her gaze, fingers going to her shirt—his shirt on her, and even that thought was thrilling—nervously.

"Please," he whispered, pulling her upward just enough to help her out of the shirt, pulling it over her head. He tossed it aside hastily as she lay back down, arms crossing over her bound breasts self-consciously, her body flushing all over. "You're so lovely," he said, and he leaned down and kissed her bare shoulder because it needed to be kissed, and felt her draw in a sharp breath. "I want to kiss your freckle," he confessed against her shoulder, and felt it shake as she laughed.

"On my back? What a strange place to be kissed," she said breathlessly, but she rolled over all the same, looking over her shoulder as he moved down her body.

Just beneath the fabric binding her breasts it was there, perfect and tiny, and he ran his hand along her skin, feeling her shiver and watching the gooseflesh raise at his touch, and he closed his eyes and kissed the freckle. Her skin was warm beneath his lips and her scent was everywhere. The binding tie was just above the freckle, and he thought about tugging it undone, but thought it might be too much too fast, so he kissed her shoulder blade instead, pushing her hair out of the way, and she twisted beneath him to lay on her back again, her leg slinging over his hip and her hands smoothing along his shoulders, ghosting over the planes of his body. He buried his face in the crook of her neck again, kissing and biting into her skin and reveling in how her legs tightened around his hips and how she gasped and reeled at the feel of his teeth on her soft skin.

She felt overwhelmed by her own senses. There was the hay scratching at her skin, the feel of the rough stone beneath the hay, his skin against hers, his mouth over hers, the scent of his skin... It did not seem possible that after all of the months of dreaming about this, it was finally happening, and it seemed too fast, too much, to take in properly, but on the other hand she had never felt so desperate, like she was running wildly and freely down a hill and her legs could not be stopped, could only wildly attempt to keep up the motion, to keep from simply collapsing and tumbling down.

Jon had been right: she was just doing what she wanted to do, and had stopped wondering why she wanted to do any of it, or how to do it, or whether he might find it strange. She wanted to feel his
hair between her fingers, wanted to dig her nails into the skin of his shoulders, feeling the lean muscle shift beneath his skin, wanted to wrap her legs around his hips and press her hips into his, and feel the heat between them. And she only wanted more: wanted to feel his mouth and hands on her on other places too, and even though she was embarrassed about the growing damp heat between her legs, she wanted him to touch her there, too.

She was arching into him, feeling one calloused hand ghost up her back, to where she had tied the fabric around her breasts, fingers slipping beneath the bindings, and she wished he would just bloody untie it already—

"Jonny boy—oh, oops, they're busy."

They froze, gasping, Jon hovering over her. She felt as dizzy and disoriented as if she were somersaulting under water, and was desperately kicking for the surface.

Anguy was in the doorway, leaning in, and Jon blocked Sansa from his view. "When you're finished," Anguy said with an unexpectedly nasty sarcasm, "we’re outside and we ought to talk."

They heard the door click shut again.

Jon dropped back onto her with something like a laugh.

"Seven hells," he muttered into her neck. An incredulous laugh escaped her as she absently smoothed her hands over his hair.

It was like breaking the surface now. She was suddenly keenly aware of how wild her hair must look, of the fact that they were merely lying on a pile of hay, of how only a matter of hours separated her from a time in which she had never thought they would reunite and this moment in which she was wantonly twined around him. She was also keenly aware of how uncomfortable the damp heat between her legs was, and she feared it might be obvious. Could he tell…? Was it more than was normal? Was it even normal at all?

Jon shifted off of her, and rolled onto his back beside her, covering his face with his hands. The grey light of dawn was filling the room now and she could see him better, all of the scars on his chest and arms and the trail of dark hair into the waist of his breeches and for some reason that made her blush. She had suddenly pictured kissing along that swath of skin, imagined the hair tickling her chin. Why did she want to do that?

"I need a moment," he said, voice strained. Sansa bit her lip to stop from laughing and sat up, still aware of the dampness between her legs and how the fabric binding her breasts had shifted. It seemed so strange now that she had wanted him to touch her there so desperately. She self-consciously covered herself as she cast around in search of her shirt and coat.

Anguy's tone had made her feel uneasy and ashamed. It had the mocking quality that nearly everything he said had, but it hadn't been kind, and she felt a stab of misgiving. Knowing Anguy would be with them at Eastwatch—knowing she would have a friend—had undoubtedly swayed her decision. Maybe she was just uneasy because she was embarrassed about being caught in the middle of something so personal and it was making her read more into things than she ought to. Maybe there was nothing unusual.

Or maybe, a tiny voice whispered, so cruel and sly, Anguy had never been her friend to begin with.

It was just like King's Landing all over again, wondering who was a true friend and who was false. She yanked the shirt over her head and turned back to Jon who had sat up and was in the middle of
pulling his own shirt back over his head. She wanted to ask him if he’d found Anguy’s tone strange, but she couldn’t find the words.

It’s nothing, she told herself. He’s just teasing like he always does.

They got to their feet and finished dressing, then went out into the pale dawn. Beric and the rest of the Brotherhood were waiting, along with Brienne and Podrick, and Jaime and Bronn. Sansa tried to catch Anguy's eye, but he was helping Podrick with his saddle, turned away from her.

"There's supposedly room enough," Beric was saying as they approached, "though we don't have any guarantees."

"I can't just abandon the bakery," Brienne replied. "But if Pod wants to go, it is up to him."

"I-I don't think so," Podrick said, looking down at the ground. Sansa waited for someone to make another Freerider joke but no one seemed to be in a laughing mood. "I-I've got a life in Mole's Town and I've worked quite hard for it."

"Understandable," Davos conceded. He nodded in greeting to Jon and Sansa, and Beric looked over his shoulder at them.

"Will you be joining us, Sansa?" he asked her, not looking at Jon.

"Yes," Sansa said, and glanced around in search of Mance and his family before continuing, "but I just wonder about..." She didn’t finish, and pressed her lips together.

"...Aye, we're all wondering," Beric finished for her quietly. "We'll see what we find at Eastwatch. Nothing’s permanent."

Jon had been right, and it soothed her worries slightly.

"I'll walk you to the gate," Sansa said to Brienne and Podrick. It seemed that Jaime would be staying with them, for he stood with Bronn, watching them walk to the gate.

The gate was open, and the mist was lavender in the dawn before them. Her heart hurt. She turned to Brienne and Podrick, blinking back tears. "Sorry," she whispered, before flinging her arms around Brienne. "I'll miss you both."

"Well, perhaps we'll visit Eastwatch. Mr. Flowers has already promised to keep in touch with Podrick," Brienne said, hugging Sansa back, to her surprise. For a moment they held the embrace, but Brienne was not given to sentimentality, and she released Sansa. Sansa turned to Podrick, who had been looking uncomfortably at the ground, and flung her arms around him as well; he stumbled backward from the force of it.

"Thank you," she said into his shoulder. Podrick also returned the embrace; tightly, to her surprise, and released her, his face molten red, and he immediately turned away to pointlessly adjust his saddle.

"Be safe, Sansa," Brienne said, and there was a sadness and a worry to her voice that twisted Sansa's heart. She didn't think this was a good choice; that much was clear.

"You too. I can't wait to see you again," she forced out as brightly as she could.

Brienne swung up onto her horse, as did Podrick, and then they were riding away from her, and then they had disappeared into the mist.
In her experience, goodbyes tended to be permanent.

When Beric had said only moments ago that nothing was permanent her first thought had been 'except death' and she hated herself for her morbid thoughts. She turned away from where they had disappeared to find Jaime standing behind her, still wearing the coat she had sewn underneath his cloak. Their eyes met; she thought he might be in pain too but she couldn't be sure. For all of the talk of Jaime's impulsive, brutally honest nature, he so often was so opaque to her.

"I still can't believe he was Freerider," he said at last, shaking his head as they walked back through the gate together. "I've been hearing about Freerider for years and after all that time it turns out to be P-p-podrick P-p-payne. Unbelievable."

"Don't," Sansa said miserably. "You're so unkind to him."

"He's not here now. He can't hear me," Jaime protested. Sansa met Jon's eyes across the courtyard, but paused when she heard Jaime stop walking. She turned back to him. "Dalla asked me to join them last night. For my strategic abilities," he said with heavy irony.

“And will you?”

Jaime shifted, looking away.

“It’s not like I can go back,” he said with a scoff.

“None of us have to stay. Jon said he was suspicious about Mance, too,” Sansa said quietly. Jaime looked down at her, green eyes glimmering.

“Snow’s suspicious of every man that talks to you,” he remarked, nodding over her shoulder. Sansa looked back; Jon seemed in the middle of helping Gilly and little Sam onto their horse. “He was watching me like a hawk just now when I came over to the gate. His eyes burned a hole in the back of my coat, don’t know if you noticed.”

“You didn’t say goodbye to Brienne,” Sansa said instead, ignoring the comment. She watched Jaime’s face carefully, but he gave away nothing.

“We said our goodbye earlier,” he dismissed.

But something seemed to be haunting Jaime. She could not begin to imagine what it was.

They walked back to the rest of the group. Mance and Dalla and Val had come out, too, with their horses. It seemed that everyone was ready to go.

“Will your wife be coming, Snow?” Mance asked as he led his horse to them. Dalla was wide-awake and fussing with one of their packs, but Val was trailing behind them, rubbing her eyes and yawning and grumbling.

“Didn’t sound like she was coming when I walked in on them just now,” Anguy piped up nastily, earning a snigger from Bronn and Sandor, and baffled looks from Beric and Tormund. Mance chuckled.

“Oh, a little morning romp? Aye, I can’t blame you; it’s my favorite time for it too,” he said to Jon slyly.

“She’ll be joining us at Eastwatch, aye,” Jon replied flatly. He looked at Anguy, but the archer was
swinging up onto his horse, face turned away from them.

“Was wondering when that was going to start being a problem,” Gendry muttered under his breath next to him. He swung up onto his horse as well, mumbling, “nothing can just be simple and easy, can it?”

Jon looked to Sansa and Jaime, who were walking back from the gate now. Anguy had made another remark, a foul one, when Jaime had gone to follow Sansa to the gate, and it had sickened him, but Davos had shot him a look and he’d done nothing.

“Best leave it be,” the older man coaxed him under his breath as Sansa and Jaime reached them. “He’s a kind lad and doesn’t mean to cause harm.” Jon didn’t want to leave it be, but on the other hand, he knew Davos was right.

“Ready?” he asked Sansa instead. Her hair was still wild, and all he wanted to do was go back to the storeroom, barricade the door, and continue where they’d left off…but maybe they’d have a real bed at Eastwatch.

“I’m ready,” she said, looking at the horse. He helped her up onto it as the others began to trot out the gate. “Wait,” she said softly, as he swung up behind her, all too aware of the softness of her body against him. “She was next to us in the sickroom,” she said.

A woman, young but weary and worn, half of her face ruined from greyscale, was sitting on the steps leading up to the row of sickrooms, holding an infant to her chest and crying into the bundle. Pain was etched into every line of her body.

“Let’s get away from here,” Val was saying. She was on her own horse and had overheard them. Her eyes lingered on the woman’s face. “She is unclean.”

“She is in pain,” Jon shot back before he could stop himself. “You can’t catch it from here,” he amended at the look Val gave him.

“All the same,” she finally said, and she dug her heels into her horse and set off.

The smell of the ocean was on the back of Dickon’s tongue. The sunlight was bleached and the air was thick with salt, and over the rolling pale-green hills he knew the sea was heaving and glittering. Atop the highest hill a ruined castle sat overlooking the sea like a watchful old gull. A smattering of cottages surrounded it, dotting the hills like dandelions.

“The Crag, gentlemen,” Theon said as they crested the hill. He narrowed his sly eyes, shading them from the sun with his hand.

Father’s men were still catching up, and Dickon told them to wait and break for food. A picnic after all, he thought as he dismounted his horse as Theon had done. They left the horses with the men. Theon eyed the food—the men were unwrapping loaves of bread and roast capon—but Dickon never seemed to be hungry anymore, and the sight of the food turned his stomach.

“Come on, let’s be quick,” he said irritably, but Theon didn’t seem to need much convincing—the Ironborn man was already taking long, lanky strides down the hill and toward the next one where the first dwellings waited.

Dickon’s cuts seemed to throb worse as they walked. Some of the villagers were outside, repairing thatched roofs or tending to livestock outside their cottages, and they looked upon Theon and Dickon with mute, wind-chapped faces.
“Robb Stark’s woman is here?” Dickon asked doubtfully, as they continued along the hill. They were surrounded by the clucking of chickens and the sounds of children playing.

“Aye, I think so,” Theon said, and his eyes were greedy as his gaze searched every doorstep. “She lives alone; she’s got a garden, and she’s closest to the sea,” he repeated, more to himself than to Dickon.

“That one?” Dickon asked, shielding his own eyes and pointing to a little cottage ahead of them.

It was the last one in the smattering leading up to the ruined castle. A little boy was out front, playing by himself. The door hung open, swaying slightly with the sea breeze.

Theon stopped in his tracks. His eyes were bright. Dickon had never seen him look so earnest, so sad, so scared. He covered his mouth with shaking fingers, and it infuriated Dickon, for reasons he could not explain, so he went on ahead of Theon. They’d come all this way; they’d get what they came for.

As he approached the little boy, the wind picked up, whipping his coat about him. He felt too hot in the sun, even though the wind was chilly. His mouth was dry and his cuts ached. The little boy halted at the sound of his boots in the grass, and rounded on him, holding a long, weathered silvery stick of driftwood over his shoulder, aiming it like a rifle at him.

“TRESPASSERS BE GONE!” he bellowed. “POW POW!”

The little boy could not be more than six or seven. He had the loveliest blue eyes that Dickon had ever seen and fluffy, auburn hair that was wild and curly with the salty air.

Dickon could not say what came over him.

“AGH! You got me!” he cried, grabbing his leg as though shot, and he tumbled down into the grass. The little boy let out a delighted peal of laughter and ran to him.

“I did get you!” he shouted, coming to Dickon. He was pointing at Dickon’s thigh, where the blood from his cut had seeped through his breeches. “Look!”

“So you did,” Dickon said, breathless, sitting up. “But it was a lucky shot; that’s not how you aim a rifle like that.”

“It’s not?” the little boy asked, squinting at him as Dickon got to his feet, brushing the sandy dirt from his breeches.

“No, you hold it under your arm, like this,” Dickon explained, kneeling before the boy and taking the long stick. He secured the end under his arm, and aimed it at the boy. “Pow.” He lifted it up slightly as he spoke, as though it were jerking with the force of fire.

“I’ve made it a point that my son would never know how to hold a rifle.”

Dickon looked up. A woman, no more than twenty-five, stood a few paces behind the boy. She was lovely in a wild sort of way, with soft brown eyes and a heart-shaped face. She wore a shell necklace and her feet were bare. Her hair was pretty and soft and brown, but wild and tangled from the sea. She was wrapped in a woolen shawl, and her dress was threadbare. He had never seen someone so beautiful, so perfect, and so sad. She is as sad as I am.

“Mama, I’ve been holding it wrong the whole time,” the little boy told her excitedly. “Look, it goes under your arm.”
She smiled at him and drew her shawl closer around her, then looked at Dickon. He stood up, heart hammering in his chest, and looked for Theon, who was standing a few strides from them in utter shock, staring at the boy with wet eyes.

“Robb,” he said so miserably, transfixed.

“I am Robb,” said the little boy proudly. “How’d you know?”

So this was the treasure that Theon had found.

Dickon stared at the little boy. Robb Stark’s son. He was Stark blood; there could be no bones about it. He could have been Sansa’s son, he looked so like her. The thick auburn hair, the blue-green eyes; and that indefinable quality that Sansa had possessed, that he had been told that Robb Stark possessed. People loved them, helplessly.

No wonder Theon hadn’t wanted Lord Baelish to find out about this treasure. Dickon knew it with a flash of certainty that was as rare and fleeting as a shooting star. They would hunt him and they would kill him, he realized, staring as the woman touched Robb Stark’s hair, reflexively twining her fingers in it so possessively.

“What are you?” the woman asked in a shaking voice, pulling her son closer to her as she looked between them.

He had the strange experience of, quite suddenly, seeing himself as another might see him: shaved head, scarred face, brutish and wild and savage, dressed in riding leathers, face drawn and gaunt from too many sleepless nights, not enough food, too much grief, not enough sunlight.

“I was Robb Stark’s best friend,” Theon choked out, still staring at little Robb. “Oh, gods. He looks just like him. He is just like him,” he said softly. “I-I’m Theon Greyjoy,” he told the woman now. “I had to find out if it was true. I had to know if Robb really had—“ he couldn’t finish it, and he turned away abruptly, covering his face and letting out an oath contorted with grief. Dickon had not known he was capable of such feeling.

“And you?” the woman asked him, clearly shaken by Theon’s reaction.

“I’m Dickon Tarly,” he said softly. “I was supposed to marry Robb Stark’s sister, Sansa. I own Winterfell now.”

Does Sansa know? Dickon wondered, staring down at little Robb Stark. Does Sansa know she’s not the last wolf left?

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Tommens hated the opera. Joffrey hated the opera too, but, Tommen thought, for vastly different reasons. From their red velvet and gilded box they watched the singers on the stage. The air was thick with the aria, a pulsing, throbbing, solid sound that made his throat pound.

Next to him, Margaery was entranced, her wide brown eyes glassy. It was rare for her not to be making a joke or locked in witty whispers with someone. She was blinking rapidly, touching her silk and lace handkerchief to her eyes, and had been for an hour now.

"Are you crying?" Tommen asked her under his breath. He could ignore it no longer. People would start to notice, people would talk. Joffrey, on her other side, belched loudly and tilted back in his chair, so that he was balanced on its two hind legs, like a ludicrous caricature of the Lannister rearing gold lion, dressed in his pale gold brocade coat and matching breeches. The covered buttons of the vest strained at his gut, and the brooch at his throat, a cluster of rubies, glittered even
in the meager light, but he reminded Tommen irresistibly of a chicken.

"Y-yes. I-it's so beautiful," Margaery whispered. "He would die for her."

A rapturously beautiful woman—the woman singing the aria—was pulling away from another singer dressed all in motley. She was so stunningly lovely that her pale beauty seemed to light up the stage like moonlight, and her rose-colored gown was precisely the color of a woman's lips—and, as Joffrey had pointed out far too loudly, earlier—other parts of a woman, too. No man could look at that color without thinking provocative thoughts, and Tommen clenched his fists on his lap.

"I-I can't understand the lyrics very well," Tommen admitted. He knew High Valyrian, of course, but the words were so distorted by the operatic singing that he could hardly follow them.

Margaery swallowed back her tears, and leaned over to Tommen.

"A fool and a knight, I have never heard such a thing," she whispered along, partly mimicking the melody, as the woman fluttered an enormous golden fan and backed away from the fool in motley.

"She looks familiar," Tommen remarked, studying the singer. "I know I've seen her before."

"She is the songbird of King's Landing," Margaery whispered with a sly smile for him, one that reminded him that she had once been pronounced the most beautiful woman alive. "She's famous."

On his other side, Myrcella elbowed him. Tommen raised his brows at her, and she beckoned him closer with her fan. He leaned to Myrcella, and away from Margaery, who at once was entranced again, eyes fixated on the singer.

"You'll also recognize her from Joff and Margaery's bed," Myrcella breathed in his ear. "From the other morning."

Tommen thought he might be sick. He saw it at once. Just the other morning, when he'd walked into Joff's sinful tableau, he had seen the stunning woman reclining, naked, draped across Margaery, black hair wild.

Was Margaery crying at having to see a woman who had shared Joff's bed with her? It seemed unlikely. Tommen stole another glance at Margaery. Her features still hadn't quite recovered from Joff's name day revelry, and her eyes, though so lovely and soft, were puffy, and the lines hadn't faded from around her mouth and eyes yet. She didn't look like a girl anymore. The powder and blush on her cheeks seemed desperate, and the deep cleavage revealed by her too-daring gown seemed tired. When she wasn't entrancing with her sly wit and provocative jokes, when she was simply existing, you could see how old she really was, how tired she really was.

The aria ended, and the singer flounced off the stage, leaving the fool in motley—Florian—to sing his own duet with another singer.

"Excuse me," Margaery whispered. "I feel ill." She rose in a rustle of silk and lace and left.

Tommen looked across her empty seat to Joffrey, who had not even noticed she had left and was amusing himself with toying with his golden flask. There was a particular sheen to his forehead that told Tommen he had finished the flask's contents long ago.

People had noticed that Margaery had left; in the crowd below they were looking up at their box, whispers thickening like fog, drifting up toward them. Tommen's face grew hot at the attention.

“There’s gossip about it,” Myrcella whispered. On her other side, Tristane was looking at the singer with vague interest. “She’d better be more careful with her secrets.”
“You know,” Tristane mused suddenly, barely audible above the singing, “I think we’re never keeping the secrets we quite think we are.”

“You’re drunk,” Myrcella teased him, fluttering her fan at him. Tristane looked to her sweetly.

“I must be,” he admitted.

Margaery didn’t return until the final act, when the infamous raven-haired songbird appeared on stage once more, this time in a magnificent, glittering silver gown that looked like she had been dipped in starlight.

“Oh gods, it smells like cunt,” Joffrey said so loudly that the people below turned to look at them. Margaery’s smile was taut.

“Do keep your voice down, my love,” she murmured, fanning herself. “They’re not here to listen to you; they’re here to listen to the opera.”

“I can do whatever I want,” Joffrey said lazily, and he turned and hit Margaery so hard she was knocked sideways into Tommen.

The hit—it was a punch, not a slap—rang throughout the opera.

The opera fell silent.

The singers on stage, the musicians—no one made a single noise. It was as though a candle had been blown out, how quickly the music and noise was extinguished.

Joffrey was a little out of breath as he stared Margaery down. She swallowed, pushing away from Tommen and righting her powdered wig.

“Y-you’re right, of course, my king,” she said, practically swooning for him, and, mollified, Joffrey made a noise of disgusted agreement and looked away, resuming toying with his flask. Margaery beamed that brilliant smile, looking for all the world like the happiest woman who had ever lived, and yet her wig was still askew and her neck was flushed.

The woman started singing again; no one seemed to know or care if it was the right song, and everyone was disoriented as the opera resumed abruptly, wildly, desperately. Tommen heard Myrcella let out a shaking breath, and when he glanced at his sister, her eyes were bright with tears, and Tristane was looking at Joffrey with such profound, unmasked revulsion that he would not have been surprised if the Dornish prince drew a rapier and stabbed Joffrey that moment.

Tommen thought he might be sick. He wanted to be alone at Dragonstone. He did not want to be here anymore. It was like watching his father beat his mother all over again; he knew Myrcella was reliving it too. All of the times that Robert’s meaty hand had struck Cersei’s skin… They had simply watched; Joff had hated it too so why was he doing it now, to his own wife? Sometimes he had thought Joff hated it even more than he did.

_You still think of him as your brother, that's your problem,_ Myrcella had said.

There was a monster, fat and snarling and foul, sitting in this gilded velvet box with them, and everyone in the opera—the singers, the courtiers, the people—knew it.
Part III: Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

I told myself I would try to space out my chapters a bit more, but I have literally no self-control, apparently.

Thank you to everyone who left comments/kudos. It is so, so appreciated! <3

“So glad we’re all riding together! Eastwatch should be such fun; I’m terribly excited,” the fat one, Flowers, was saying eagerly, as they all began to set off into the misty morning. Jaime watched Snow and Sansa catch up with Sam and then ride ahead, with Snow’s arms possessively around her under the guise of holding the reins.

Earlier that morning the archer, Anguy, had implied that they had been caught in the middle of a morning romp, but it would have been obvious anyway. It was all too evident in the wildness of their hair and the way they seemed to cling to each other as though physical separation was agony, as though they were keeping each other alive through touch alone.

He had never had that with Cersei. For all of the years of their relationship, they had never held each other like that. It had always been either intense sex or nothing...But that had never been enough for Jaime—he had always secretly treasured that rare occasion of waking up next to Cersei, cherishing that quiet, soft time when he could just pretend they were normal lovers. He could pretend they were a husband and wife, waking up on a morning like any other, sleepy and tangled and leisurely in their love.

There was something so much more appealing about that state of love, especially these days. He envied Snow and Sansa. They did not know how rare it was, how hard-won it was. No matter how much they had suffered, they could not know, young as they were, that the heady, pleasurable tension of desire would fade; and to have something left over—warmth and friendship—was the rarest of all.

Bronn was watching Sam struggle with the horse, a smirk playing about his lips. Jaime knew the man was thinking cruel thoughts, his clever eyes lingering on how Flowers’ beefy legs wobbled and trembled in the saddle, how his eyes seemed to perpetually shine with tears. Had Flowers been in the army, Bronn alone would have rendered the poor boy suicidal—not to say anything of how the other men in the army would have treated Flowers. Sort of mean, Podrick had said. Oh, Pod, he thought, watching Bronn, you never knew the half of it. Even an awkward, stammering man like Podrick had escaped relatively unscathed by men like Bronn; Sam Flowers, by contrast, must have had quite a painful life.

Thankfully, Bronn did not give voice to any of his cruel thoughts. Jaime was glad for the silence, particularly as he was finding it impossible to meet Bronn’s eyes, and impossible to talk to Bronn normally.

For months he had desperately missed Bronn. He had missed his wit, his easy companionship; he had missed being around someone whose eyes would always find his, glimmering with humor over the same thing. He had missed being around someone who seemed to like him just for who he was. He had just missed Bronn, really. He had missed their jokes, missed Bronn’s light, musical voice,
had missed the feeling that Bronn always gave him, of having someone permanently on his side.

And last night, they had talked for hours: of what was happening in King’s Landing; of what it had been like to live with Brienne and Sansa for months; of what it had been like to traipse around after Beric Dondarrion. They had talked into the small, dark hours of the night, hardly realizing the world growing dark around them...Bronn had even convinced him to drink from the flask of whiskey he kept with him, and Jaime, who had always refused to drink, had accepted on a whim, and felt himself grow silly and sleepy, and then at peace, finally.

It was the first time in months—since losing his hand—that he had truly felt like himself, sitting there next to Bronn before the fire.

Late into the night, long after Jaime had begun to feel lightheaded with whiskey—so this was what being drunk felt like—Mance and Dalla had joined them, and Mance had proposed that Jaime and Bronn come with them to Eastwatch to help start the revolution.

Drunk on warm whiskey, with his best friend at his side, Jaime had agreed, not seeing what other paths he could possibly take. He did not find himself too concerned about what progress Mance and his group might make. Jaime had seen so many of these rebel groups in his time; he sorely doubted they would gain any traction further than having a few excited rallies. Their energy would die out, as would whatever pitiful store of gold and resources they had acquired, and they would dissipate back into anonymity. Whatever gold they got, whatever pamphlets they cobbled together—it would never be enough to match the intractable royal army, and all of its gold and steel and men. After all, Jaime himself had shaped it to be thus, following in his father's footsteps and relying on the wisdom of hundreds of years of generals before him.

After Mance and Dalla had left, satisfied that they had won Jaime over, Jaime and Bronn had discussed it more, eventually coming to the conclusion that they could always leave if it did not turn out to suit them.

“Where you go, I go,” Bronn had said lightly. Before the dying fire, Bronn’s dark eyes turned golden as Jaime looked to his left at his best friend.

“What about the army?”

“Well, I did desert the army, which is against the law, so let’s hope we don’t run into them,” Bronn had grunted, shifting so that he was more comfortable against his pack, partly laying down. “I don’t see that turning out too pretty for either of us. Jail isn’t nearly as much fun as it sounds, in my experience. I’d rather stay out of it.”

“You shouldn’t have deserted. You had a good post,” Jaime had said, studying Bronn’s empty flask in his hand. It had the Baratheon stag, the emblem of the royal army, engraved upon it.

Jaime thought of how he had finally met the so-called ghost of King Robert—Gendry, one of the Brotherhood—earlier. Gendry had looked so strikingly like Robert that it had sickened Jaime at first, but it had been a Robert long since gone, a Robert from before his wine and women and willfulness had taken over. Robert had grown so bloated and ruddy-faced and violent, always beating Cersei, always sloshing wine everywhere, always carrying the stench of the brothels on him. Jaime had despised him, more than he had ever despised anyone in his life.

But Gendry was Robert Baratheon’s bastard son in appearance alone. Aside from that Baratheon jawline and those Baratheon blue eyes, he could not have been further from Robert. He was so quiet and gentle-natured; it was impossible to imagine him ever laying a hand on a woman. But even so, seeing him had sent Jaime backward in time, to when he had been a young man, young as
Jon Snow, and in love with a woman as lovely as Sansa, and had been forced to watch the woman he love terrorized by a man who looked just like this Gendry. He’d known Bronn, then, too, and staring at him now across the fire, Jaime was struck by how old they both suddenly were. Too old. They had both seen too much. They were like over-cooked pork.

“I’ve never given a fuck about the scarlet. You know that,” Bronn had snorted, casting an arm over his eyes as he stretched out his long, slender legs. Jaime had studied his lines, the lines he had come to know so well, as well as Cersei’s.

“Then what do you give a fuck about?” Jaime had parried, settling against his own pack.

He had wondered what he gave a fuck about. In the swirling heat of the whiskey, he had thought of his sons and daughter, and waited to feel some measure of warmth as he ought to, but he felt nothing. He had thought of Cersei, and that sense of doom squirmed in his belly.

He had thought of fighting with Brienne and hearing Sansa sing softly to herself from the other room and watching Podrick squint at his abacus.

He gave a fuck about that.

He had looked at Bronn.

He gave a fuck about him, too.

“I told you. I wanted to know what the fuck happened to you,” Bronn had snapped, arm still slung over his eyes.

“Well, now you know what happened to me.”

And what now?

“I do. Would never have guessed it, I admit.” He heard Bronn sniggering, and the man pulled his arm away and propped himself up on his elbow, dark eyes glimmering dangerously as he looked roguishly, teasingly, at Jaime. “Are you going to miss the big woman?”

“Her name’s Brienne,” Jaime had snapped, feeling strangely cornered.

Something had closed off in Bronn’s eyes, and he felt a shocking sense of loss. He had misstepped; he had said something wrong. He was supposed to have laughed at Brienne with him, but he could not laugh at Brienne. Bronn gave him a long, measuring look.

“Oh, is it?” His voice had been cool. “You sound as sulky as Snow.”

There was something wrong and he did not know how to right it. “From queen of the seven kingdoms down to a she-man in Mole’s Town,” Bronn mused, still assessing him. “How the mighty have fallen.”

“I never fucked Brienne,” Jaime had countered immediately. The very thought was… well, he didn’t know what to think of it.

“No, I’m sure; you don’t fuck her, she fucks you,” Bronn had snorted, flopping back down. Jaime knew he was supposed to laugh, but he could not. He thought of Brienne meticulously peeling each potato, thought of sitting in the darkened kitchen with Brienne, waiting for Sansa to come home.

They had been silent for a long moment. Jaime sat there, studying the Baratheon engraving,
running his left thumb over it.

It was a night for truths, he thought. Now the person who mattered most knew about his hand, about his shame. Why stop there? He had always gone with his worst impulse.

“Did it ever bother you, about me and Cersei?”

Somehow Bronn’s was the only opinion he did not have...and, somehow, Bronn’s was the only one that really mattered to him. He had never realized it before. Bronn did not speak right away.

“I thought it wasn’t good for you,” Bronn had finally admitted. There was no trace of laughter in his voice. “There was no way for that to lead to anything good.”

“Did it disgust you, though?”

“...No.” Bronn had sounded thoughtful. “No, actually, it didn’t. She disgusts me, and I don’t see it — whatever it is in her that made you swear off all other women for your whole life, and sacrifice every chance of anything that could possibly make you happy—but it never disgusted me.”

“Happy? The only thing that’s ever made me happy was fighting, and being general,” Jaime had admitted bitterly.

He wished the wind could have been louder, wished there could have been some other noise. It was so hard to admit things in silence. A crowded room was always more intimate than an empty one. “It’s the only thing I was ever good at. And now I’ll have to find something else to be good at. It’s not like I can go back to being general without my right hand.”

Bronn had scoffed.

“It’s not your damn right hand that made you general of the royal army, you dumbcock.”

“Well, the right hand helped,” Jaime had joked, desperate for some levity. He was revealing too much of himself to Bronn, and this was well-beyond the nature of their friendship. Or was it?

“It’s your mind, and as far as I can tell, you’ve still got that.” He glanced at Jaime. “Mostly, anyway.”

“You just called me a dumb cock.”

“Eh, you know what I mean,” Bronn had dismissed with a careless wave of his slender hand.

Hours later, wrapped in their cloaks against the cold emanating from the Wall, and with the fire dying, they had fallen asleep.

Jaime had woken before dawn with a throbbing headache and a sour, dry mouth; he did not know what had woken him until he realized he had fallen asleep against Bronn, slumped into his shoulder against the back wall of the stables, and Bronn had shifted in his sleep. For one, bleary moment he had been happy; then he had become aware of reality, and of how this moment did not fit into reality, not as he knew it and not as it should be.

He had shifted away, and Bronn had awoken, and in the blue dawn their eyes had met, and neither had acknowledged it. It was bigger than the wall and just as impenetrable, just as impossible to fathom. But they could not cross it, could not surmount it...so they each had simply run from it.

And now they were here, suspended in an entirely foreign place. He had shared a bed with Bronn
plenty of times. He could not even begin to count the number of times he had woken up with his head pressed against the other man’s shin, or tossed carelessly over his legs, as they had often slept head-to-toes on campaigns. There had never been anything strange before; why was this different? And why was this strange, now?

They rode on, watching the mist burn off as the sun rose, leaving the world around them lush and green, the forest floor dotted with golden and ivory flowers that looked like tiny stars. The further east they rode, the sparser the trees became. They passed through a forest of beeches with roots like brushed silver and papery leaves like crumpled parchment, and then they were in the open rolling hills, nearing the sea, the air pierced by the cry of gulls. Jaime rode on his own, in silence, trying to both make friends with and simultaneously escape the gnawing uncertainty inside of him, yet succeeding at neither. He was at the mercy of his mind, as he had been for so many months.

Up ahead he could tell that Bronn, armed with Sandor’s rough, bark of a laugh and the archer’s dancing wit, was abusing Flowers again. Apparently he had amused himself with abusing the sensitive man the day before, while they had all waited for the Stark man to die.

They were cackling, having surrounded Flowers and his wife and son, and though Jaime couldn’t hear the words, he could hear the high, girlish protest of Flowers and the sharp anger of his wife. *Stop defending him, you little fool,* Jaime thought lazily as he watched her homely face grow flushed as she snapped at Bronn. *You’re only making things worse for him. Now you’ve made him a man who needs his wife to defend him.*

To his right he saw Snow and Sansa catching up, Snow’s sullen features set into a scowl in Bronn’s direction. Sansa looked at Jaime as they rode past, almost accusingly. What, was he Bronn’s keeper? He could no more control Bronn than a gull could control the waves.

Snow deftly angled his horse in between Bronn and Flowers, forcing Bronn to peel away and fall back. Jaime caught up with them as they slowed, letting the others ride ahead.

"What is it now, Snow?" Bronn snapped, jerking on the horse's reins and attempting to maneuver around Snow. Bronn would not look back at Jaime.

"The next time I catch you harassing Flowers will be the last," Snow said in a low voice, fixing Bronn with a chilling look. Bronn let out a laugh, throwing his head back, and reflexively glanced back at Jaime before looking back at Snow.

"You only get more bossy and irritating with every day, Snow. Some men improve with marriage, some men do not." Bronn's eyes lingered on Sansa, whose pretty face flushed. Something about those words niggled at Jaime; they were familiar, but he could not remember who had said them.

"Stop causing trouble. You've found Lannister; there's no need for you to stick around anymore," Snow insisted, that chilling gaze flashing on Jaime briefly before returning to Bronn. "If you're going to stick around, you're going to do it on our terms. Beric doesn't tolerate fools who cause trouble for no reason."

"Oh, I've got plenty of reason—it's fucking hilarious. It's like a pig riding a—"

"—One more word," Snow warned him. Bronn arched his brows at Jon.

"I'm terrified," he deadpanned. "Truly."

The way Snow looked at Bronn now was icier than the wall itself.

"Aye, you ought to be. The last time we dueled, I won."
And at that, Snow dug his heels into his horse’s sides, and set off to catch up to Flowers and the others, whose cruel energy toward Flowers had deflated without Bronn’s clever jibes.

For a moment they rode together in silence, until Jaime could bear it no longer.

“You lost to Snow?” Bronn would not look at him.

“So did you.”

“Yes, I did—on purpose,” Jaime corrected. “I can’t believe you lost. Are you getting old, or what?”

“If I’m old, you’re old.”

“I’m a year younger than you,” Jaime protested. “I won’t be old until you’re past old.”

“No wonder you fathered Joffrey,” Bronn snarked. “I often have seen that same brilliance, that same cool logic, from him.”

“Har har. How clever. You’re the first person to make that joke, you know,” Jaime said, rolling his eyes, but he was so desperately relieved for some semblance of normalcy that he was not offended in the slightest.

Sansa and Jon peeled off from Bronn and Jaime. It seemed that without Bronn’s cruel influence, Anguy and Sandor had relented in their teasing of Sam, and they were riding along together in relative peace.

“Can I just say—” she began, then halted, embarrassed.

“Hm?”

She felt Jon shift behind her, and she looked down at the strong hands gripping the reins, thought of the commanding tone in his voice as he had spoken to Bronn, the deft way he had forced Bronn and Jaime to split off from the others, without fuss and without struggle. There were hints of a different man, a new man—a strong man, a leader—emerging...and she liked it.

“That was very kind of you,” she said instead of what she had meant to say. Please take me, now; the minute we get to Eastwatch, she prayed silently, her face growing hot at the wantonness of her thoughts.

“Oh.” He sounded embarrassed now, too. “It was nothing. We can’t have that kind of cruelty at Eastwatch. Beric’s let him have free reign for too long.”

“Is he cruel to the others, too?”

“Aye, he is. I would have thought he’d pull himself together once he found Lannister…”

“...I don’t know what’s wrong with him and Jaime,” Sansa agreed, glancing back at the two men. Jaime had seemed haunted earlier this morning, and even from here she could feel the strain between them. “I’m surprised Jaime’s coming along, but apparently Mance and Dalla convinced him.”

“It would be a wise acquisition,” Jon reasoned—there it was again, that flash of that pragmatic man she did not know. “Lannister’s a famously talented strategist and he’s good at organizing people and resources.”
“You think Mance wants to organize people? As in, an army?” Sansa wondered.

“It’s been my only guess. Eastwatch is close to a break in the wall—”

“—Wildlings,” Sansa realized suddenly, and she felt Jon nod, the movement rustling her hair, making her skin prickle with awareness.

“Aye, wildlings. It would be a cheap army—”

“—But it’s just more of the same problem,” Sansa sputtered in horror. “We don’t need more bloodshed, and more armies. We need more thought.”

“Thought?”

“Yes,” Sansa said, thinking of Jaime’s words from when they had argued together in Brienne's kitchen. The north has no means of sustaining its own economy, no means of union, no means of protection, and nothing to trade. Independence would isolate the north from industry and from trade, rendering it as barbaric as the bowels of Essos. “How many times has the north rebelled before? It’s always ended in bloodshed and devastation, and it always sets the north back in advancement. We bleed ourselves dry attacking the Crown and then leave ourselves with nothing. The Wildlings are even less disorganized. It would just be more of the same; it would just put the devastation on a bigger scale.”

She thought of Thorne, too, and felt sick. No matter what, he was right in his own way, she reminded herself fiercely.

Jon did not reply for a long moment, and she began to fear she had offended him. She twisted to try and look back at him, but he was staring down at her shoulder, and their foreheads brushed. She looked forward again hastily, her whole body growing warm at the contact. “S-sorry. I don’t mean to offend.”

“You’ve not offended me at all,” Jon said. “I agree with you. But I don’t see an alternate plan.”

“So you think the whole thing is pointless?” The very idea was heartbreaking.

“I don’t know what I think, yet,” Jon hedged.

“Well, you’ve seen a lot of the world… What do you think works?”

They rode in silence for a bit as he thought, and she was grateful for how far Anguy, Sandor, Sam, and Gilly were ahead of them, and how far the others were behind them. She could not help but relish this rare moment of privacy—a thing she knew they would only have sparingly at Eastwatch. After all, in so many ways they were still strangers. They had had so little time to learn about each other, to understand each other. She wanted him, selfishly, all to herself.

"In the last few months, I’ve thought about this a lot,” Jon finally admitted. “The first night that Davos and I were with the Brotherhood—before I’d made the choice to stay—Beric and I had a long debate. A heated, loud debate. I'd never had a debate like that before. I thought he was angry with me; I thought I had gone too far...but the next morning he didn't act any differently. I asked him if I had gone too far, and he was baffled by my fears. He said we should debate, we should think about things critically. He said that any leader who cannot bear to be questioned or who does not remain open to other opinions is a tyrant."

"And what did you debate about?"
"He said we ought to remove all forms of government and let every man govern himself. But I had seen that in Essos, and I know it doesn't work. But Beric insisted that Westeros must start from a blank slate, and that the absolute power of monarchy only leads to ruin. It was why he deserted the royal army, he explained, because he saw corruption everywhere. He had joined the royal army because he had wanted to make the world better, safer. And that was why he started the Brotherhood—to find a way of doing good in the world without hurting others. And that’s why, even though he's technically the leader, we make decisions based on votes."

There was an opening, here, an opportunity for intimacy. Should she take it? She did not want to push Jon too hard, but on the other hand, he would have to open up about Daenerys at some point. *Or else this will never work,* she thought, but she could not say why it could not work. What did their pasts matter? She had been telling herself that her past actions—from watching her family be executed while doing nothing, to piercing Thorne’s neck with the dirk—did not matter, but if those things did not matter, then was it fair to expect Jon to explain his relationship with Daenerys? It did matter… but then, if that mattered, then other things, things she did not want to matter, should matter, too.

“And that was different for you? From Daenerys, I mean?” she asked tentatively. She felt Jon tense against her, felt him let out a short breath. It ghosted along the back of her neck, and a flash of what they had been doing earlier, in the storeroom, taunted her.

“Aye, different,” he said simply. “I don’t think I’ll ever agree with Beric completely. I think some sort of structure is needed; the Dothraki were utter chaos and were at the mercy of the elements, of geography. But the way he leads the Brotherhood—to me—seems effective. Or at least,” he amended, “it did. Who knows, now.”

“What was it like with Daenerys?” she pressed, even though she sensed this was a step too far.

“Not like that,” Jon said. “Let’s ride up ahead; I don’t like leaving Sandor and Anguy alone with Flowers, even without Bronn’s influence.”

The door had been slammed shut, and Sansa felt a prickle of frustration.

“Did Anguy seem…odd…to you earlier?” she asked instead, as the horse’s pace quickened and they gained on Sam and the others.

“Odd?” Jon’s voice was almost lost on the wind as they rode. They reached Anguy, who was closest, and he glanced back at them. Sansa met his eyes, searching for some sign of that strange animosity from earlier that morning, but he only offered a small smile and twisted back to face forward again. Had she imagined it, earlier?

“Never mind,” she said, feeling ashamed and confused.

“I don’t like it. We never agreed on this plan,” Maege was saying stubbornly. Daenerys held her breath, and held herself as close to the crack between the doors as she dared. “The condition of our support was that you would eliminate the Greyjoys for us.”

“Times change, and to be honest, when we made this agreement I wasn’t aware of the leverage that Asha Greyjoy possessed,” Tyrion was replying. She heard the clink of glass on glass, the trickle of whiskey pouring. “But she has eyes and ears all over the north and the south, and in the last month she has managed to single-handedly upend the economic structure of all of Westeros.”

“It’s just salt,” Maege said disgustedly. “I do not see what the problem is.”
“Just salt?” Tyrion was chuckling. “Just salt, she says. Seven hells, my lady, but salt is everything. It is as necessary as water, as bread. It is elemental to life, and Asha Greyjoy is currently sitting on Westeros’ only salt mine. The next closest mine is outside of Braavos, but Joffrey’s relationship with Braavos is poor to say the least—”

“—Thanks to you,” Maege interrupted shortly.

“Yes, well, I did not know at the time that I would come to completely switch sides, did I?” Tyrion snapped, sounding hassled at last. “Asha Greyjoy may currently be more powerful than the Iron Bank itself, and the web of spies that she has deployed throughout Westeros and beyond is highly compelling. If we do not form an alliance with her, she will be our next enemy. Winning the throne means nothing if there is no Westeros left to rule, and without salt, people will die. Not to mention that the hefty salt tax is stirring the people all over Westeros. Another rebellion—perhaps the biggest one of all—is imminent.”

“You want us to join forces with the woman who has caused that rebellion, and then use that rebellion? Are you out of your mind?”

“No one will ever put that together, trust me. All the people know is that Joff imposed a ludicrous salt tax and that now no one can get salt anywhere. They don’t know why he levied the tax, and they don’t know why there’s a shortage; all they know is that they are even poorer and even hungrier and, soon, even sicker. And in comes Princess Daenerys, who wrestled a bear, and is best friends with the one woman who can solve their salt problems,” Tyrion said, his voice wry with irony.

“My clan does not need salt. My clan needs to be rid of the Greyjoys,” Maege retorted sourly.

“You don’t need to be rid of the Greyjoys, you just want to be,” Tyrion countered swiftly. “Let us not confuse needs and wants, Lady Mormont.”

“Let us not,” agreed Maege, her voice hard. “Not you, in particular.”

“Oh, I’m very clear on distinguishing my needs and my wants, my lady,” Tyrion said, his voice rough—he’d just taken another long swig, and she heard the clatter of him setting his glass back down on the wood. “I am a man purely driven by wants, so rest assured I understand just how powerful a want can be.”

“What spies does Asha have?” Maege asked irritably. Tyrion was chuckling again, pouring himself more whiskey again.

“Many, and they’re everywhere. Most notably she has sent her brother to Winterfell to keep an eye on the Tarly boy and the Boltons... and on General Clegane, too.”

“Not Theon Greyjoy? But he was a ward of the Stark clan,” Maege said in surprise. “I would not have thought she would trust him at this stage. He was Robb Stark’s best friend; he would have died for him. Theon Greyjoy is more a Mormont than a Greyjoy, practically.”

“Well, I cannot know how or why Asha has secured his loyalty,” Tyrion dismissed, “but the boy is a reasonably talented spy, and as far as I know, he has little other talents, beyond whoring and drinking and hunting. I’ve heard he is a remarkable archer.”

An archer. Daenerys fell back against the opposite wall, short of breath. She thought of the white stag, reaching for the gleaming, burning sword—and of the archer advancing on them both, shadowy and blurred, his arrow pointed at the white stag.
It is ordained, she realized with powerful certainty. It is just as my vision foretold. Theon Greyjoy was the archer in her vision, and he was going to help her take down the white stag and therefore save Westeros.

She had to tell them; she had to make them see. It did not matter that she had been eavesdropping, for after all, this was her campaign. Daenerys burst into the parlor, making both Tyrion and Maege jolt with surprise.

“P-princess,” Tyrion stammered, blotting at the whiskey he had spilt on himself.

The fire in the hearth was dying; they had been talking all night, she realized. Daenerys met Maege’s gaze directly. Things had been tense since Dacey had left, and she had overheard Maege reassuring Lyanna that Dacey had not really left, and that her sister would be returning any moment now; but she had also seen that one of the rowboats was missing, and that Dacey’s room had been cleared of all of her things, including her morningstar, her riding leathers, and things such as her blankets and all of her shoes. Dacey was not returning, at least, not anytime soon. Daenerys knew she was to blame for that. She felt her son, Gida, give a little kick.

“I overheard your conversation,” she said plainly, to them both, and she sat in one of the carved chairs across from Maege, perching on its edge. Her heart was fluttering in her throat. “I must tell you that I foresaw a Greyjoy alliance,” she admitted now.

Maege and Tyrion stared at her like she had lost her mind.

“You foresaw a Greyjoy alliance,” said Maege slowly, “and yet you only tell us of it now, now that you have heard us discussing it. Did you happen to have any plans of alerting us to this alliance, or did you plan on allowing fate to take care of it?”

Maege had not been nearly as devoted and ingratiating since Dacey had left.

“I didn’t know how to interpret it,” Daenerys snapped, her face flushing. “I had a vision when I fought the bear; I’ve been having visions for months now. They have always been of a white stag that I must fight.”

“How literal in its symbolism,” Tyrion mused, pouring the last of the whiskey into his glass. Maege’s dark eyes, so flat and black like Dacey’s, flicked to the movement, but she did not mention it.

“And,” Daenerys continued, anger rising, “when I fought the bear I saw the white stag once more, and he was facing me with a burning sword in between us, and—and there was a crow and a dragonfly on his antlers, and there was an archer coming from behind, aiming his arrow at the white stag.”

Initially she had not been so certain of where the archer had been aiming, but this explained so much.

But Maege and Tyrion were still simply staring at her. “You said Theon Greyjoy is a skilled archer,” Daenerys said to Tyrion, desperate to make them see. “It must have been him in my vision. He’s going to help us take down the white stag.”

“And what of the crow and dragonfly?” Tyrion asked lazily. “What will they do? Buzz around the white stag to distract him?” He glanced at Maege. "Do any of the clans' crests contain a crow or dragonfly? This might foretell our next alliance," he added with heavy sarcasm.

“I-I don’t know,” Daenerys admitted hotly. “I still do not understand their presence. But now I
understand the archer’s presence.” She looked to Maege. “We were meant to join forces with the Greyjoys, I just know it.”

“I see it,” Anguy said suddenly, and he rode a little faster, ahead of them, cresting the next hill.

“Archer’s eyes,” Sandor muttered, almost sounding disgusted. But all the same, Jon urged the horse on to catch up with Anguy, who, to his relief, seemed to have reverted back to his normal self. He writhed with guilt at how he had treated Sansa, but he did not have any answers or explanation, and he had been hoping it might sort itself out.

He also felt ashamed at how he had reacted to her questions about Dany. They had been fair and neutral enough, and he owed her his honesty.

But if I really am honest with her, what will I lose? he wondered, as they rode. His fears tasted bitter, sour in his mouth. The more they discussed Dany, the greater chance she would have of seeing him for who he really was, for seeing him as tainted as he really was.

He was false coin, he was dishonorable… It was just as she had said, that first night he had stolen her away from Winterfell. She deserved an honorable man, but whether he was dishonorable or not he would earn himself pain. He could not bear to have her look at him the way she invariably would if he explained everything. The thing that had tainted him would taint things between them, it would be a disease spreading. He wanted to stop the disease from spreading, but if he did not tell her, then he would be treating her badly.

Condemned if he did explain, but damned if he didn’t explain. An endless cycle of people hurting others out of their own pain.

As they too crested the hill after Anguy, he held the reins in one hand and impulsively, foolishly, used his other hand to hold her against him, wishing he could explain everything through touch.

A ruined stone estate, nearly the size of a castle, rose up in the distance before them. It was one large stone structure, shabby and partially covered in vines, with a smaller stone house to its side, and a crumbling, uneven stone wall connecting the two structures and forming a courtyard.

“It looks abandoned,” Sansa observed. Anguy slowed his horse and angled to turn back to them. He met Jon’s eyes, and jerked his chin back to the castle.

“Know of any carpenters or masons among us?” Anguy asked. “The place is falling apart, but this has to be it. It’s not like there can be two bloody castles just south of the wall.”

“Aye, it’s the place. We’ll have our work cut out for us,” Jon agreed. He saw Anguy’s gaze linger, ever so briefly, on Jon’s arm around Sansa, but then he looked away swiftly.

He knew we were married, Jon thought angrily, guiding his horse to follow Anguy. This cannot be jealousy. But if not jealousy, then what?

As they approached, Jon could just make out a figure at the front gate. The gate was a stone arch set into the wall, with a crumbling stone frieze at the keystone, and a rusting wrought-iron gate crumbling off its hinges. Beyond that he could see a muddy, rutted yard.

The figure was tall and lean, and though his hair was silver, it was still thick, and slicked back from a clean-shaven face. Mance’s friend, Jon realized, as he had clearly been expecting them, waiting for them. He could hear the others catching up to them now, the trundling, rolling thunder of so many horses along the grass. Supposedly, this castle was his family's ancestral home, but as he was the only remaining heir and had never married, it was abandoned, now.
Jon, Sansa, and Anguy were the first to reach him. He had sharp, shrewd eyes that were lingering on Jon with significant interest, and his patrician lips curved into a sly smile as Jon reached him.

“That’s a Stark face if I ever saw one,” he said to Jon. “And Catelyn Tully reborn, more beautiful this time. Mance meant his word, it seems.”

Anguy shot Jon a knowing look, and Jon thought of Sansa’s words about being used.

“What about me?” Anguy prompted suddenly. “I’m the best archer in Westeros.”

“Aye, too bad for you they’ve invented guns,” said the man dryly. Anguy was, for once, shocked into silence—and perhaps a little offended, too. “The others are a bit slow. I reckon Mance isn’t too eager to be put to work.” He was smiling as he looked into the distance for Mance.

“Put to work?” Jon asked, dismounting.

“I haven’t visited Eastwatch since I was a young man. No one’s lived here for decades,” he explained. Jon turned to help Sansa dismount, and as he placed his hands on her waist she met his eyes worriedly, but quickly smoothed her features over. “Mance!” he called, as the others came closer to them now.

“Quorin,” Mance greeted pleasantly, as he and Dalla and Val at last reached them. With unexpected grace, Mance jumped off his horse and went to embrace Quorin. Jon looked over his shoulder to Beric, watching for how he reacted to this man. “It’s been a while since I last saw this place,” he added, looking up at the ruined castle.

“It’s been a long while since anyone last saw this place.”

“It’s a dump,” Jaime said bluntly, awkwardly dismounting—clearly he still had not got used to doing so without his right hand—and joining them. Quorin’s shrewd eyes lingered on Jaime. “You don’t even have a stable for the horses,” he added, peering through the ruined gate and into the yard.

Jaime was right. Even the stable, situated against the back wall of the yard, between the larger house and the smaller house, was caved in, the wood silvered and warped and splintered, vines tangled among the splinters.

“Then the stable’s the first order of business,” said Quorin, an edge to his voice.

They tied up their horses next to the caved-in stable, and Jon and Gendry together shifted the wrought-iron gate against the wall so that it blocked the horses from leaving. Sansa watched everyone seem to know what to do with themselves: many of the Brotherhood helped to tie the horses, and Jon and Gendry were dealing with the gate, and Mance, Dalla, and Val were speaking with Quorin… She felt so superfluous. She only knew how to do ladylike things, and as she looked around the ruined courtyard, she thought that this was a place that she did not know how to belong.

The mud of the courtyard was blackened, and the wooden door leading into the house was rotting and warped, and wild vines were creeping out of the windows. The sea wind howled around the turret of the main building, a lonely, desolate sound. Sansa hugged Jon’s coat around herself and looked to him, ashamed of her neediness, as he and Gendry finished repositioning the gate and turned back to them.

*I need to prove my worth beyond my name*, she thought fiercely, as she watched him walk back
toward her. *I don’t want to be used for my name anymore, so I’ve got to show that I’m more than my name, I’m more than my mother’s face. I’ve got to decide who Sansa Snow is going to be.*

“We certainly do have our work cut out for us,” Sansa said, hating how stiff her voice was as she tried to raise it. Jon was giving her that soft, shy half-smile, and he nodded to her almost imperceptibly. *Go on,* his eyes were telling her. “We need to rebuild the stables,” she said to him, Gendry, and Anguy, “and we need to make sure some rooms are inhabitable before it gets dark. And we need food.”

“I can hunt,” came a voice behind her. Sansa turned to find Val beaming at her; she was so lovely that it was disorienting, and Sansa pushed down another silly stab of jealousy.

“You and Anguy can hunt,” Sansa said. “D-do we need more people to hunt?” She was embarrassed that she did not know.

“Aye, I’ll help. Anguy can’t carry the weight of anything bigger than a rabbit,” Gendry teased, elbowing Anguy, who arched a brow at Gendry.

“And you can’t hit any target smaller than the wall,” he parried, making Gendry scowl.

“I can work on rebuilding the stable,” said Jon as Mance, Quorin, and Dalla joined their group. “Tormund and Sandor can help.”

“I can help clean,” Sam offered a bit lamely.

Jaime and Bronn were lingering, Jaime awkward and Bronn disinterested, and Sansa saw Jon’s gaze flick to Jaime.

“Lannister ought to help with the stables. And Bronn, you’re a good shot; you ought to go hunt,” he said suddenly. Jaime looked shocked at Jon’s words, while Bronn looked scandalized at being told what to do.

“I’ve never heard of a one-handed carpenter,” Bronn protested irritably.

“Aye, but Lannister’s got a good head for making plans, and I don’t think any of us know the first thing about building a stable,” Jon replied, his voice dismissive. Sansa tried to stem the smile that was threatening to break out. She caught Jon’s eye and gave him a small, secret smile, before turning away to face Sam, Gilly, and Dalla.

“We need to make enough places to sleep for everyone,” she told them. Little Sam was fidgeting with the hem of Gilly’s dress, and Gilly and Sam were looking at her anxiously.

“Aye, first let’s see if that well works,” Dalla said comfortably, and Sansa was relieved at Dalla’s competence. She didn’t even know where to begin. “Your boy can find us some buckets and carry water back and forth.”

“Come on, Sam,” Gilly said, directing her son toward the well at the edge of the yard.

“Let’s go see what we’ve got to work with,” Dalla said then to Sansa and Sam. “I feared Mance was a bit optimistic in what we’d find here,” she added with a laugh, and Sansa could not help but laugh, too, if for no reason other than relief that she had a place, had a function, and that people were listening to her. They went to the main door, and Sam busted it open with his weight. Before they went inside, Sansa glimpsed Jon and Jaime talking together, pointing at the rubble of the ruined stable before them. Jon seemed to sense her gaze, and glanced at her over his shoulder while still talking to Jaime.
Thank you, she mouthed, nodding to the back of Jaime’s head, and Jon merely nodded once, slightly, before turning back to Jaime.

Inside was dark and smelled of mildew and rotting wood. The front hall was empty of furniture, the air thick with cobwebs and damp with the scent of the sea. The hallway led to the single turret that housed the spiral steps, leading up to the main halls, and then down to the kitchens and cellars.

“We’ll need the kitchens and as many rooms as possible,” Sansa said as they crept down the stone steps into the cellars. The kitchen was crowded and cramped with old pots and pans, and dried herbs, ancient and flaking and useless, were strung from the ceiling, coated in spiderwebs. Sam shuddered when he walked through a cobweb and whimpered as he batted a spider from him, earning a covert eyeroll from Dalla.

“You’ll need a bit of help, I reckon.” Davos was coming down the steps, looking around the kitchens with pleasant interest.

“What, you don’t want to build a stable?” Dalla asked as Davos joined them, and Davos snorted.

“Oh, gods, no. They’re already squabbling like a bunch of fishwives out there, and I don’t want to wait until Snow and Lannister finally get them all under control.”

“I’m so excited that we’ve gotten Lannister,” Dalla confessed to them in a sudden, gleeful rush. “I’ve studied every one of his battles, you know; he is a brilliant general. And Snow’s got a deft mind as well. I can't wait to see how they work together.”

“Aye, but he doesn’t know how to lead, yet, and it'll be a bumpy road,” Davos said with a chuckle. “So I’ll stay with the sane people, thank you very much. So! What will you have me do?” He clapped his hands together, and they set to work.

It was the hardest she had ever worked. Gilly and Sam and Davos cleaned the kitchens while Sansa and Dalla went to the bedrooms on the storeys above the main hall. There were dozens of bedrooms in varying states: some had ancient mattresses filled with hay that turned to dust the moment they were touched; some were entirely empty. Sansa and Dalla scrubbed and scrubbed, while little Sam carried bucket after bucket of well-water up and down the steps.

Every now and then, Sansa risked another sly look out the window at Jon. It was well past noon, now, and Jon had shed his coat, revealing the white shirt underneath, and had rolled up his sleeves, displaying his lovely, lean forearms. He and Jaime were scowling at a section on the end, clearly arguing, while the others struggled with a long, warped beam. Tormund had shed his coat and shirt and was laughing roguishly with Sandor and Beric...and Mance and Quorin were off to the side, heads bent together, deep in private conversation. It made her uneasy, though she did not know why. She glanced at Dalla, considering probing her...but she thought it was too soon, yet. Dalla seemed to like her well enough, but the woman was clearly clever, and her friendliness, while probably sincere, was disarming. She had learned to be careful with her words, and had learned that every question that you asked revealed something about yourself. I'll wait, she told herself, and start asking her more about Mance once she's become more comfortable with me.

Thus they worked in companionship, chatting now and then about nothing of consequence. Dalla asked her no personal questions, she noticed; her conversation was carefully light, side-stepping anything of any personal nature, anything that concerned her past.

That is, until Sansa risked another sly look out the window at Jon.
“Now, let’s find a room for you and your handsome lad,” Dalla said, coming up behind her. Sansa flushed to her hairline.

“Oh, I hadn’t really even thought about—”

“—Of course you hadn’t,” Dalla said dryly, pulling Sansa away from the window. “Those lust-filled eyes weren’t for your partly-undressed husband; they were for the horses, weren’t they?”

“For all that wood, actually,” Sansa countered, earning a surprising cackle from Dalla. They walked together up to the next storey, the top one, which had fewer rooms. “It might be best for Sam and Gilly to be up here, too,” Sansa thought as they passed the different bedrooms.

“Aye, quieter for their son,” Dalla agreed. “How about this one for you and Snow?”

At the end of the hall was a smaller bedroom, its ceiling angled, with windows that looked east, to the ocean. It had no bed; it had only an empty wooden trunk and a broken wardrobe, and a hearth smeared with ancient ashes.

And yet—quite suddenly—she could see the future of this room. She could picture a four-poster bed, one that Jon made; she could picture a baby’s cradle under the window beside the bed. A son named Robb, she thought with a thrill that made her eyes burn with tears, with happy tears.

“I like this one,” she said shyly, turning back to Dalla.

“It’s small,” said Dalla critically, “but you need a good view of the sunrise when you’re newly-married,” she added as she toured the room, assessing the windows.

“You do?” Sansa asked in surprise, following her to the windows.

“Aye, for all the early morning activities,” Dalla said slyly. Sansa bit back a silly grin, thinking of how Jon had kissed her freckle just that morning. Remembering the feel of his lips on her back—what a strange place to be kissed, yet what a perfect place to be kissed—raised gooseflesh over her whole body. And he’ll kiss me again tonight, she thought, feeling almost drunk, and going to the window again to sneak another glance at him if she could. Maybe in other places, too.

He was helping Tormund and Sandor lift a section of the stable roof, with Jaime watching them, directing them critically. This time he had shed his shirt, his hard chest and shoulders gleaming with sweat, his wild hair pulled back at the nape of his neck, his cheeks slightly flushed with effort. In the afternoon sun he was beautiful, the most beautiful man she had ever seen. And I’m going to kiss him back, she thought giddily, maybe in other places, too.

“This looks like it was built by a goat,” Jaime said, when the final nail had been hammered in. Jon could not help but laugh, breathlessly, as he pushed his hair out of his eyes and dropped the hammer. “We didn’t rebuild the stable, so much as sort of push elements of it around to different places.”

“If you squint, it almost could be a stable,” Jon agreed wryly, stepping back and squinting at their work in the dying light.

“The important thing is that we all worked together so well—” Beric began fondly, but was cut off as Jaime, Tormund, and Sandor began making loud vomiting noises and miming dry-heaving onto the ground, and Sandor loudly called Beric an unrepeatable word.

He’d not seen Sansa all day, but he’d seen little Sam running back and forth from the well, and had
heard the slam of the windows being thrown open—all evidence of Sansa’s work. Every time he thought of her nervously attempting to take charge, anxiously trying to prove herself, he was filled with an unbearable warmth and the urge to embrace her and kiss her. She had looked so sweet, so nervous, so gentle, so hopeful.

He remembered watching her gossip with Missandei and dance with Daario at their wedding. No matter where she went, she fit in with people, she made a place for herself. He envied her for the ease with which she did it. Even in a group like this, of people so utterly different from her, she had become a part of the group almost seamlessly, with only a moment’s discomfort. He, by contrast, had spent over a decade trying to mesh with Dany’s group, never succeeding. He often thought that perhaps he did not know how to fit in with others, that perhaps he was not capable of it. Even though he envied Sansa for this ability, he was filled with a strange pride, too. He wanted to see her, he wanted to kiss her; he even wanted to tell her all of these thoughts.

They led the horses into the poorly-reconstructed stable. Mance and Quorin had not helped at all; rather, they had sat together, talking for hours. Jon had felt odd about it, and he’d seen the others stealing glances at the two men as well, all day, looking wary.

“I hope that strategy works for Mance,” said Jaime sardonically, as he and Jon unsaddled Jon’s horse together at the very end of the stables. Beric had joined them.

“Aye,” grunted Beric. “To lead men, you’ve got to be one of them.”

“Yes,” agreed Jaime in surprise, glancing at Beric. “You do have to be part of the group, otherwise they’ll never respect you.” He narrowed his eyes at Beric. “You know, I’m surprised you’d put your faith in a man who so clearly knows so little, Dondarrion.”

Beric looked unhappy.

“Mance has the right beliefs,” he said in a low voice. Jon and Jaime stepped closer, instinctively. “And this is unlike him. Or at least, it used to be.”

“Do you know Quorin?” Jon asked, glancing back at the steely-eyed man. Across the courtyard Quorin noticed Jon’s gaze and met his eyes shrewdly, briefly, before returning to his discussion with Mance.

“I know of him—”

“—Well who doesn’t? He’s Quorin the Halfhand; he’s a legend,” Jaime snorted. Beric grimaced.

“Aye, he lost half his hand to a Wildling axe, we know the story. He’s the terror of the Wildlings.”

“Yet we’re close to the breach in the Wall...which means we’re awfully close to Wildlings,” Jon countered. Both men looked at him.

“So you noticed that, too,” Beric said with a sigh. “The plan was that we’d come here, regroup, and strategize. It would buy us some time to form a better strategy, as we’d not be milling around the north, so close to Clegane, and we wouldn’t need to step in and out of Mole’s Town for resources for a while.”

“In other words, the plan was to not have a plan yet,” Jaime summarized. “Yet to me these are two men with plans—detailed plans, plans already in motion.”

“If their plans involve Wildlings, they’re fools,” Jon said. “Sansa put it best, earlier today: it’ll just put the destruction on a bigger scale, if we harness Wildling forces for a rebellion.”
“Aye, she’s a sharp girl,” Beric agreed, shaking his head. Jaime looked amused about something, but he said nothing.

Gendry, Anguy, Bronn, and Val returned in the last of the daylight, hauling multiple deer and a long string of rabbits. Gendry looked like he had aged ten years.

“All right, Waters?” Beric asked, amused, as Gendry passed by their trio. Gendry looked limply to him, then to Jaime.

“Bronn is a complete cock,” he said bluntly to Jaime, “and Anguy did not even stop long enough in flirting with Val to take a bloody breath. I am spent.” And he wandered off, presumably to find someplace to hide from everyone.

As the sun began to set, Jon pulled on his shirt again, conscious of how filthy he was, and even more conscious of the prospects that the night offered.

“Where are you going, Snow?” Tormund asked as they began to make their way inside, to the great hall, to begin building a fire in its hearth. Jon bit his lip.

“I--”

“--the pretty crow needs to bathe before he can see his wife,” Anguy said loudly, and everyone burst into laughter at Jon.

“I hope it wasn’t a spotted one,” Sam said sadly, as Val heaved the skinned deer onto the stone. Val stared at him.

“They don’t taste any different,” she said bluntly, and Sam sighed and pulled the deer towards him.

“Yes, but I just find the spotted ones ever so sweet,” he replied mournfully. Sansa tried not to laugh at him; she felt oddly giddy and silly. She had bathed quickly, and Dalla and Val had given her spare clothing, so that she had cobbled together an outfit and was no longer just wearing Jon’s clothes. She had gotten a sea-green lace-up top from Val and a muted sage skirt from Dalla, and although she had enjoyed the freedom of movement that breeches had afforded her, and had enjoyed the feeling of wearing Jon’s clothing against her skin, she felt far prettier now—and she wanted to feel pretty in front of Jon.

There wasn’t a table left in the greater hall, so they’d have to eat on the floor; but at least they would be inside. Sam, Gilly, Dalla, and Davos helped with cooking, and Sansa and Val helped carry the food to the great hall. An enormous fire was already roaring merrily, casting the hall in warm, golden, cheery light. Sansa’s eyes immediately found Jon: he was dressed in clean clothes, his hair still wet from bathing, and she felt a stab of slight disappointment. She did not know why but she had anticipated seeing him all dirty and sweaty. It ought to have disgusted her but instead it had enticed her, secretly. She had wanted to see him all smudged with dirt, hair clinging to his skin with sweat.

“FOOD!” Tormund boomed, lunging for Sansa, but Anguy grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt.

“Back off, or I will kill you,” he said, and Sansa flushed, hands unsteady, until he spoke again: “me first.”

“Settle down, lads, settle down,” Beric said with a laugh, as Sansa knelt in the middle of their group and everyone began to arrange themselves around the food.
“Where’s Gendry?” she asked. Tormund snorted.

“Hiding,” he replied with a smirk at Anguy, who shrugged.

“It’s not my fault,” he protested. “I’m innocent, I swear.”

“As innocent as a whore,” Tormund said dryly. Quorin and Mance joined them; Mance was eyeing Sansa.

“Nothing like a beautiful woman holding a plate of fresh meat,” he said fondly.

“Aye, it’s even better when you’ve worked all day,” agreed Jon rather coolly. Sansa looked at Jon in surprise, but everyone was looking at Mance—not at Jon. Mance smiled.

“You’re right. You lads must be hungriest of all,” he said, aggressively pleasant.

“Can we stop talking and please eat?” Anguy complained loudly.

Everyone gathered near the hearth as the windows, freshly cleaned, grew dark. Sansa had shyly sat beside Jon, feeling as awkward and coltish as a young girl, and she could not bring herself to meet his eyes. She knew she was being ridiculous, knew that the tension between them was all too obvious. Every time their arms brushed as they ate and talked with the others, she felt a jolt that went straight to her core, making her feel drunk and overheated.

Jaime was already fitting in well, she noticed: he, Bronn, Sandor, Tormund, Anguy, and Val were all laughing together about something, hunched together like a band of mean-spirited vultures, and the image made her lips twist into a smile that turned a bit sad as she thought of Brienne and Podrick, and felt a pang. She missed them. They would have fit in well here, too. She could just imagine Brienne being offended by Anguy, or Val and Dalla teasing and flirting with Podrick.

Dalla was playing with little Sam while Gilly and Davos were locked in deep conversation about herbs, and Sam was excitedly discussing the castle’s history with Mance, Beric, and Quorin. Eventually, Gendry came into the hall, hair rumpled from sleep, slinking quietly toward the food like a skittish cat, and he sat with Dalla and little Sam, smiling at the little boy and playing with him with surprising gentleness.

And all that left her and Jon alone together, not speaking, sitting side by side, the air taut with all of the things that could happen, that might happen. Even though she was starving, and weak with exhaustion—she was not sure she had ever been as bone-tired as she was now—she could hardly eat.

“The stable looks nice,” she began timidly, and she heard Jon snort.

“Lannister said it looked like it was built by goats,” he said dryly. “But it’s built.” They glanced at each other warily, shyly. He was turned gold by the firelight. She saw his gaze flick downward, to her dress, then hastily away. “Er, is that a new dress?” he asked the ceiling.

“Borrowed from Dalla and Val,” she replied to the floor.

“It—um—well, it’s nice.” A pause. “With your hair, I mean. And—er—everything looks really nice. Davos said this was all you,” he added, gesturing around the hall.

“Yes, we got most of the rooms at least inhabitable,” she said, latching onto the subject gratefully. She did not know why speech was so difficult at the moment. It was silly to be so nervous. “Dalla and I worked on the bedrooms. Some of them have furniture, but it’s not really usable. None of the
rooms have mattresses,” she continued, feeling herself begin to glow with pride. “But there’s a place for everyone, I think, and tomorrow we’ll make mattresses and bedding. You should see our room, it—” Jon choked on his food and had to clap his chest, turning away from her, and she blushed.

“Go on,” he said between coughs, face red. “Sorry.”

“R-right. Well, our room’s on the top storey, and faces the sea,” she admitted. “So—so we’ll see the sunrise every morning.”

Their eyes met once more. She struggled to draw in a proper breath as she thought of him kissing her neck, thought of how he might look in the light of dawn, tangled with her. She wouldn’t have to imagine, soon—she would know. A muscle in his jaw leapt, and she thought about how she would be kissing that jaw soon, and her face flamed. He looked down at the floor.

“I need to talk to you. Privately.”

He glanced back at her. Her stomach dropped as he bit his lip, brows knitting together. He looked so, so sad. She wanted to touch him, wanted to hold him, but she also felt her eyes burning.

“Why?” she whispered. Why now, when they were just on the verge of happiness?

“Because you deserve an honorable man, and if I don’t talk to you about this, I’m a dishonorable man.” Jon looked down at his hands as Sansa looked around the group. Everyone was still talking and eating, growing drowsy and happy and satisfied, basking in the glow of the hearth and the glow of the satisfaction of hard physical labor. She felt strangely removed from it.

“Wh-when?” she asked, not looking at him, blinking rapidly and hating herself for how upset she was growing.

“I’d rather never,” Jon admitted in a low voice. “So it might as well be now.” He was looking at her again. “So...why don’t you show me our room?”

“Alright.”

She got to her feet. No one noticed them, save for Gilly, who met her eyes and winked—to Sansa’s surprise—and then Anguy, who merely met her eyes and looked away hastily.

She slipped out of the great hall and into the darkness of the stairwell, hearing Jon behind her. Her belly was tied into knots; it felt like hunger but was so much worse. In silence they climbed the steps together. She was blinded by her own fears. She had begun to trust...she had begun to feel safe...why was he doing this, now?

The walk down the hall to their bedroom felt like a death march. “Well, here it is,” she said lamely, opening the door and gesturing inside, at the empty room. Where before she had seen a whole life, a room full of furniture, it suddenly looked barren and cold. Jon stepped inside and she followed, and he reached behind her and shut the door, his arm brushing her as he went.

In the grey dark he met her eyes. “I—I was thinking the bed could go there,” she whispered, gesturing to the opposing wall. She couldn’t bring herself to speak about the cradle. She watched Jon turn and look around the room. His lips twitched, slightly, and he looked back at her.

“You led everyone today,” he said quietly.

“So did you,” she replied, looking down at the floor between them. “I was thinking that we work
well beside each other,” she admitted.

“Aye, me too.”

“Then why are you doing this now?” She looked up at him pleadingly. “Why do you keep pulling away?”

“I’m not pulling away, this time,” he said sadly, gazing at her. “You’ve been asking about Dany, and I’ve been avoiding answering you. But it’s not fair to you.” He looked away, suddenly, and paced away from her. “I’ve been thinking a lot about how much pain secrets cause.”

“Me too,” she said in surprise. “Anguy has a secret, and I think Jaime has a secret, and Bronn, too; and Mance, perhaps.”

“Aye, and look how much trouble it’s all causing,” Jon agreed, his back still to her. Her heart was giving great, trembling shudders; her hands shook so she fisted them. “I’ve done so much wrong.” His voice broke and in turn her heart broke. He slowly turned back to face her. “More than I can even begin to tell you. I can’t tell you all of it, all of the things I regret. But you want to know about me and Dany...so I’ll tell you about me and Dany.”
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. I needed a break from this story (so as a 'break' I wrote like 70k words of other Jonsa...haa) and I couldn't get this chapter right, and then other RL things came up...such as potentially moving across the country for a job. Gah!

I had to change the rating to 'Explicit' and probably should have done that sooner. In any case, this chapter contains quite a bit of graphic sexual content so consider yourselves warned.

Sansa was staring at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears, and Jon turned away from her sharply to pace around the room, his chest tight.

He looked around the room, taking in all that Sansa had done to try to turn it into a home. She had amassed some blankets to create a bed in the middle of the opposite wall, so that it faced the south windows. If they had a bed there, they would wake up with the sunrise casting pink and gold light across their bed and lighting the room, but it wouldn’t be in their eyes. It would be perfect. He could suddenly see it so clearly that it was as though he had stepped forward in time. He could see their limbs tangled with the covers, and Sansa’s bright hair splayed over the pillow, her head on his chest. Maybe they would even have a cradle across the room... He wanted it so badly; he wanted it more than anything.

His gaze landed on a little vase of wildflowers she had placed on one of the windowsills. Already this place felt like home, more of a home than he had ever had in his life—and perhaps more of a home than Sansa had had in a very long time, too. Here she was yet again, so fearlessly reshaping the world around her, as though she had never been hurt at all. How did she bloom, over and over again, no matter where she was planted?

If he was to be worthy of her—and he wanted to be—he would have to learn to take such risks, too.

"I just want to understand why it happened," Sansa said behind him, her voice soft. "I know it made you miserable. I want to know why you would do something that would make you so unhappy."

"There's no short answer," he warned her, still unable to face her. It was hard to breathe; even now she was so compassionate and understanding, and he did not deserve it. "I can't explain it without going back to the beginning, to when I was first taken."

"Then go back to the beginning."

"You might feel differently about me." He focused on the mottled glass of the window before him. "You will feel differently about me. But I won't hide it from you. I'll tell you whatever you want to know, and after that, you can decide for yourself what it all means."

For a moment, neither spoke. He heard Sansa step forward, closer to him, and his skin prickled with awareness that she was near.
“This still seems like you’re pulling away again.” Her voice was small, tight, watery, and he could not help but turn to her, hearing her pain in her voice and knowing it was his fault once again. Her hands were fisted and she was looking down, blinking back tears.

He stole her hand and watched her raise her gentle eyes to his, and he tightened his grip.

“I’m not,” he promised her. He watched her jaw tremble, slightly, as she studied him. “But if I keep avoiding your questions about Dany, then I’m no better than anyone else in your life. I won’t hide or lie. We’re surrounded by so many secrets and lies—we need to trust each other, and I can’t expect you to trust me if I don’t answer the only question you’ve ever asked of me, even if I’d rather not answer it.”

“Every time I ask, I’m afraid to hear the answer,” she admitted, wiping at a tear that had trickled down her cheek.

“It’s no love story, Sansa. But it’s still not a story I’d wish to tell my wife.”

“I didn’t think it would be a love story,” Sansa replied, shaking her head, and she squeezed his hand. “That was what pained me most of all—knowing that it made you miserable. If you had seemed like a man in love, it would have been different. You never seemed like you were in love with her.”

“Then why are you afraid to hear the answer?”

“Because I know it will be a sad one. But I think you’re right. I think I need to hear it…and I think you need to tell it, too—or you’ll never trust me, either. You’ll always hold yourself back, always be waiting for me to discover your secrets and hate you for them.”

Her hand was still in his. She wasn’t running away. And, as he told himself, she already did know the worst of it—that he and Dany had lay together—though she did not have the context for it.

Together, they walked to the blankets that she had tried to turn into a makeshift bed, and sat against the wall together, in the place where they might someday have a real bed. If they were to have a real bed, and even have a cradle, he would have to do this. Or else that, too, would be tainted, and he could not bear to see this thing between them tainted.

And so he told her everything.

He told her of how Viserys had taken him from Winterfell when he was ten, fearing him a threat to his ascension, to Essos—to live with Dany and her new husband, Khal Drogo. He told her of how he had come to know this quiet girl of no more than fourteen who had been sold into marriage and who dreamed, each night after Drogo had raped her, of a world in which fourteen year old girls could not be sold into marriage. He told her of how he felt he had finally found his family, and how Dany had welcomed him at once. He told her of missing Winterfell and burying those feelings and memories.

He told her of lying awake with Dany outside of her tent on the nights that Drogo did not rape her, and learning the stories of all of the Targaryens who had come before them as they gazed at the stars. He told her of how Dany had protected him, had become a sister to him, had given him a home and a family when he had thought he might never have either.

He told her of how Dany’s pregnancy changed her relationship with Drogo, giving her sudden power over her brutal husband. He told of how Drogo killed Viserys on Dany’s command, after Viserys made an attempt on his life—but also how, in the fight, Viserys gave Drogo a small wound
that would later mean everything.

He told her about riding through the desert, seeing the slavery that plagued the world, and feeling angry, and seeing his anger mirrored in Dany. He told her about how Dany convinced Drogo to stop taking slaves, and how Dany began to gain control of her husband and of the horde…and how then, when they lay awake at night, as Dany became too pregnant for Drogo to take her, they would lay side by side and dream of freeing the slaves that they saw…

They would dream, and, increasingly, they would plan, and in these dreams and these plans they found their purpose. These two lost children finally began to hope.

He told her about Drogo’s death, and Dany’s miscarriage, and the chilling prophecy that deemed Dany barren. He told her of how her grief and hopelessness hardened her, and turned the dreams and plans that they had made into an obsession that frightened everyone. Even as they gained more power, and more followers, and conquered more hordes and freed more slaves, it was never enough. He told her of how, in her misery, Dany turned toward her Targaryen heritage. It was no longer stories—it had become her compass, a compass that was increasingly pointing toward Westeros and the Iron Throne.

He told her of how no matter what he did, the person who had become everything to him was in all-consuming pain and he was watching her lose herself before his eyes. He told her of his guilt, of his certainty that it was Dany’s love for him and her urge to protect him that had cost her everything—her husband, her son, her future.

And then he told her of the first time that Dany came to him, when he was thirteen, and how he did not know how to turn her away, and how even after he told her, ‘no,’ she did not stop, and instead kept going, and how that was the first time in months that he had seen her happy. He told her of how he had kept waiting for it to be enough, and yet, it never was, and soon he was so ashamed that he did not see how it could be stopped.

He told her of how every time he wished for it to stop, he would think of the miserable little girl who had only ever known terror and pain, of the little girl who had dreamed of saving the world even after her brother had abused her and her husband had raped her, of the little girl who had done everything to give him a home. He told her of how he could not harm that girl, even if that girl was slowly being consumed by the woman that Dany was becoming; even if he and Dany were arguing more and more, and the schism between them becoming only more enormous, until a canyon stretched between them, filled with the corpses of the slaves they had tried and failed to save, and all of the Targaryens who had come before them, and Drogo and Viserys and her son.

He told her of how each time they would reach the breaking point where he thought he could take it no longer, something would happen to make him see a brief, bright flash of that girl again—that girl who so sorely needed to be loved, that girl who had only ever known cruelty—and he would feel himself crumble once more. He thought that if only he showed her enough love, he might resurrect that girl, and soon it seemed the only kind of love that she wanted from him was a kind of love so poisoned and twisted that he began to wonder if he was poisoned and twisted, too.

He told her of how Dany’s quest for the Iron Throne suddenly began to seem like a possibility, like the gods were colluding with her poisoned dream and working against all who knew her and who knew what would be best for her. She suddenly gained armies, she suddenly gained allies, and she suddenly gained gold from seemingly thin air.

He told her of their destruction of Mereen and Astapor, done in the name of justice, and he told her of how it had kept him awake at night and made him despise himself every time he thought of all the fire and blood. He told her of how Dany would still come to him, sensing his distance and his
pain, and by that time every time he turned from her she would grow miserable and volatile, and he
would realize that all she had ever wanted was to be loved, and that she had never been loved, and
so the cycle would begin again.

He told her of how they finally decided to sail for Westeros, and how he had grown ill on the
voyage to Gulltown, and how he had sensed Dany’s love for him turning sour. He told her of how
he had heard Dany say that he could not be a dragon, for dragons did not become ill, and how it
had made him despise her, and despise himself, too.

He told her of traveling north, and praying that once Dany ascended the throne, it would end
between them. He told her of how he started to see how this vile thing was destroying them both,
this thing made of desperation and loneliness and fear and rotting pain that masqueraded as love, a
love so twisted that it looked and tasted and burned like hatred.

He told her of taking her from Winterfell, and how he had been awakened, brought back to life, and
how he had fallen for a woman who would never let herself be hardened by the many evils that had
been done to her, a woman who would bloom and bloom and bloom continually even as the world
around her grew ever meaner. He told her of how he could not continue on his path after seeing
her, knowing her, and how she had resurrected him in the way that he had tried—and failed—to
resurrect Dany.

And then, at last, he had run out of words, his voice hoarse and his eyes burning. The poison had
been bled from him, and part of him wished they had not done this in this room, where they
planned on building a life together; yet part of him was glad, because now there could be no
pretending about what he was or what he had done. That, too, would be part of their future, as it
must be.

They sat in silence, adrift in everything that he had confessed to, and he waited to see what this
woman that he had fallen for might do.

"I think," she began at last, "I would have done the same."

Jon was afraid to look at her, afraid that he had imagined her words. He heard her breathe in
sharply, and then he realized she was crying.

He didn't know what to do; he did not know what she would want him to do. So he squeezed her
hand back, and waited for her to speak. "I tried so hard to make Cersei love me," Sansa continued,
hers voice thin and shamed. "I really wanted her to love me. Even when I hated her, I still wanted
her to love me. And I thought if I could make her love me, then I could fix everything. If she had
been a man and had come to my bed, I think I would not have turned her away."

It was not quite the same, he thought, but perhaps the end result was the same. Maybe Cersei had
once been like Dany: caught between having far too much power and far too little influence,
yearning love and never getting it in the right way or from the right people... "I thought," Sansa
continued, "if I could make her love me, then I could save my family. And then I failed, and for a
long time I thought it was my fault. And yet I still wanted her love, even though I hated her more
than ever. But Cersei had never really been kind to me, and had never really loved me. I can't
imagine what I would have felt if she had. It would have been even more painful. I don't think I
could have survived it."

"You would have. You could survive anything."

Sansa was looking at him, and he finally risked it: he looked at her. In the darkness, her eyes were
bright, but her brows were drawn together. She did not see her own strength. He needed her to see
"When I offered to marry you, it must have been your worst nightmare—but you tried to find a way to be happy anyway. You danced at our wedding, Sansa, even though you were trapped in a nightmare."

He watched another tear slip down her cheek. He was failing with his words; he wasn't making her understand. He searched for the right words, but he felt Sansa edge closer, squeezing his hand.

"It wasn’t my worst nightmare. I already knew you were good and kind," she protested.

"How? You had no reason to think that."

"When Jaime attacked the holdfast, why did you run away with me?"

"Because... I couldn't let you go."

"Why not?" she asked patiently.

"Because I just...couldn't." It had been another selfish moment. He had not been thinking of the ransom. He had not been thinking at all. "It didn't have anything to do with the ransom," he admitted.

"And then you fought Jaime for me even after you learned that there would be no ransom," she continued. "Why?"

"The look on your face when he said you'd have to go back to King's Landing," Jon said at once.

He could still remember how he had recognized something in that look, though he had not wanted to admit it at the time. It would be the look on his face now, he thought, if he were to learn he would have to return to Dany. "I don't think anyone could see that look and not feel your pain," he added.

"You told me I deserved my freedom. You dragged me through the Barrowlands—never once laying a hand on me, though you could have, and though so many men would have—because you were determined to protect me. Then when we reconvened with Daenerys, when it seemed like I might be sent back to King's Landing, you sacrificed your relationship with Daenerys to save me."

She laughed slightly. "And perhaps it could have been said that you were doing it for selfish reasons—yet then, before the bedding, you sent me away with all your gold."

"I still kidnapped you."

"Yes, you did. And I killed Thorne. And you spent years laying with your own blood, and I spent years trying to gain the approval of the woman responsible for executing my entire family. We’re not so different. We’ve both been prisoners. We’ve both made mistakes trying to do the right thing. We're not made prisoners by iron, I think, but by love and fear."

"Aye, I think so too."

He felt her lean her head on his shoulder, and warmth bloomed along his skin.

So this was what it felt like to be loved.

He turned his head and pressed his lips to the top of her head. "I'm sorry," he said into her hair.

"For what?"
"For kidnapping you. For being unkind to you in the Barrowlands and making you cry. For not telling you my plan to send you to Mole's Town, and not giving you more of a say in it. ...For keeping you up nearly all night with this."

He felt her laugh slightly.

"I'm sorry for saying you weren’t a Stark."

He still remembered that first night so vividly, the scent of her perfume clinging to his coat and the feel of her body jostling his as they rode through the night. He had wanted her even then, wanted her in a way he had resigned himself to never wanting someone again, and it had angered him to have her held up before him. She had been proof of all of the things that he had been trying to run from: proof that he had been betraying himself to support Dany, proof that what he did with Dany was slowly killing him.

It had also been proof that what he felt for Dany was not the kind of love that Dany wanted from him—and though that had been a relief, it had also been shattering. The hope—that he was not so twisted as he had believed for so long—had been so painful.

_You’re no true Stark._ She had said the one thing that could hurt him the most, and yet, that pain had been a catalyst. It had been the greatest pain and the greatest kindness, all at once.

"I'm not a Stark, though," he said at last.

"Neither am I," she pointed out. "I'm a Snow, now."

"Aye, you are a Snow now," he agreed softly.

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Her father had given Jon a new identity—neither Stark nor Targaryen—never knowing that that protection would one day extend to her as well. In giving Jon his own name he had wanted to protect Jon’s future, and now, together, they were taking shelter under that protection, the protection that Ned Stark had died to give Jon.

Jon did not see that it was this man's footsteps in which he followed; he did not see the evil of what Daenerys had done to him. He could not see that Daenerys had taken advantage of his generosity and empathy—whether she had intended to or not—and that even if she had been acting out of pain, she would not have done the same thing to someone older.

Even if he had been but two years older, it would have been harder; she would likely not have attempted it. He could not see that he had been preyed upon, just as she had been unable to see, for a long time, just how Cersei and Joffrey and all the rest of them had preyed upon her, and her innate urge to love others and to be loved.

He could not see that rather than take his pain and hold it up as a weapon, he had taken his pain and used it as a bridge, and it was this that made him so distanced from the Targaryens, and made him so very much like Ned Stark. He thought he had been tainted by what he and Daenerys had done but he could not see that it was a thing that had been done unto him, and he could not see that he had remained untainted by it; he could not see that the proof was in all of the ways he had tried to love, all of the ways he had _not_ done to her what Daenerys had done to him, and what Drogo and Viserys had done to Daenerys, and what undoubtedly had been done to Viserys. Instead, he had risked everything to protect her—just as her father had risked everything, once upon a time, to protect him.

She could not tell him these things because he would not believe her. He would just have to learn
for himself. Perhaps she could show him by loving him. Then he would see that he was worthy of love.

Oh, Jon, she thought longingly, leaning further into him, feeling him rest his chin on top of her head. I wish you could see the kind of man you are…and I cannot wait to see the kind of man you will become.

They sat there together, curled into each other, with their hearts pounding. She had known back at Castle Black that she could not be the one to approach Jon, and now she knew why.

She brushed her thumb over his skin, and felt him shift slightly, his chin brushing the top of her head. His breathing was shallow, and she felt him tense against her. This fearless man who would face death without hesitation was afraid to touch her, but she could not do this for him. He had to be the one to reach for her, to seek out his own happiness, to decide himself worthy of seeking his own happiness, no matter how selfish he felt and no matter how undeserving he thought himself.

"Sansa..." His voice was so soft and she felt every hair stand on-end at the longing in his voice. She waited, holding her breath. "Do you..."

He pulled back and she looked up, meeting his dark eyes. He was searching her face, and she saw him swallow, saw his throat move just above his collar, saw him press his lovely lips together as his eyes darkened. He was looking at her like she was beautiful, like nothing evil had ever touched her, and she wished she could do the same for him. The breath he let out was slow and shaking, but he never took his eyes from her.

"It's only if you want to," she whispered, and he scoffed, almost a laugh.

"I should be the one reassuring you," he mused, his brows knitting together as he gazed at her.

"But you don't need to," she told him gently. "Do you want me?"

He did not speak immediately, but instead looked down at their joined hands.

This was, she realized, the first time that either of them was not running from something, but rather stepping toward something. Every choice she had ever made had been to get away from something painful, but this time, the path forked before her evenly, as it did for Jon. Perhaps they had married out of necessity but this—this was a choice. This was something she wanted, not something she had to learn to want.

Perhaps that was why it was so overwhelming. She had never before thought that this act would be with someone she had chosen—and Jon hadn't, either.

His gaze slipped down to her mouth, then back up to her eyes again, hastily, and then she felt his hand on her jaw, thumb grazing her skin.

"Aye, I do," he murmured. "Do you want me?"

"Yes, I do," she breathed, and covered his hand, which still rested against her cheek, with her own. She thought of the night that she had found her release in thinking of him and felt the flush bloom along her skin, and watched him take in her flush, watched something change in his gaze. She had given her thoughts and feelings away, it seemed, and he had always seen too much—and now he had seen, perhaps, just how deep and primal her want really was.

He lowered his head slowly, tentatively, halting just before his lips brushed hers, his hand on her jaw angling her face towards his, and she closed her eyes to show she was not afraid. Then his lips
were brushing against hers.

His hand slid to her hair, fisting in the thick red locks at the nape of her neck, and she blindly reached for him, clutching the fabric over his chest and pulling him closer. His other hand pressed on the small of her back, pulling her closer as the kiss deepened from sweet and chaste to something heady and filled with need. Heat was gathering between her legs.

"Still don't have a proper bed," he realized, murmuring against her lips, and she let out a breathless laugh. "Is it really a bedding if there's no bed?"

"It's not a bedding; it's love," she whispered back. "We don't need a bed." And she closed her eyes and kissed him harder.

Jon’s tongue parted her lips and she felt his chest brush against her breasts, his strong hand pulling her ever closer, and the hand in her hair moving tenderly against the nape of her neck. But suddenly he was pulling away, breaking the kiss and letting go of her hair.

"Wh-what?" she stammered, overheated and dizzy as she propped herself up, watching Jon pull back. His eyes looked black with desire and there was a high flush to his cheeks that she was beginning to recognize, a flush that only meant desire. Then why was he stopping...?

He got to his feet and stalked to the door. She got to her feet as well, watching him turn the lock of the door with a metallic clank, and something fluttered behind her breastbone as she watched him test the door with a ragged, desperate motion.

"No interruptions this time," he said in a low voice, then turned to her, his eyes blazing as from across the room he gazed at her, his eyes roving over all of her slowly, his hand lingering at the door as he turned away. She felt wet heat at the tops of her thighs; felt a low, burning throb between her legs that made her desperate to move, and she had to stop herself from rubbing her thighs together in desperation.

He was such a beautiful man, and she hungrily took in every lean line of his body, the softness of his mouth and the scruff of his beard, the wildness of his hair and the warmth of his gaze. And, she thought with a burst of joy, he was hers, and she was his, and they were going to build a life, a future, together—starting tonight. He had given her everything he had—his cloak, his name, his gold, his life—and now she would give him everything she had in return. He took his hand from the door and approached her slowly.

Jon stood before her now, eyes raking over her, lingering so pleasurably on parts of her that she had never thought beautiful: her collarbone, then her mouth, then her shoulder, then her cheek, then the swell of her breasts, then, as he took her hand, lingering on the inside of her wrist.

You just do what you want to do, he had said. This was just about want. It wasn’t about what they had to do, or what they ought to do. It was just about what they wanted to do. Neither of them really knew how to do what they wanted.

They would have to learn together.

"What do you want to do?" she asked him, as his fingers trailed over the tender skin of her inner forearm, making her shiver, making that throb between her legs deepen.

"I want to kiss your scar," he told her, looking up to meet her eyes once more, his strong grip tightening around her wrist. "You said you had one from that blade."

A shudder, helpless and too hot, rippled through her. She felt like her whole body was blushing as
she thought of his lips, the lips she loved, grazing her scar, so close to the most private part of her.

"The scar you gave me," she stammered. It was a scar given to protect her, a scar given out of fierce love. She still remembered the heat of his kiss on that night, as they had clumsily grappled for each other, knowing their time was slipping away. Now they had all of the time in the world—now they had the rest of their lives.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, pulling back, but she reached forward and took his hands, drawing him back to her.

"I'm not," she promised him, and then he was kissing her again, hard, driving her backward until her back hit the wall, knocking the breath from her, but neither stopped as his lips slid against hers, and she thought headily of those lips on her scar—and perhaps other places, too—and then she was tugging at his coat, pushing it off of him. In a hassled motion, he pulled away just long enough to shrug it off and toss it aside, and then his hands were on her again.

Now there was only his shirt between his warm skin and her fingertips; and his hands, suddenly so sure, were on her hips, gripping the soft flesh there, then moving to her waist, then sliding up her back in a caress, and then back down to her hips as he pressed her harder against the wall, and she felt her desire slick on her thighs. If he kissed her scar he would know, he would taste her, and the thought was so wanton that she shivered and kissed him harder, pulling him against her by his shirt, then moving her hands over his hard chest and shoulders just because she wanted to.

He was unlacing the bodice of her dress clumsily, roughly, as he kissed her collarbone, and then blessedly cool air was rushing along her skin as she helped him push the fabric away, so that she was left in her stays and sark. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he smoothed his hands along her arms almost absently before unlacing her stays with rough, swift motions, until that fell away in a rustle of fabric too. Her breast heaved with the sudden freedom and the powerful need for air as she felt his hands on her ribcage, then his palm brushing her breast through the thin fabric of her sark. She wanted him to touch her breasts but she did not know why, and she was too shy to ask him.

The skirts were done away with and they pooled around her feet, and he helped her step out of them, and then they were sinking to the floor together among the mess of blankets. The floor was blessedly cool against her burning skin as he hovered over her, his hand beneath her breasts as he guided her to lay down, kneeling between her legs. His dark eyes met hers as he smoothed his palms along her thighs, fingertips brushing along the hem of her sark.

His gaze was burning, lingering on her mouth, then her breasts, and then trailing down to her legs and the place between her legs, just barely covered by her sark. He gripped her leg, and she drew in a sharp breath as she watched him shift forward, so slowly, too slowly, and then--

--A pounding on the door. They each jolted as they heard the door jiggle.

"Oh, I think that's the Snows' room," came Jaime's voice, and then raucous, drunken laughter. It sounded like Bronn and Sandor, and possibly Anguy. The door rattled harder.

"Locked," rasped Sandor, followed by more laughter. "Seems like they don't want anyone getting in."

Jon let out a seething breath and looked back at Sansa once with that same burning look—the look that made desire throb so painfully between her legs—before twisting his body.

"Go away," he ordered furiously.
"Sounds like we're interrupting something." That was Bronn's light voice. "You're not busy, are you, Snow? What are you doing in there?" His words were broken with laughter. "Say, have you seen Sansa?" More laughter.

"Oh, I'm sure he's seen quite a bit of--"

"—I'm just going to kill them," Jon muttered, pulling away, but Sansa reached forward and stopped him, looking down demonstratively to her undressed state. She saw him flush again before crawling back over her and kissing her as he guided her to lay back down once more.

There was loud banging and wolf whistles, and then it abruptly stopped with the sound of some scuffling.

"Oh, leave the poor man alone, Anguy; can you imagine how long it's been since--"

"—Aye, he never even visited the brothels with the rest of--"

"GO AWAY."

There was an uproar of raucous laughter that slowly faded as they continued down the hall, trying the other doors, and Jon and Sansa froze there, Jon perched over her, each holding their breath, their faces flushed, as they stared at each other, waiting, waiting, waiting for the noise to die down...and then they were alone once more.

She felt her lips twitch, and watched as his did as well, and they let out gasping, shaking laughs, unable to look away from each other...and then the laughter faded as the silence overtook them.

Jon's hand brushed along her skin, leaving trails of fire in the wake of his touch, making her body shiver with need. "You're certain?" he breathed. She could only nod and reach for him, pulling him back on top of her. She had never been more certain of anything in her life.

His skin was so warm. As he kissed her she ran her hands along his shoulders and back, tracing all the scars with her fingertips and wondering about the story behind each one, thinking achingly of Jon the scared but fierce little boy, the boy who would always give and always protect, the boy who had been stolen away just like she had...

That little boy, who had given Bran his own fish, who had taught Arya to fight in secret, who had been asleep in Jory's arms, had grown into the man kissing her now, his skin brushing hers, his hair tickling her forehead, his hand ghosting over her skin with no purpose but to delight in the feel of her skin beneath his touch, just as she had delighted in the feel of his scars beneath her fingertips.

And then he was kissing along her neck once more, only this time there was so much less fabric covering her, and he was sliding the strap of her sark down, kissing the skin that was revealed. She felt herself pulsing with need as his body brushed hers, so she frantically pushed the other strap down, helping him to bunch the fabric down around her waist. She had to fight the urge to cover herself from his gaze as he pulled back to look at her.

Sansa was looking up at him, her skin turned silver in the little moonlight, her hair splayed around her, mussed and wild as he'd never seen it, her lovely breasts rising and falling as she struggled to breathe evenly. He searched her eyes, saw the heat behind the shyness and uncertainty, but saw no fear. His lips were thrumming and raw from kissing her and there was a powerful ache in his groin, almost painful in its insistence.

He wanted to kiss her again, so he did, feeling her breasts brush against his bare skin, but then he
wanted more, wanted to kiss every part of her. He trailed from her mouth to her collarbone and then downward, kissing between her breasts, the scent of her skin everywhere, feeling her chest rise and fall with her nervous breathing, her fingers twining in his hair again, making him think of how her lovely hands must look twined in his hair.

He loved her hands. He remembered watching her fingers work with those reeds as she had woven that net, all that time ago in the Barrowlands. He had been so sorry to lose that net, but, he realized as he ghosted his lips along her skin, she could make him a new one, now. She was his wife, and he would build their bed and she would weave their blankets, and side-by-side they would create their future...

He kissed one peak, and then ran his tongue along it, and her soft gasp, the way she tightened her fingers in his hair and arched further into his mouth, sent another painful jolt between his legs. He ran his lips along her skin to the other breast, and kissed that peak as well, experimentally circling it with his tongue and listening for how it made her feel. He felt her hips shift and roll against him, heard her ragged, uneven breath, so he did it again. When he pulled away, he felt her hands tighten in his hair, trying to stop him from pulling back, but he moved downward, kissing between her ribs and then pushing up her sark and kissing one hipbone and then the other. Her scent was everywhere, making him dizzy and drunk with lust, and her legs were brushing against his shoulders and arms as he moved downward again and felt her twist her fingers desperately as he parted her legs further, bracing his hands on her thighs.

He saw the scar, pale and slender, on the soft flesh. He remembered making that cut, remembered how dizzy with need he had been in that moment, yet also aching with fear and sadness. But this time there was no fear, and no sadness. She was here, he wasn't going to lose her, and she wanted him as much as he wanted her. He ran his finger over the scar, the soft flesh slick with need, and felt her shiver at his touch.

She couldn't look at him; she stared at the ceiling, trying to breathe and trying not to shy away from his touch. Every part of her was alive, her skin tingling like whispers running all over her, and aching for his touch. His fingertip traced her scar, and she felt him let out a ragged breath against her thigh that rushed over her slick skin and set her aglow.

And then his hair brushed her thigh, and his lips, those pretty lips, were on her scar, kissing it, and she tried not to writhe against him as his hands tightened on her thighs, gripping her legs just short of painfully. She let out a soft, needy sigh, knowing what she wanted but being too embarrassed to ask for it. Did anyone even do that? She would not ask.

His beard, short and coarse, was rough on her thigh as he kissed downward, agonizingly slowly, toward her knee, his hair slipping from her fingers, and she tried not to whimper in desperation. Her desire was soaking her, was painfully centered at her core, and she thought that if he did not touch her there she would simply die of pain...

But he was kissing back up her leg again—teasing, soft kisses that made her shift and writhe and, shamefully, wantonly, murmur his name in need, and then those soft kisses became deeper and more desperate, and then suddenly his mouth was on her there and she arched helplessly as her whole body flushed with heat. He was kissing her there—how had he known what she wanted?—and kissing along the slick skin with powerful need, and each kiss made her gasp, her skin growing damp with sweat.

"Sansa," he breathed, pausing to kiss her other thigh quickly, almost absently. You are so loved. No one else she had ever known would have done this, she thought as he returned to her slick lips. She had forgotten her awkwardness and discomfort and shyness completely, and this—the clumsy way
that she shifted her leg over his shoulder to give him better access, the way he laughed at their
clumsiness softly, the laugh rushing along her slick lips in counterpoint to the way the sound made
her skin tremble, and made her whimper—was so much better than anything she had ever
imagined.

It was not the violence she would have received from Joffrey, nor what would have likely been a
polite and tidy and brief coupling between her and Dickon—nor even the fierce but drunken and
impersonal way she might have touched Jaime. This was so much, just short of being too much.

And then that feeling was tightening, rising, and she knew she was gasping, was being too loud,
and the others might hear her gasps, and then they would know for certain, but it was hard to think
of that too much. Jon’s kisses became deeper, longer, his tongue moving against her in a way that
made her shudder. She was rising, rising, rising…

Something crashed over her, making her shake and buck against him, and he kept kissing her, his
grip only tightening on her hips, and then at last he pulled away from her.

His lips were slick with her desire in the silvery light and his cheeks were flushed and her core was
still pulsing with her release. She reached for him and then he was against her once more, kissing
her desperately, and she reached down and traced her fingers along his abdomen with light,
fluttering touches, and then, as he gasped against her lips and shifted against her, she pulled on the
laces of his breeches.

And then it was a mad rush. He pulled back to unlace his boots and kick them off with wild,
clumsy motions, and she was sitting up to kiss him wildly, tangling her fingers in his hair once
more and experimentally slipping her tongue between his lips as she pulled him back down on top
of her, his chest brushing her breasts and the hair trailing down his abdomen tickling her skin.

He kicked off his breeches at last, and she felt his hard length, the skin velvety soft and warm,
brush against her stomach, making her pulse with need. He was tugging her sark, which had been
bunched around her waist, down over her hips, and they kicked that away from her wildly, too.

There was nothing left to stop them, now. His eyes softened and he pressed a gentler kiss to her
lips, slow and soft, lingering, and she closed her eyes. As he kissed her, she felt him lift his hips up,
and she spread her legs further, lifting them up to wrap around his hips, and he ended the kiss,
pulling back from her just enough to look down at her.

"What should I do now?" she whispered, touching his face, brushing her fingertips over his skin.
He turned his head to kiss the palm of her hand. "I want you," she whispered, almost pleading, and
felt him shiver against her.

"I want you too," he said against her hand. "I—I heard it might hurt," he warned softly, and she
tried to bite back a laugh but it escaped anyway, and she watched him half-smile.

"I don't care," she promised. He kissed her palm again as he reached between them and guided himself into her,
his eyes never leaving hers.

They each let out sharp gasps, him of pleasure and her of pain, as he bowed his head, his forehead
brushing hers, and kissed her desperately. It was a dull throb of pain that was shakily eclipsed by
something else as he moved against her, something that made her shudder and writhe against him
helplessly, before she even knew what she was doing. She wrapped her arms around his neck and
held on as he moved once more, not knowing whether she was more in pain or more in joy, and
arched against him as they began to move together desperately.
She was just doing what she wanted to, she thought vaguely, the thought just barely out of her reach.

Jon pressed his face against her neck, gasping into the sweet skin that was damp with sweat, listening to the soft gasps she made with every movement, feeling her breasts against his chest and the way she tightened around him with each movement, her heels digging into his legs, her thighs tightening around him, pulling him ever closer, holding him against her so tightly that it was almost hard to move as much as he needed to.

At first she was merely holding onto him, but then something changed, and she was arching against him, the soft gasps becoming louder, smoother, warmer; her fingertips trailing along his shoulders suddenly digging into his skin. He felt her unraveling and felt her wildly trying to hold on; she did not know how to anticipate each shift yet, did not know her own body yet—and he was realizing that he did not, either.

He could not step outside of himself long enough to do so, as he had so easily stepped outside of himself when with Dany, until he was hardly there at all.

To do so now was impossible; he could barely even hold onto a single thought, finding himself lost in the way she sighed his name, or the way her skin, damp with sweat, tasted, or that singular shuddering, coiling feeling that was building. With Dany, sex had been like carefully arranging something: he thought of how he had used to hide in the godswood of Winterfell and carefully, out of twigs and leaves, build tottering castles of his own, each movement ginger and premeditated for fear of toppling the whole thing over.

But this time he thought of the wild, exhilarating uncertainty of riding a wild horse across sunlit hills, cresting each hill with no idea of what lay beyond it, frenzied and breathless and utterly at one with the moment—and even this observation slipped away from him too, when Sansa gripped his hair and guided him back to her lips, their kiss clumsy and breathless. They broke the kiss, gasping, and then she wrapped her arms around him again, pulling him closer so gently, so sweetly, so lovingly, touching him in precisely the sort of way that he had never been touched before, that the coil snapped.

He gasped her name because it felt good to say her name as he shuddered against her, finding his release helplessly, collapsing against her damp skin, her voice soft in his ear, her fingers gentle in his hair.

They lay tangled with the blankets on the cool floor, trying to catch their breath, but he felt Sansa's hips shift, and he realized she might be in pain. They pulled apart just long enough to resettle on their sides, and he impulsively took her hand and kissed it again. The blankets were uneven beneath them, twisted and tangled, but he felt too dazed and lazy to bother fixing them. Sansa lay on her side, facing him, her hair clinging to her temples and neck in sweaty tendrils, eyelids fluttering with drowsiness.

There was a dull throb between her legs that pulsed in time with her heartbeat, but there was something satisfying about the pain, and it was only made sweeter by the feel of Jon's fingertips pushing back her damp hair so tenderly, his arm brushing her shoulder with the movement. She opened her eyes once more, and saw his dark, warm gaze roving over her, tracing every line of her.

He suddenly pulled her closer, holding her against his chest, and she curled against him, tucking her head beneath his chin and running her legs against his. His fingertips smoothed along her back, up and down almost dreamily.
"Now we're truly married," she said against his warm skin. She felt him laugh softly.

"Aye, now we are," he murmured. "It gives new meaning to the old vows."

"Blood of my blood, bone of my bone," Sansa recited sleepily. "I was thinking of those vows when we were riding to Castle Black. Somehow they speak more than the vows of the Seven. I don't know why."

"Because you're a northern woman," Jon reasoned, "and they speak more to me, too. I was thinking of them when I saw you walk to the Direwolves' meeting."

"Because you're a northern man," Sansa said with a slight smile.

"I suppose I am," he agreed softly.

For a while he ran his fingertips over her skin in mindless patterns, and she felt herself drift closer to sleep, but then he spoke again. "Soon the northern ways will be gone. There will be Septs everywhere, and all the godswoods will be nothing but ash and memory, and maybe one day the clans will be gone, too, and no one will wear tartan anymore."

"No," she protested, amid a yawn. "That's what we're fighting for."

"Is it?" She felt Jon's hand trail lower, to the small of her back, and rest there as he thought. She wriggled against him, trying to get him to resume trailing his fingertips along her back. "Or is it the freedom to keep those things?"

"Well, both." She stilled again once his fingertips resumed movement, and sighed into his skin. "You can't have one without the other. If we fight for the freedom to keep our tartan and godswoods, then we'll certainly keep our tartans and godswoods."

"Mm. Perhaps."

"You don't sound like you agree," she noticed. She also noticed, though she would not say so out loud, how he was opening up further to her, now, and it warmed her with joy.

"I don't think everyone has quite the same goal. Beric believes in absolute freedom and absolutely no government, but does not care which gods are kept," Jon said slowly, "but Anguy, for example, keeps the old gods above all else. I don't know that he cares whether anyone sits the throne, so long as the godswoods are kept safe."

"He never seemed very...spiritual...to me," Sansa said doubtfully, and she felt him let out a scoff.

"Aye, you'd not think that brothels and godswoods could coexist."

They fell silent again for a time. The heat was dissipating as their bodies cooled, and she moved closer to him, seeking his warmth.

"Do you care about the old gods?"

"I don't know," Jon admitted. "I care about the godswoods more than I do the Septs, I suppose. And I care for the clans. But losing them is inevitable. Coming back to the north felt like traveling backward in time...I don't know how long it can be preserved, Sansa. The rest of the world is changing so fast."

Sansa thought of her argument with Jaime in Brienne's kitchen, and suddenly felt like she was
disappearing. She held onto Jon more tightly.

"It's our home," she said into his shoulder, and she felt him tighten his hold on her, drawing her to him with so much love and tenderness that a lump formed in her throat as she felt him reflexively kiss her hair, the movement almost instinctive, unconscious. She had never imagined that she would be so beloved to another. "I don't care what gods we keep so long as we're safe...and so long as our children will be safe, and happy, and loved."

"Aye, me too," Jon murmured, and he held her tightly, so she held him tightly in turn. She thought of the place where they might one day have a cradle, beneath the window, a cradle holding a son named Robb...

"I want to find out who my brother married," she whispered now, as she felt his hold on her relaxing as sleep began to overtake him. "I want to find her. I want to know what happened."

"We'll find her," Jon promised sleepily. "If she can be found."

There was a gentle warning in his words, but it wasn't anything she had not yet considered. Yet the sureness of his reply warmed her. He was on her side. The things that mattered to her mattered to him, too.

She had a family again, at last. All that had been taken from her was being returned to her, slowly, in ways that she would never have guessed.

She kissed Jon's shoulder and felt him sigh in his sleep as he pulled her closer, so lovingly and so gently, like she was precious, like she was beloved, like he would never let her go. Her last thought, as she began to drift off to sleep as well, was that, perhaps, Winterfell might be returned to her someday, too, in a way she had never imagined.

"I just can't believe you're Commander, now," Grenn was muttering, standing on the other side of Thorne's—well, now his—desk.

Pypar felt rather small behind the expansive desk, cowed by the finery of it. The office was full of finery that he had never dreamed of possessing, but with one decree from General Clegane, it had all become his overnight. Not just the office, but Thorne's title, and his own house, full of fine things he had been given by the Crown—it had all gone to Pypar.

"You were the highest ranking member of the Town Watch, and thus you are the new Commander," Clegane had informed him earlier in the day, in that voice that Pypar had been itching to mimic. It was like hearing rocks breaking; it was a brutal, violent voice, so well suited to a man of brutality and violence.

It had been disappointing to Pypar. He had something of an interest in voices and had been hoping, upon seeing Clegane, that the man might have a silly voice—a high, wispy, whistling sort of tone, perhaps.

"I get to boss you around," Pypar remarked, trying for levity, but he could not bring himself to smile.

The terms of his new appointment lay before him in a neatly furled scroll, which Clegane had presented to him earlier.

His first task was to end the Direwolves, the underground freedom group that had taken root in Mole's Town.
"We will take care of the Targaryen wolf and his whore," Clegane had informed him, as a Septon had placed stones over Thorne's eyes behind them.

It seemed inappropriate to discuss such matters inside a Sept, but as Pypar did not keep the new gods, he could not be certain. For certain it had to be sacrilegious to say 'whore' inside a place of worship... But he did not dare correct Clegane. "They will be hanged for their treasonous, murderous behavior, you can rest assured."

The redcoats had overrun the town, accompanied by men in the bloody Bolton tartan, and the red that had seeped through every street made him think of the rebellion so many years ago, and the blood that had spattered the town. The presence of soldiers always ended in blood, no matter the conflict, and when Clegane and his men had finally left the town, Pypar had hidden in his new office and vomited into a vase of the finest hand-painted Myrish china.

He did not want this new title or office; all of the finery of it could not make it less grim to him. There was no one above him in Mole's Town, now, and he knew he was unprepared for it.

"So...we find the Direwolves, then?" Grenn's uncertain voice drew him back to the present moment. The piles of gold dragons that Clegane had awarded him sat on the desk before him in a fine leather pouch, and they weighed on him as though he wore the pouch round his neck. *There will be more,* Clegane had promised as he had handed Pypar the weighty pouch, *once you end the Direwolves. The Crown does not tolerate rebel violence.*

Pypar felt sick. He thought of Miss Stone—who had never been Miss Stone, evidently, but in fact the Targaryen wolf's wife, Sansa Stark, daughter of clansman Eddard Stark—and her sweet smile. If she, that pretty girl with the pretty hair and pretty tits and the basket full of bread, could be a rebel...then who else was a rebel?

And could he bring himself to do anything about it?

The pouch of gold dragons was heavy. Odd, Pypar mused, that they still called them dragons, as he took the pouch in his hand, his arm straining with the weight of it. For even though the Targaryen dynasty had ended so long ago, they were still stamped on the currency of Westeros, and, as everyone knew, it was gold that won wars and earned loyalty.

In a way the Targaryens had never stopped ruling them, and they might never stop at all.

"Aye, the Direwolves," he agreed softly.
Updates will be slower than they have been going forward as I am relocating across the country for a new job!

"I didn't realize you were so close to Robb Stark," Dickon said as they rode away from the Crag. The sun had set, and the night was cold, and Dickon's boots were filled with sand.

“Aye, he was everything to me—best friend, brother...” Theon would not look at Dickon, but he looked back in the direction of the Crag often. His posture was tense, and every word from the Ironborn man was hassled, as though Dickon had interrupted him in the middle of an important thought.

Dickon could not blame him. He had not wanted to leave the Crag either.

He had followed little Robb Stark down to the rocky shore, cold in the shadow of the ruined castle, and had played for hours and had forgot the cold, while Theon talked to Jeyne Stark about things that did not matter to Dickon.

They had played soldiers, with Dickon following Robb up and down the beach, ducking together behind wet black rocks from invisible troops. They had played dragons, where Dickon had been a fierce dragon chasing Robb about, exulting in every peal and shriek of delighted laughter from the boy. They had splashed in the shallows, and for the first time in months—and months, and months — Dickon had caught himself laughing freely as he chased the boy. He had forgotten what joy felt like.

But then dusk had fallen, and Dickon had glimpsed Theon walking down to the shore with Jeyne, and he had known his time of brief joy was coming to an end. Robb had been growing sleepy by then, and Dickon had carried the little boy in his arms, his face buried in the crook of Dickon's neck, so trusting and so sweet, his fluffy auburn hair tickling Dickon's chin.

It had been hard to give him back, and in doing so, Dickon had felt as though he had cut off his own hand and given it to Jeyne. And in spite of this great sacrifice, she had still looked at him like he was a villain, like he was a bad man, and he was more conscious than ever of the scar from his father, of his shaved head, of how gaunt he knew he had grown.

Now they were on their way to Horn Hill once more, traveling in the night to make up for the time they had lost, and though Dickon was exhausted, he felt strangely awake. The strange, suffocating weight of his sadness had been lifted, but rather than feel free and light, he felt horrified and shaken. The world around him suddenly seemed too real, too sharp, too cruel, and the full horror of everything—his father’s death, the things he had done—felt like a light shining too brightly in his eyes, yet from which he could not turn.

He was all too sentient of everything around him: the sounds of the horses, the night noises, the salty breezes from the sea, the feel of his breeches rubbing against his cuts with each movement. The world was vast and unfriendly; the world was that of the Stranger, the one of the Seven whose face he had never seen in his mind’s eye.
Who was he? What had he done?

And how was he ever going to face his mother?

Perhaps the Stranger’s face was his own.

They would reach Horn Hill by dawn, he knew. His time was slipping away, slipping too fast. His stomach churned and he struggled to breathe evenly. Every time he blinked, he saw little Robb Stark, and the way that Jeyne had looked at him.

Was that how his mother would look at him?

He had turned his father to ash. He had done unspeakable deeds. He saw the lovely golden-haired girl at the Blue Rose Inn, writhing and crying before him. He saw the line of ruby prickling forth from the cut he had made into his own flesh. Why had he done it? He saw his father’s eyes just before he had died, his skin turned slick from the flames around him.

He was the villain, now.

How had it happened?

He had never had any choice in the matter. It had been a thing done unto him; yet the deeds were his own.

“Not long now,” yawned one of his father’s men, as they passed a bridge that Dickon recognized well, and his belly lurched.

Not long now.

He was walking toward his own execution, an execution of his soul.

Not long now.

He was a villain, unworthy of even Jeyne Stark’s kindness.

Not long now.

He couldn’t breathe.

Robb Stark’s blue eyes—the golden-haired girl, crying as her dress was torn from her, looking at Dickon with a kind of revulsion he had never once thought anyone would turn upon him—Robb Stark’s delighted laughter—Jon Snow’s pretty mouth—the gulls and the washed sunlight casting shadows in the shallows of the Crag—smoke billowing, burning his eyes, as he emerged from the Sept with all of those horrible men looking up at him—Jon Snow’s sword pointed at him—*the whore has an heir.*

Not long now.

“Is that it?” Theon narrowed his eyes, squinting into the distance as they crested a hill. *That’s right, Dickon remembered numbly, he’s an archer. Good eyes.*

The hill dropped into forest that was already far more lush and alive with spring than anything surrounding Winterfell; spring came earlier here than it did in the north. And beyond the trees was the silhouette of Horn Hill, the enormous estate topping the next hill, turned blue in the pre-dawn light, its myriad windows like blank, unfriendly eyes.
“That’s it,” Dickon choked.

They paused on that hilltop. His skin was prickling and he still couldn’t breathe. He felt Theon looking at him, and it angered him. He wished he would just stop it. He didn’t want anyone to look at him; he didn’t want anyone to see.

“If you tell anyone about our stop at the Crag or what we found there, I’ll saw off your cock with your own teeth and then rape you with it,” Theon said suddenly, then rode forward, down the hill. The men followed, leaving Dickon there atop the hill, alone, shattered by Theon’s powerful animosity.

Not long now.

He was crying. He couldn’t stop. He didn’t realize he’d been crying until now, now that he felt his jaw trembling and his eyes burning, and warm salty wetness gathering along his jaw and running down to his chin. He felt it drop onto the back of his hands, little raindrops.

He had never felt so alone. He wanted his mother; he wanted to be held, to be loved. When was the last time he had been loved?

But his mother could not love him now.

Had she ever truly loved him?

Had anyone ever loved him?

His father had thought him a fool; Sansa Stark would rather be defiled by the Dragonwolf than come back to her childhood home with him; his mother had not even written to him until now.

The last person who had loved him was Sam, but now Sam was dead.

He thought of Robb Stark’s auburn hair tickling his chin.

Dickon’s horse began to take the hill, eager to run after the others, and soon he was among the trees in the misty dawn whether he willed it or not, his face slick with tears and mist and his head and heart throbbing, pulsing in time with his blood. The men had made a mess of tracks in the woods, but Dickon went more quietly. He had always been a good hunter.

He thought of a slain fawn, he thought of his brother crying. He thought of Jon Snow, of Sansa Stark running from him.

He might as well stay in these woods; there was nothing more evil in this wood than him.

Not long now.

His horse stopped at a fallen log, and Dickon moved to urge it over the log, but something stilled him. The light was palest green, everything turned silver and lavender around him in the dawn. He had thought only the northern woods could contain magic, but there was something other in these southron woods this dawn, and it captured him.

Something, some force, turned his head to the right.

And there it was.

In the pale green light between lavender-shadowed trees stood a magnificent stag, gleaming pale as moonlight—not just any stag, but the White Stag, the stag of his dreams, the thing that he must
hunt. The air was thick with honeysuckle and hazel, heady and sweet. He was lost in his dream once again, and through the woods, the White Stag stared back at him. Its magnificent, silvery antlers almost glimmered, dusted with the magic of the faeries, and every hair on his body prickled with awareness as his mouth went dry.

He noiselessly dropped from his horse. He did not have his bow nor his gun with him; it would have been a perfect shot if he had. Yet he was not sure he could have shot the White Stag in this moment, though some primal part of him knew it was his mission. It was gazing at him with those black eyes, so innocent and so trusting. He thought of a child’s laughter, he thought of the warmth of holding a child in his arms, and it stilled him as he gazed back at the stag.

It bowed its lovely head, and Dickon, mesmerized, stepped forward—and then—

— *Thwack.* The White Stag reared and darted off, a blur of pearly light, and the woods darkened again. Now they were just woods again. An arrow shivered in a tree close to where the stag had bowed its head.

“Fucking hell.”

Theon was crunching toward him in the darkness, lowering his bow. His ash-colored hair was clinging in damp clumps to his forehead, and his eyes were wild. “You scared it, you fool,” Theon admonished furiously. “That was a white hart, and I had a perfect—”

“—You can’t catch it,” Dickon remembered suddenly, the words not his own. He spoke though it was Sam’s voice he heard. He was a child again, crouched before his brother who was sprawled beneath one of the bookcases in the library of Horn Hill.

Why do men want it so bad? Dickon had asked his brother.

*Because it’s the loveliest creature on earth, and because no other man has caught it,* Sam had replied. *When you see it, it fills you with light and joy and hope. But it’s a futile hunt; it is like giving into dreams rather than living. The hunt for it consumes these men; it ruins them. It’s terribly sad.*

He remembered Sam’s warm brown eyes, shining as he set the enormous book down between them, pointing to a sketch of a white stag, edged with golden ink that caught the dim light of the musty library. Even as a boy Dickon had thought the white stag marvelous, although the sight of all those words around the picture had bored and annoyed him. “Men have tried but have lost their minds searching for it. No one’s ever caught or killed a white stag,” Dickon continued, echoing Sam’s words from so long ago.

As a spoilt child it had been hard to imagine being so transfixed by something that brought hope and joy—he had not known the absence of hope and joy. Now he knew. Now he understood.

“Not if they’ve got a hunting companion like you blundering through the forest,” Theon snarked, rolling his eyes and slinging his bow over his back. “Have you been *crying*?” he asked, that sly voice on the edge of a joke once again.

“No.”

Dickon mopped his face, and got on his horse once more; in the distance, Theon did as well. He looked back toward where the white stag had been, but the stag was gone, as was that strange pearly, silvery light with it. He was shivering frantically now, overcome with a new loss. His soul felt more hollow than ever. Now he understood the search for the white stag; now he understood
They came to the edge of the woods. There was a long, straight road lined with beeches leading to Horn Hill. Its stately silhouette was clearer, now. Through the large, wrought-iron gate, he could see the carefully-tended front garden surrounding the front drive. It was so different from Winterfell that it was jarring; he had forgotten how backwards the north had felt when he had first come to it. All that wild, tangled, ruined space... Here Horn Hill gleamed crisp and modern and proper, and yet, it too felt strange to him, now. The north had awakened some deeper part of him—the warrior within him—and now the south no longer felt like home either.

He had become the Stranger...another lost man searching for the White Stag.

So a stranger I will be, he decided grimly, and he set forth for the gates of Horn Hill, bearing new scars and his father’s ashes.

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Jon awoke with Sansa in his arms, the curve of her bare back pressed to his chest. His arm was around her, her arm against his and her hand over his, holding his hand to her chest. She was still asleep, her breathing deep and even. The light was flat in the room; it was just before dawn.

He kissed her shoulder, impulsively, and she stirred and sighed in her sleep, and he felt her pull his hand closer, tucking their twined hands closer to her chest. Her soft breast brushed against his arm, and he shifted backward as heat traveled south in his desire for her. He did not want to wake her with his desire. She might be sore, and she was definitely tired. She had been through so much, recently—she deserved her rest.

He had only ever woken up with her, he realized. Even in the Barrowlands when they had been traveling together—before they had been married—they had woken up together. And even then, he remembered with no small amount of shame, he had been awoken by his desire for her, and had tried his best to conceal it from her. He had behaved like such a selfish fool, turning from her and hiding from her until she had been brought to tears by his distance.

He kissed her shoulder once more, forgetting his resolution not to wake her. He could not help it. My wife, he thought, and he let his lips linger on her shoulder for a moment. Her skin was warm and sweet-smelling. He felt her sigh and stir.

“Jon?” Her voice was soft with sleep. “Is it morning already?”

“Aye.”

The house was silent around them; no one else was awake yet, he was sure of it. “Go back to sleep,” he told her. “I’ll see about some food and a bath.”

She drowsily mumbled her assent and curled back into the blankets as he shifted away from her. She tucked the blankets around her carefully, then rose and dressed. Their clothes were scattered about the floor wildly; another reminder of last night’s love and passion. He folded her things and then left the room, after stealing one last look at Sansa, her red hair splayed and catching the light.

Everything was different now. He was different.

Downstairs in the great hall, where they had eaten their supper, Anguy, Sandor, and Tormund had all fallen asleep, sprawled across the flagstone before the darkened hearth, their faces grey and slack from too much drink. They’d be in some pain when they awoke. He wondered where the others had gone off to—particularly Lannister.
In the kitchens, he found a tub large enough for a bath, and started a fire in the hearth to heat the water. There was some bread from last night and he took that as well and wrapped it in cloth. When the water was hot enough, he lugged the tub up the many stairs, the hot water sloshing over the rim occasionally, to their room.

Sansa was waking up when he opened the door and shoved the tub in. She clutched the blankets around herself and sat up as he shut the door behind him. The room smelled like sex. It would be obvious what they had been doing all night to anyone who entered, but it didn’t matter. There was nothing dishonorable about this, and that thought alone made him weak with relief.

“Not much of a bath, but it’s better than nothing,” he told her, then tore apart the bread, handing her the larger hunk of it.

“Thank goodness,” she said. “I’m in need of a bath,” she admitted ruefully. He studied her as they ate. Her hair was wild and tangled, and her pale skin was marked with little love bites. It was hard to believe he had done that, but he had—and he would do more, he thought dazedly.

“No one’s awake yet,” he told her as she got to her feet, still modestly holding the blankets to her. “I won’t look,” he promised, turning away, but she laughed.

“You’ve seen it all, now,” she reminded him. “I don't know why I'm hiding; I suppose it’s just habit. ...You can turn around,” she added shyly.

Jon turned back to face his wife. Sansa dropped the blankets from her body after a moment's hesitation, and he bit his lip as he met her eyes.

“You’re so lovely,” he said, his voice embarrassingly rough with desire, and she flushed.

“I must look a mess,” she muttered, looking away and tucking her hair behind her ears. She stepped into the steaming water and cringed before sinking into the water. There was just barely enough room for her to sit with her knees pinned to her chest. In the movement, he saw traces of dried blood on her thighs, and saw her wince as she settled into the hot water.

“Are you sore?” he asked as he sat beside her on the floor.

“Just a bit, but the warmth helps.” She attempted to untangle her hair, but he reached up, carefully combing his fingers through the long hair, and she looked back at him questioningly.

“It’s my fault it’s so tangled,” he explained. It was a good excuse; he loved her hair.

In the quiet, she sat in the water as he untangled her hair with patient movements. It made him think of weaving that net of reeds with her as they had traveled through the Barrowlands, and of how upset she had been, so fearful that he was angry with her.

He needed to remember what she had been through, he told himself. He needed to care for her as she had cared for him.

After a while her long hair fell neatly down her back once more, the ends pooling in the water, and he found himself tracing her skin on her back, fingertips pausing at the freckle at the middle of her back. Gooseflesh rose at his touch. She turned her face toward his, biting her lip, her gaze lingering on his mouth before flicking away shyly. She cleared her throat and twisted her hair away from her face, and turned to face him full-on. Her bare skin was distracting, but he could tell she did not intend on letting them fall back into bed together just this moment, so he tore his gaze from the curve of her breast, just visible around her knees.
“We need a plan,” she informed him.

“Aye, I’ve been thinking that, too.” He paused. “Hold on.” He got up and unlocked their door, and looked around the hall. Still dead-empty. “Alright,” he said, locking the door once more and returning to where he had been sitting beside the little tub. He watched her draw in a deep breath, and he thought of watching her at the Direwolves’ meeting, and his chest tightened.

“We need a plan for how we’ll find out about Robb’s marriage...but we also need a plan for how we’ll manage here. We know there’s bound to be conflict, and we need to be ready,” she said. "I won't be a pawn ever again—and neither will you. We know Mance wants to use us."

“Aye, but we need more information,” Jon said doubtfully.

His hair was still wild from their night of love and it made her fingers twitch with the need to tangle them in those wild curls, and the desire to feel that lovely mouth against her skin—her scar, in particular—but she was still quite sore, and moreover, the room was becoming bright with daylight. They’d already been caught in the act once last night—she would not let it happen again, or she’d never live the teasing down.

She thought of Jaime and fought the urge to cringe. Jaime knew that Jon had not bedded her before; he would know that last night she had lost her maidenhead. *He never bedded me,* she had told him all those nights ago, drunken and miserable.

*Why* had she told Jaime anything at all? And *why* had she thrown herself at him? In the chaos of the last few weeks, she had forgotten it, but the humiliation was suddenly as bright as the light streaming into the room. The memory, although fuzzy round the edges from the whiskey, was still as strong as ever. In her need for Jon she had thrown herself at Jaime—and yet...

She shook herself from her shame when she realized that Jon was studying her, his brow furrowed in thought. “You can charm Mance and Quorin,” he began slowly. “You did it back in Mole’s Town, and I watched you do it with Daenerys before that.”

He hadn’t called her *Dany,* and Sansa’s heart clenched with hope. He stumbled slightly over the name, self-conscious, but she knew better than to comment on it. Instead, she pretended she’d not noticed it at all. “You’re good at it,” he added, avoiding her eyes, and her cheeks grew warm. “People trust you. They open up to you. And you’re the cleverest of us all. If there’s anything to be got out of Mance or Quorin, you’ll be able to get it from them. We need to find out what Mance’s plans *really* are before we can make any plans of our own. And we know he’s made plans. Lannister saw it too, yesterday: Mance and Quorin are planning *something,* and they’re not telling Beric.”

“But why involve Beric at all, then?” Sansa whispered, peering at Jon curiously. She watched him press his lips together in thought, watched him look away, narrowing his grey eyes.

“Beric’s well-connected. He has access to weapons, and the Brotherhood has made a name for itself, now—a name that resonates with northerners, a name that means anti-Crown sentiment. I think Mance wants to make use of it all. He likes a good story, and he knows the power of it.”

“But *how*?”

“I don’t know,” Jon admitted. “If he’s planning another northern rebellion, he’s a fool. We don’t have the numbers anymore, and too many people remember how the last one turned out.”

Sansa thought of Thorne’s words, thought of Pypar, thought of her father’s head coming off. She
thought of Mance slyly looking at her and thinking of how he might use her.

“He reminds me a bit of Daenerys,” she said slowly, watching carefully for how Jon reacted to her words. Jon returned her gaze unflinchingly. “Strong ideals, but no practical plan, and ...perhaps... not a strong grasp of the reality of the people of Westeros,” she continued cautiously.

“Aye, I thought so too,” Jon said flatly, surprising her. “If it’s just another simple rebellion he’s planning, I’ll have no part of it.”

“But what other choices are there?” Sansa pressed. “Rebellion is inevitable. The north has nothing to offer the crown in exchange for liberty.” She thought of Jaime, and thought of Brienne and Podrick. She remembered sitting in Brienne’s kitchen with Jaime and Brienne, and her heart ached.

“There’s more than one way to do it,” Jon countered. “The north lost last time because it lacked the men and the machinery and the unity. You can round up every last man in the north and put a sword in his hand and send him into King’s Landing—and what will it accomplish? Nothing but death. It’s a fool’s errand.”

Jon and Jaime had more in common than either man knew.

He seemed angry; she touched his arm and he let out a breath. “We left Essos with enough Dothraki for a proper standing army and the finest swords from Braavos; by the time we reached Gulltown, we had barely enough men to protect Daenerys properly, and the idea of storming King’s Landing was laughable. We were decimated by sickness, Sansa. All those men, all those swords—it took years to build up that kind of army—nearly destroyed within two weeks. And it hardly mattered, because as we learned from Tyrion, all of the swords in the world would not have won Daenerys the throne. You don’t win wars with warriors anymore, he told us.”

“Then how do you win wars?”

“I don’t know. But it’s not with swords anymore.” Jon got to his feet, and held out his hands for her. She took his hands and let him help her up, and the water sluiced off her. His gaze lingered on her form before he looked away guiltily.

She gripped his strong hands, the hands she had admired from the start.

_So why do I want him?_ she had once asked Jaime, so desperately.

_Sometimes it is about a kinship, a recognition of the soul,_ he had replied. She met Jon’s eyes, watched them soften as he gazed at her. She thought of how she had touched his cheek so long ago on that sad, cold night in the holdfast. She thought of how he had looked at her then, and warmth washed over her anew. She watched him swallow as he gazed at her.

“Do you _really_ think me the cleverest?” she asked suddenly, as Jon helped her out of the tub and handed her one of the blankets to dry herself off.

“Aye,” he admitted, passing her the blanket, looking wry but hassled. “You are, and it’s made me furious before, and I reckon it’ll make me furious again.”

“Well, your habit of sacrificing yourself has made me furious before, and will likely make me furious again,” she countered. Jon’s lips twitched as he gazed at her.

“Just because it’s made me furious doesn’t mean I don’t love it,” he said quietly, and he turned away to pick up her clothes. Her heart gave a shudder and she felt her eyes burn with emotion abruptly. When he turned back, holding her sark and corset, she could not help herself—she
stepped forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

After she had dressed, they went downstairs, and Jon carried the bathwater out to the yard to dump it. Dalla was in the kitchen with Davos and Gendry, preparing breakfast.

"Oh, good, you're awake," greeted Dalla, slightly flushed from standing over the hearth. "I need more water."

Gendry and Davos only nodded to her; they both had been put to hard work already, it seemed. When Sansa returned with water from the well, the kitchens were abuzz with activity, and Jon was nowhere to be found.

"They're finishing the stables, and after that, they'll start putting together beds," Dalla explained to her. "And we'll continue cleaning in here!"

Sansa set to work in the kitchen, helping Dalla prepare food, but something was not sitting right. She would have guessed that they would all meet together over breakfast. Even if Mance and Quorin had their own plans, was it not strange that there was no mention of why they were here at all?

"When should we all sit down and begin planning?" she asked innocently, as she began kneading dough for Dalla. She hadn't ever done it before, but she'd seen Brienne and Podrick do it enough. Another pang for Brienne, and for Podrick, tightened her chest, but she ignored it fiercely, and pushed down the pain.

Dalla laughed.

"Planning? We've got to make the place inhabitable, first off, before we do anything else," she dismissed cheerfully, but there was an edge to her voice that told Sansa to ask no further questions on the subject.

They worked for hours. Dalla set out breakfast for everyone to take as they pleased, and then they moved upstairs to resume cleaning. Sam and Gilly joined them at last, looking sleepy. Little Sam, apparently, was struggling to adjust to their new home, and Sansa tried to turn away from her guilt. It was her fault, after all.

Every now and then she got a chance to look out the window. Mance and Quorin were nowhere to be found, but she did see Jon and Jaime working together, heads bent low as they drew in the dirt between them. She felt so useless.

*You're the cleverest of us all,* Jon had said, and remembering it filled her with warmth.

On the other side of the room, Dalla was scrubbing away at the floor. *Dalla knows far more than she lets on,* Sansa thought, looking back to her own scrubbing. *And she is political. She even knows the White Stag.*

*People trust you. They open up to you,* Jon had said.

Her heart began to pound. This was a chance, she realized. If she could get Dalla to open up to her, to trust her, she might get more from her than from Mance. Mance would be on the lookout for prying, would be ready with sly excuses and diversions. But Dalla was his partner—that much was clear enough—and would likely know whatever Mance planned.

"You were right, by the way," Sansa remarked, still scrubbing the floor, slightly breathless. "About the morning light," she added shyly. It was not difficult to sound modest, as she was embarrassed
by the topic, but Dalla had been the one to bring it up yesterday, after all, so she knew she would not be offended. She heard Dalla chuckle.

"The way you two look at each other, it's no surprise," she replied. "I hardly expected you to leave the room at all."

She thought, unbidden, of Jon's mouth on her scar, and the scar tingled at the memory. She didn't want to admit to anything more—it was, after all, private—but this was the only way to Dalla's heart that she had found thus far. It was her best chance, and she could not bear to be useless, to be helpless, as she had been in King's Landing for so long.

"I didn't want to leave," she admitted at last. It was the truth. She had wanted to draw Jon into the bath with her and kiss every part of him. "It was...different...than I expected."

"Aye, it's never what you expect," Dalla agreed, wringing her cloth out. She shot Sansa a look. "He's a lovely man. My Val was after him, but he was steadfast. Wouldn't submit to her advances—and it's a rare man who would turn Val down. He only insisted that he had a wife in Mole's Town."

Sansa's mouth went dry. She had wondered, of course, about what Val might have been to Jon—she was so lovely, the loveliest woman that Sansa had ever seen. The thought that he had been faithful—though their marriage had not been a true one—filled her with warmth and made her want to cry.

And meanwhile, she had thrown herself at Jaime... she had nearly been kissed by Podrick... A lump formed in her throat and she scrubbed harder.

There was nothing to feel guilty about. She had not known that they would ever reunite. He had told her to find a man, after all. So why did she feel so guilty?

"He is lovely," she said at last. "The loveliest man I've ever seen."

"And he's yours," Dalla reminded her cheekily. "In name and in heart. You're a lucky one."

And here was her chance. She drew in a deep breath.

"So are you. Mance is so kind, and so brave." She felt Dalla staring at her, and she risked a glance at the woman. She had to play this just right. Dalla was looking at her oddly.

"Aye, he is," she said slowly. "He's very kind and brave. ...Most don't see him for that, though. You see quite a bit, Sansa Snow."

"Is that why you fell for him?" Sansa asked innocently, teasingly. Dalla snorted and looked back to her scrubbing.

"Hardly. I fell for the pretty face and pretty voice," she shot back. Was there a bitterness to her voice, or was Sansa hearing what she wanted to hear?

"And he fell for your beauty and your wits," she finished for her, smiling at Dalla. "He's the lucky one. He didn't just get a wife—he got a partner, too."

"That's true of any steady marriage," Dalla dismissed. There it was: that edge again, that warning: tread no further. "Now, go fetch Mr. Flowers and his wife. We ought to tackle the kitchen gardens next," she said suddenly, rising briskly and wiping her hands on her skirts. "We'll be at this for weeks, at this rate."
Dalla left the room, sloshing the buckets of water, and Sansa sat in thought.

_They're waiting for something_, she realized suddenly. All of this work was a distraction: a good one, as it was necessary work, but a distraction all the same.

Mance and Quorin were waiting for something, and Dalla knew it.

Sansa got to her feet and wrenched open the window looking out onto the yard. The stable was in better shape, now, and Jon and Jaime were arguing with Beric about something. Jaime was the first to notice her looking out, and their eyes met, and Sansa felt herself flush at the knowing gleam in those leonine eyes. Then he turned and said something to Jon—something teasing, by the curve of his mouth—and Jon turned round to look up at her.

His look was blazing; a shudder rent through her. _Is it natural_, she wondered desperately, _to want someone so badly?_ The world briefly melted away, as she drank him in for as long as she dared, before returning to the matter at hand.

She smiled at him and waved, wishing they had some sort of signal.

"Working hard, Mrs. Snow, or hardly working?" Jaime called up to her with a laugh. The others were looking at her, now, and Tormund waved brightly at her, and she laughed and waved back, then looked back at Jon and Jaime. Both men were staring at her, and Jaime's teasing look from before was gone. He seemed to sense something.

"Working hard...and learning a lot about the house," she called back, looking at Jon. His expression did not change, but he nodded at her, slightly. Jaime was looking at him curiously, then back at her, squinting in the sunlight, but she turned and shut the window.

Daenerys came downstairs to a commotion. It was late morning; they had been up late planning for their journey to Pyke, and when she had finally gone to bed, it had taken hours to fall asleep. She had heard dogs barking all night, reminding her strongly of the morning she had defeated the bear—but no one else in the house seemed to be bothered by the barking, and eventually she had fallen asleep.

She hobbled downstairs, one hand on her belly as though holding an unwieldy bundle in place. Maege, Tyrion, Jorah, and Grey Worm were downstairs near the front entrance, with several Mormont clansmen and clanswomen surrounding them. When Daenerys reached the last step, they finally looked up at her.

"What's happened?" she demanded, looking between them. Grey Worm's hand was on his sword, but he said nothing.

"It's the Tyroshi," Maege answered for the rest of them, shooting a look of disgust at Jorah, who shifted under the burn of Maege's glare and appealed to Daenerys with a look. Ever since arriving at Bear Island, Jorah had reminded Daenerys of a castrated man; the sight of him, so cowed by the women of his own family, disgusted her. She did not smile at him, merely stared at him, waiting.

"Come, Princess," Jorah said at last. "It's best if you see it for yourself."

She reluctantly followed him out into the windy, grey morning, the salt of the ocean thick on the back of her tongue and the fishy, putrid reek of the shoreline turning her stomach. In silence, their little group marched round the perimeter of the great house, and around to the side where the sheep were kept.
Her breath caught in her throat as they paused outside the paddock. It was too cold for flies, luckily, but the stench of death mingled with the odor of fish, and Daenerys had to clap a hand over her mouth to stop from vomiting.

There was not a single sheep left alive. The lambs lay scattered throughout the paddock, their wool matted with blood, entrails spilling out into the patchy grass.

"D-daario would never—" she began, after the urge to vomit had passed, but Jorah interrupted.

"No, Naharis did not do this. He was the one to discover them. He came out at dawn because he heard dogs barking and wanted to investigate. He found this, but no dogs."

"We don't have any dogs—or even wolves—on Bear Island," Maege said skeptically. "And no one else heard such a commotion."

"I heard the barking, too," Daenerys replied, and felt sicker when everyone turned looks of confusion on her. "Didn't any of you?"

For a long time, no one spoke. They were simply staring at her, as though she'd told them she'd seen mermaids sunbathing on the shoreline.

"No, and I was awake most of the night," Tyrion said slowly, studying her with those mismatched eyes.

"Well, then what did this?" she asked haplessly, after an uncomfortable moment, wishing they would stop peering at her like that. It was not so strange to hear dogs barking, she thought furiously. And how could Maege possibly account for every animal that haunted Bear Island? Surely there were animals of which she was unaware. Wild dogs were not so uncommon.

"Perhaps a man," said Grey Worm. He had swung over the paddock fence, fearless as always, and was kneeling before the closest sheep, examining it. Only Grey Worm would be able to get so close without getting sick, Daenerys thought. She could hardly even look at the sheep. "This could have been done with a blade, though not a sharp one."

He rose from his crouch and swung back over the fence. For a long time, no one spoke, as the salty wind whipped around them.

"Who would do such a thing?" Daenerys asked them.

"I think it likely another wild beast," said Maege. "Some of the guts are missing; I think it a hungry beast. Perhaps a bear, indeed. The bears never used to bother us, but they've grown too used to our presence on the island, I think. They no longer fear us as they did."

She turned away from the nauseating sight. "We do not have the time to wait around for the Tyroshi to return from his ridiculous quest," she said briskly. "We must leave for Pyke now." She looked angrier than ever, and Daenerys did not relish a long journey by boat with her.

"We can give him until noon," said Tyrion, squinting up toward the pale sun that was nearly blocked by clouds. "The boat's nearly ready. We can wait a bit longer, but it's true that we'd better get a move on sooner than later."

Daenerys told herself not to worry. After all, Bear Island was not large—Daario would not have to go very far before determining that there were no dogs to track.

But the sheep did not look like they had been eaten—rather, they looked like they had been
slaughtered, for spite or for sport.

Daenerys packed up her few belongings, and, standing alone in her room before the long mirror, she finally slipped on the bearskin. The bear’s yawning jaw hung over her head. The animal skin was a foul scent, but in time the stench would fade. Her silvery hair was eclipsed by the bear’s black fur, and its arms draped down over her shoulders, down her front.

She looked like a feral, wild goddess— like a conqueror, she thought with lust — and a thrill of admiration for her own reflection made her stand taller. This is who I was always meant to be.

She would move forward—toward a Greyjoy alliance, toward the throne. She could not let herself look backward, toward any of it—least of all back to Jon.

And yet the mere memory of him made her drop to her knees, gasping and heaving with private sobs. No one could know this pain. The world would shame her for it—hell, she would shame herself for this pain, but not for the same reasons. He is not worthy of your pain, she told herself, no man is. And yet here she was, crying like a fool over a man anyway. Crying over his pretty lips and kind eyes, crying for the boy who had gasped and writhed beneath her, first in protest, as she had pulled him towards a place of pleasure and love. He had once belonged to her and now he was lost to her, that sweet sad boy who had always been a prisoner, of the Starks, then of Viserys, and then of her.

No. That wasn’t right. She had never held him prisoner...had she? No. She hadn’t. He’d always wanted to stay.

Except he left, a small, sly voice whispered, and she looked up and saw her wet-faced reflection in the mirror. If he left you so happily did he ever really want you at all? Did he ever really love you, as you loved him?

Had she ever been loved?

Once upon a time, a small boy had looked upon her with love and admiration filling his grey eyes. Once upon a time, she had been loved by Jon Snow. Once upon a time, she had held snowdrop flower pins in her hand, and Jon Snow had half-smiled at her.

But that time was past, and Jon Snow would never smile at her again. The snowdrop pins were gone. She ought to have cast them into the sea on their way to Gulltown, for that was where she had lost Jon for good. Anger billowed within her as she stared at her foolish reflection, and she dried her eyes.

He was no true dragon. She had known it then. So why was she still weeping for him?

She placed a hand over her belly, feeling Gida. He would never know his father. She would scratch Jon from her memory, from the Targaryen line forever. He was no true dragon, she reminded herself. Her eyes burned, briefly, but she blinked and the feeling subsided. When she got to her feet once more, her face was dry, and a dragon queen, dressed in the skin of the bear goddess she had conquered, stared back at her.

I am the last true dragon, and Gida is my son, and I will conquer Westeros.

“Without Jon Snow,” she whispered, smoothing her hand over her belly. He had been a wolf in dragon’s clothes, but now she knew the truth of him. This was her greatest betrayal, but she could withstand it. What could she not withstand? She had withstood everything: rape, deception, miscarriage, lies, abuse, betrayal. This was just another piece of kindling to add to the fire within
her, the fire that burned brighter than any man that had ever sat upon the Iron Throne. And Jon Snow was just another man who had harmed her, but who could not destroy her.

She would not give him the fucking satisfaction of it.

The ship was waiting out beyond the shallows, and the little rowboats that would take them to it were bobbing along with the whitecaps by the dock. They stood there in the watery sunlight, in impatient and strained silence as they waited for Daario.

"He knows we're leaving, does he not?" Daenerys asked for the millionth time, sensing the irritation of everyone around her. Tyrion was sitting on the edge of the dock, swinging his short legs and staring, broodingly, into the murky water. Every now and then, little silvery fish caught the light, and he would needlessly point them out.

"He knows. He is determined to catch this beast," Tyrion replied. Maege was pacing, the sea wind ruffling her black furs and black hair. She kept looking anxiously out to the horizon, as though waiting for something. Or someone. Dacey, thought Daenerys with a sick lurch of guilt, and she turned away from Maege—but a little figure was running down the beach toward the dock, and Daenerys had no wish to look at her, either. Lyanna Mormont was sprinting for them, faster than most girls her age would have been able to run.

"Found him," she yelled, panting, as she skidded to a stop on the silvered wood. She pointed back up the hill. Indeed, Daario was loping toward them from the house. Although he had the same lazy, long strides as ever, his face was pulled taut, and he was unsmiling. It was a rarity.

As they waited for Daario, Daenerys felt Lyanna staring openly at her and her bearskin, but the little girl said nothing. Daenerys stared back. This is what a strong woman looks like, child, she wished to say. Look not to your mother, nor your foolish sister — wherever she has gone — but to me.

"Did you find the beast?" Tyrion snarked as Daario reached them. He did not look at Tyrion, but turned to Maege instead.

"I found tracks," he told her. "Smaller than a bear, bigger than a dog."

"Wolves?" Tyrion suggested with a roll of his eyes, but Lyanna pulled a face.

"And how did they get here, dwarf — by boat?" she demanded, cocking her head.

To his credit, Tyrion laughed rather than taking offense.

"We must leave now," dismissed Maege. She turned to Lyanna, who nodded stoically at her mother.

"I will send a raven if Dacey returns," promised Lyanna, and Maege turned from her daughter quickly, her face shadowed.

The rocking of the rowboats made her feel even more sick. She'd be glad to be on the sturdy ship. She pulled her bearskin tighter around her, grateful for its warmth. No one spoke.

Once aboard the ship, she was relieved, as though she had breached the surface after being held under for some time. Bear Island receded until it was nothing more than a smudge on the horizon, and she wished it ill as she stared back at it. I hope one thousand dogs attack its sheep and every last woman upon the island starves or freezes to death, she thought vengefully, and then felt guilty for it. What sort of savage am I become?
She touched her bear, still sheltering her silvery hair. *Perhaps it is the spirit of the bear that has engulfed me. Perhaps I have become fierce and savage and cruel and motherly as a bear, as the bear of Bear Island.*

Missandei was beneath, in the little bunk she had saved for herself, and Daenerys went to her and crawled into the dark space with her. Missandei’s limbs were warm and smooth as they had always been, but the Naathi woman turned from her and would not cave to her touches.

“What do you think killed the sheep?” Daenerys whispered to Missandei’s slim back as the boat creaked around them.

“Our sins,” Missandei whispered back. Daenerys almost laughed. An imperfect and silly translation—but the laugh got stuck in her throat. *Our sins.* Why did she think of Jon?

Why did she think of a man-child with pretty lips and strong arms pushing her away, only to relent at once? Why did she feel sad when Missandei finally turned to her in that bunk, and kissed her in the darkness? Why did she feel so hollow even when she felt Missandei slide two fingers into her, as they moved together in the darkness? Missandei had to stretch around her unwieldy belly, around *Gida*, and she thought of how strange it was that Gida was here, witnessing this, thought he would never remember it. Or perhaps he would?

He would never remember her coupling with Jon, though. At least, she hoped he would not. But even as Missandei thrust her fingers into her, until Daenerys shuddered and bucked against her hand, she hoped that Gida would have no memory of that, either.

In silence she lay beside Missandei and touched her belly. She had wanted Gida to be a child of love, but she was feeling, increasingly, like love was a thing made up, as silvery and insubstantial and false as faerie tales. Even the White Stag of her strange visions and dreams was more real.

In the distance loomed Pyke. It was a smudge of grey against more grey, and Daenerys’ heart sank. When they had first landed in Westeros, she had imagined sunlight and color and life—but so far it seemed that everything was grey. Grey, grey, grey. Wet and dark and grim.

"You don’t look happy," Tyrion observed. He had come to stand beside her on the deck. The light rain was barely more than mist but it soaked them both. Tyrion was, for once, without his whiskey, and was garbed in a cloak too large for him that had been clumsily hemmed.

"Another grey abandoned island," Daenerys replied, looking back at Pyke, but Tyrion laughed.

"Hardly abandoned, Princess," he said. "Pyke has half the north on it—not that it will last, of course, as Asha Greyjoy clearly knows."

"What do you mean?"

"When Ned Stark’s head fell from his shoulders, the north got fucked," Tyrion said bluntly. "And the clan system more or less collapsed. All of the peasants that were not noble enough to wear tartan but who lived on the Stark clan lands—and the Starks had the biggest lot of them—were forced to search elsewhere. Many of them came to Pyke."

"Forced? Did the crown kick them out?" Daenerys thought of Sansa Stark...and of Jon, whose dark eyes were Stark eyes. She touched her belly. He was not Gida’s father, not anymore, but still... she thought of the sweet sad boy beneath starlight, of the fierce boy wielding a sword far too young... she thought of the boy she had loved, desperately, painfully. "Under my reign, I would allow them back," she said at last.
"A kind gesture, no doubt, but a pointless one. They wouldn't go back. The northern lands aren't arable, Princess. That's why the clan system was necessary in the first place—peoples had to band together for survival. You can't easily live off the north without assistance, without imports. Once they lost Ned Stark, they lost their means for survival, and they fled their crofts and came here. People like Maege and Sansa Stark may remember the clans fondly, Princess, but no one else does—particularly those who suffered in the crofts, barely surviving each year. Pyke may seem unappealing, but they can survive here."

"But what's here?"

"Seaweed, Princess. Seaweed, without which you do not have iodine, or soap, or glass." Tyrion pointed to the murky waters below. Brown, slimy vegetation was floating on the surface briefly before being lost beneath a whitecap. "And so long as Joff maintains a poor relationship with Essos, Pyke has the biggest source of seaweed in all of Westeros."

He paused. "I think," he began, "that Asha Greyjoy might be a genius. She controls the salt mines, and she controls the kelp industry—two things the crown cannot get elsewhere, and two things that support life and industry in Westeros. Without her salt mines and without her kelp, Westeros falls." He grinned. "And the woman knows it, and she uses it. Genius. If we secure her allegiance, we may as well crown you Queen of the Iron Throne in that moment."

Daenerys' mouth went dry. She wasn't a fearful person, not by any means, and she had approached people of far more importance than Asha Greyjoy before. But within herself she could admit she was nervous.

"How likely is it that we will secure her allegiance?"

"That is entirely dependent upon you. I can bargain and banter all day with Greyjoy, but she's surrounded by shrewd men like me." He turned to look at her, his mismatched gaze lingering on the bearskin draped over her, then on her silver hair, then on her swollen belly. "But she has yet to meet anyone like you."
Part III: Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

A quick recap: Jon and Sansa have finally consummated their marriage and have agreed to keep a close watch on Mance, who seems to be planning something with Quorin.

Back in Mole's Town, Pypar has been appointed the new Commander of the Town Watch, and has been tasked by General Clegane to hunt down the Direwolves.

Daenerys and co. are heading to Pyke to meet with Asha Greyjoy, seeking an alliance.

Dacey has left Bear Island and is currently MIA.

Dickon and Theon are on their way to Horn Hill to return Randyll's ashes to Melessa, but Dickon is still reeling from meeting the son Robb Stark left behind--and his wife, Jeyne Westerling.

...And in King's Landing, the people grow ever more restless under Joffrey, Margaery has yet to produce an heir, and Tommen really wants to go home.

Chapter Notes

I took a break from this story because I was losing my interest in it and I plan on turning this into an original series, so I wanted to take some time to think about whether I was still heading in the direction I meant to and whether I was pacing things correctly. Somewhere along the way, I started to hate this story and felt ashamed of it, so I decided to not look at it for a while... but then I reread it recently while on a business trip and rediscovered what made me need to tell this story in the first place, so here we are again.

Thanks to everyone for sticking with this (ridiculously long) story.

Astride his fine black horse—courtesy of the Crown—Pypar rode along the main drag of Mole's Town. He watched its inhabitants, people he had once largely thought of as his own family, shy away from the long shadow he cast, ushering their children inside hastily.

He longed for someone with whom to share this new irony: now that he could by law go anywhere and do anything in Mole's Town, he no longer felt free, and it no longer felt like his home. But Grenn, friend though he was, would not have understood, and Pypar realized he was beginning to feel an odd sense of companionship with Thorne, who had always seemed so distant, his self-imposed loneliness bordering on martyrdom.

But Pypar was no martyr. He was just a man—a man tasked with finding the Direwolves, on order of General Clegane of the Royal Army. To find the Direwolves would be supposedly to stamp out
the rebellion, and there were rumors that some of the Direwolves lingered in Mole's Town. The threat of rebellion was like the taste of rain before a storm, lingering on the back of his tongue.

At Flowers' Print Shop, he tied up his horse and, after a quick, paranoid glance at the abandoned square behind him, let himself into the abandoned shop. By right of law he could go wherever he pleased but written laws were different than unspoken ones and, Pypar knew, often more forgivable when broken than unspoken ones.

The door crunched as it gave way, and then Pypar was standing in a dusty sunbeam, staring at the ransacked shop. It had been looted not long after Flowers' departure, and Pypar and the rest of the Town Watch had done nothing to stop it. It was good publicity, he figured, to let the townspeople benefit from the violence of the night of the town's ball. It was symbolic, that they should benefit from the suffering of the Direwolves. It would diminish the sense of grandeur and nobility of the Direwolves; it would, indeed, diminish the Direwolves. Yet allowing it to be done had made his soul feel oil-slick with something that might never wash off.

Nothing of value was left in the shop; it was all just paper. Pamphlets were scattered across the floor, marked with bootmarks, the ink smeared and faded. Pypar, who had never learned to read, knelt to pick up a pamphlet. More and more people these days were learning to read. It was nearly commonplace now.

He knew some of the words, but not most of them. But what caught his attention was not the words at all: a drawing of a man crowned by antlers haunted the header of the pamphlets. It was meant to be somewhat silly, but even so a shiver rippled down Pypar's spine at the unnatural sight of antlers coming from a man's head. He picked out the words "white" and "stag" and his mouth went dry.

People loved symbols; all the better if they were romantic and savage.

He pocketed the pamphlet, left Flowers' Print Shop, and went straight to the Laughing Tree Pub, where Bowen Marsh had tended bar for forever. It was early yet for ale so the place was empty, which was preferable for Pypar's purposes. He needed a man he could trust...more importantly, he needed a man who could read.

"Afternoon, Commander," came Marsh's voice from behind the bar as Pypar strode into the quiet inn, its corners dark with shadow but its floors golden with afternoon sunlight. Even empty, the place stank of old sweat and ale. The red-faced man poked his head up. He was in the midst of polishing a glass. "What can I do for you?"

His tone had an edge—or had Pypar imagined it? He saw foes everywhere these days; the air always had a taste of unkindness to it, the sky always seemed blackened with crows. He swallowed, fingering the pamphlet in his pocket.

"A favor. Obviously," he quipped as he approached the bar, and watched Marsh staunch a flinch. Better to poke fun at his new position of power than pretend nothing had changed. "You know your letters?"


"But you can read?"

His heart was pounding and he thought of the Baratheon ghost, a man with antlers on his head. There was something here that he needed to understand, some mystery that he needed to solve.
"...Aye," said Marsh slowly. "What of it?"

The two men were silent, until Py par at last produced the pamphlet from his coat and handed it to Marsh. As though he had shown him something vulgar, Marsh turned away.

"I don't want trouble—"

"—I am not asking for trouble," said Py par calmly. "Hundreds of these were scattered on the floor of Flowers' Print Shop, and Flowers has since fled. I ought to know what the thing says."

Marsh studied him carefully, and Py par, feeling nervous, was obliged to explain further. "It's not to—not to punish anyone," he said hastily. "But I saw these before—least, I think I did—and maybe I should pay attention. ...Maybe Thorne should have paid attention. Maybe not paying attention to this is why Thorne ended up dead, and why we had General Clegane in our town. Or maybe it's not. But either way, I ought to know what it is."

"You ought to learn your letters, more like," Marsh countered, but he was looking down at the pamphlet now, studying it critically.

"Well?" Py par pressed, leaning forward on the bar. Marsh cleared his throat.

"The sentiments expressed herein may not yet be fashionable among that class for which fashions hold such weight. Given enough time, perhaps these words will be whispered behind trembling ladies' fans at court, the lace handmade by some maid to match their gown, only to be discarded in a day, the lace dirty and forgotten; atop their fine horses, as they kill for sport, never eating the game they shot, lords may joke between each other: revolution, independence!"

Marsh halted, and glanced up at Py par. He had struggled with the words, but not near enough. Marsh had read this before. He knew these words.

"Is that it?" Py par had a sinking sensation.

"No, it's not. It...well, I'll just read it," Marsh said gruffly, giving in. "But for those of us who do not have maids to make us lace, or servants to run after us, darting between the grasses to pick up the game we shot, we do not have such time. We cannot wait for fashion.

"For we have waited too long to ask why we are ruled. The consequence of our complacency has been distilled into one boy. We ask if he bears the right to rule us. We, the unsettled sheep, looking for a wolf we could like more—we shall be slaughtered all the same. Kings may only obtain their power through violence and abuse, and they may only maintain it through violence and abuse. Like Robert before Joffrey, like Aerys before Robert, a king tells us he shall protect us, and we burn all the same. It stands to reason that no king is a protector of the realm, and no king is a lover of mankind.

Whispered in the gutters of Flea Bottom, shouted from the lips of drunken men in Winter Town, we talk of revolution and independence, and we shrink back from the words for fear that we will burn. But if we shall burn if we rise, and burn if we lay down, let us not be frenzied sheep waiting for slaughter, but become wolves once more."

The bar was silent. The afternoon sun glinted in Marsh's pale eyes as he watched Py par, then slowly held out the pamphlet for Py par to take back.

"What are the rumors around this?" Py par asked. Marsh, to his credit, did not bother to fight Py par on this, and instead sighed heavily.
"They say it was written by the Baratheon bastard; the one in the Brotherhood without Banners. The White Stag."

"It wasn't," Pypar said immediately, and Marsh looked at him in surprise. Pypar at last took the pamphlet from Marsh. "Thanks. Maybe you can teach me my letters...but don't tell anyone of this."

Pypar left the Laughing Tree. The world looked different, even less friendly than it had earlier, but he couldn't quite say how.

He had always had this instinct, this other sense. It was how he'd survived, it was why he could imitate the voices of others with dead accuracy, why he could tell where a person was from by nothing more than the way they said 'aye.' He knew voices, and therefore, he knew people. He never understood these insights, merely accepted them.

The White Stag was, without a doubt, a woman.

Could it have been Alayne Stone—Sansa Stark? But no; her language would have been gentler. She did not deal in broad proclamations but in careful flattery and spun webs. Pypar looked about Mole's Town, wondering if the White Stag was lurking in one of the houses he passed a hundred times a week, if the White Stag had ever mended his clothing or handed him a tankard of ale, if he had ever whistled at the White Stag as her skirts and hair caught in the wind.

This was, he realized, why the world suddenly looked so different. It was like learning that snowdrops were poisonous, that the gentle fawn in the forest might turn on him and rip him apart. A part of his world that had always seemed pretty and helpless was suddenly terrifying.

Pypar mounted his horse and rode through town aimlessly, studying each woman: their shining hair, their dresses toyed with by the wind, their forced smiles. They seemed such gentle, benign presences. You never saw them in pubs; they never got into fights. Women were not dangerous, or at least, he'd never feared them before. He'd never really thought about them at all, before, beyond admiring the pretty ones and scorning the ugly ones. Yet terror seemed to suddenly lurk in every doorway—they were dangerous precisely because he had never thought them dangerous. The only women that had ever seemed dangerous to him were the women with loose corsets who lounged about his jail with blackened eyes and tangled hair, offering him their cunt and more for their freedom.

But the White Stag was no prostitute: she was a learned woman, a woman of privilege. She was a woman who had no husband, or at least, hadn't when she'd written this.

There was only one other woman, aside from Alayne Stone, who fit such a description in Mole's Town. Pypar turned his horse in the direction of the Bear and the Maiden Fair Bakery.

Sansa's back ached and throbbed by the end of the day. She had cleaned all day with Dalla and had made no further progress. Now, as the sun began its descent, the day was finally done and the old house was filled with the scent of meat stewing and the thunder of laughter. Sansa had been waiting all day to speak with Jon, but they'd not spoken since earlier when she had leaned out the window to call to him, and the distance would soon drive her mad. They needed to speak, needed to theorize.

Well, we'll have all night together, she reminded herself, and maybe we'll even make some time for talking. She was grateful that she was bent over a steaming pot to excuse her flush. Dalla and Val had been loudly teasing Sam, though to her surprise he'd turned it on them and was now teaching them to dance properly.
"You dance like a lord," Val teased with a rare cackle. Sansa glanced over her shoulder; Sam was leading Val in an effortless dance, carefully and methodically showing her each step. "Actually, you dance better than a lady. How'd you get so good at dancing?"

"A book," Sam said, earning another round of laughs. Beyond them, Sansa saw Jon appear in the doorway to the kitchens, his look blazing. He'd shed his coat, and his white shirt was dirtied, the sleeves pushed up to reveal his lean forearms gleaming with sweat, the neckline clinging to his skin with sweat, dirt smudged on his cheeks.

"Oh, he looks a man with a cause. Have you come for your wife?" Dalla asked him slyly, as Jon strode past her.

"Aye, I have," Jon admitted, and Sansa's belly clenched with desire. Shameful though it was—as much as she loved his tenderness—there was something of this fierce look that she liked even better.

"We're nearly finished supper; you'll have her all to yourself, soon enough—" Dalla protested as Jon reached her. Sansa straightened to match his gaze and saw not desire but urgency.

He had learned something. He had something to tell her.

She had to play the part, though—Dalla's gaze was too shrewd.

"Jon!" she admonished him with a squeal, pretending to be coyly outraged, as he made a show of grabbing at her and pulling her to him. Even though it was pretend, it made something within her flutter. He'd never be so rough with her if it were real... oh, but it seemed wrong to want him to practically manhandle her like this, and she felt guilty for it, particularly in light of what he had told her about his time with Daenerys. He was studying her eyes and she wished he could not read her so well; she did not want anyone to know such thoughts. She held her breath as she felt his grip on her upper arms loosen, and tried to staunch the tide of slight but still humiliating disappointment.

There was a question in his eyes, now. He was curious about what he'd seen in her eyes.

"Oh, don't be so embarrassed, Mrs. Snow; a man works up a rather different sort of appetite after working in the hot sun all day," came Jaime's careless, dancing voice. He and Bronn had joined them, malicious laughter trailing about them like perfume. Tormund, Anguy, Davos, Beric, and Gendry were behind them, their faces red with laughter.

"He's hungry for her biscuit—" Tormund bellowed, earning cries of disgust and amusement alike. Bronn snorted so hard that it sounded like it had hurt.

"He wants to go fishing in her river—"

"—She wants to feast on his sausage—" Anguy countered between gasps of laughter.

"Oh, really!" Val was saying, brandishing a poker from the hearth at the archer.

"I didn't know you had a lady's sensitivities, Val," Anguy said slyly. Val snorted, and feigned jabbing him with the poker, which Anguy hastily dodged.

"I don't; but I don't have an oaf's wit either, unlike you," she snarked, and the others began to wolf-whistle. "At least be clever about it. Let's see... He wants her to play his bagpipes—"

"No, it's all food, that's the joke—"

In the chaos, Jon's hand closed over Sansa's wrist.
"Change into something you can climb in," he murmured in her ear, his voice tickling her skin, "and meet me out front. I'll saddle a horse."

"He wants to plant his parsnip—" she heard Gendry weeping with laughter as she slipped past him, on Jon's heels.

"—She wants him to grind her corn—"

The shouting faded as Sansa hastened to their room, her heart hammering. What had Jon found? And where were Mance and Quorin? This had to have something to do with them.

She changed into Jon's clothes, then had to sneak back downstairs, where the halls still were ringing with raucous laughter. The boots were a bit big for her, and she still felt odd without a corset. She'd always feel best in dresses, no matter who she became or where she went, and she felt silly for wanting to look pretty for Jon. It was foolish to focus on such things, in the face of whatever Jon had learned. Become wolves once more, she reminded herself, and she rolled up the slightly too-long sleeves of Jon's spare coat, and burst into the yard.

Out in the sunset-filled yard, Jon was waiting beside a brown horse. He'd put on his coat once more, but he was still smudged with dirt, his hair still wild. She thought she liked him best like this, so feral and wild looking, but she pushed it from her mind.

"Why are we going now?" she asked as he helped her up, strong hands on her waist. He swung up beside her and dug his heel into the horse's side, and they set off at a canter.

"Because Mance and Quorin left, and I want to follow their tracks before the rain comes," Jon explained under his breath as they peeled out of the front gate, his chest bumping against her back and his arms on either side of her, guiding the reins.

"But Dalla will notice; we're being too obvious—"

"Lannister and Bronn said they'd handle it," Jon dismissed as they rode. "They'll make a big show of me wanting you, make it sound like I had the idea to slip off with you before supper. We're technically still newlyweds, after all."

For a moment the awareness between them tautened. She thought of how her belly had clenched with need at the way he'd grabbed her arm, but her thoughts were quickly torn from such desire.

"Look—their tracks," she realized, pointing at the deep gashes in the mud. "They're headed north... for the break in the Wall."

The world round them was cast in molten rose from the sunset, but as they rode north, she saw darker clouds up ahead—the rain would come soon and, hopefully, wash away any tracks they made. On the other hand, it would make tracking the two men harder. They had perhaps an hour, maybe less. "I tried my best with Dalla and got nothing, but I think they're making us wait for something."

"Aye, or someone," Jon said darkly. "Mance and Quorin slipped off an hour ago, saying they were looking for more firewood, but I think they went to meet someone. Lannister and I saw them go, and we agreed you and I would follow them."

"I did see you and Jaime talking quite a bit, out in the yard," Sansa realized. "Why didn't you just follow them then?"

"Couldn't get you away from Dalla then without raising her suspicion," Jon explained.
For a moment they rode in silence as Sansa pondered this change in Jon, the glow within her nearly as rosy as the sunset itself. She leaned back against him as he slowed the horse slightly, conscious of the treacherous terrain. They were nearing the shoreline now, where the end of the Wall crumbled into the sea, a great gash in it where it was low enough to climb over. The wind was harsher here, and colder, too, and as the sun set further the world began to glimmer blue. The soil was more sandy here, and the ground was uncertain beneath the horse's hoofs, shifting unexpectedly. Jon navigated with ease; he had been among the Dothraki, after all, for so many years, and knew well how to guide a horse over sand. Jagged, leafless trees rose up from newly-green thickets that were dotted with tiny points of gold. Though the wind was so cold and harsh, there was the taste of new life on the air. Further south the trees were all in bloom now, but spring was slower to arrive this far north. Sansa had always relished this change in the season, when the very air hummed with the promise of new life, trees silvered with buds, full of possibility.

"I think Dalla's unhappy with Mance," Sansa confessed. She could hear the ocean now, a dull distant roar. Jon was warm against her. "If there is some sort of plan, I'm not certain that she's all that involved in it."

Jon was quiet for a long time. She wondered if her words had been lost on the wind, when he finally spoke at last.

"But she knows the ...White Stag, was it?" he cast around, and she nodded. *Become wolves once more.* "She's political—as political as Mance. It wouldn't make sense for her not to be involved."

"Perhaps that's the problem. She cooks and cleans now—"

"—And is wanted by the Crown for shooting a high-ranking man of the Royal Army. She's not exactly become a quiet little wife," Jon reminded her.

"Don't you see? That's just it. She's clearly not a woman who would be content with a quiet life. Perhaps she wants to be involved in whatever the plan is...and Mance is blocking her. Or, perhaps she disagrees with it. I read the White Stag's essays, Jon. They were likely the whole reason I joined the Direwolves to begin with. You can't just go back to a quiet life after you read them; you can't go back to sleep. It wakes you up. If she knows the White Stag, I can't imagine this life of just following Mance around makes her happy...especially if she doesn't agree with him anymore."

"It's no life, to follow someone you don't agree with," Jon agreed, his voice dark. His arm was around her waist, hand flat against her abdomen, so she set her hand over his. Their hands were cold from the harsh sea wind, but to touch him was comforting. She felt him let out a breath against her neck. "It turns you, makes you go dark."

She wished to reassure him, to soothe him, but the end of the Wall loomed before them now, a broken tower crumbling into the roaring sea. The ruined Wall was painted with the day's last gold. Two horses were tied near the wall.

"They're here," she breathed.

It would be a rocky climb, and the Sansa of before might have protested against it, but Sansa Snow slid off the horse eagerly. A pawn would wait at the bottom of the wall, but she would never be a pawn again...and she had a feeling that Mance meant to use her as a pawn.

Jon tied the horse as she looked up at the crumbled wall, at the way the crashing, unbearably loud waves had slowly eroded the rocks, smoothing the largest ones so that they look as perfect as eggs. The ones further from the water were still jagged; they looked painful to touch. It would be a hard climb.
Jon came to stand beside her and survey the wall. Sansa swallowed, flexing her fingers.

"This isn't exactly my strong suit," she confessed. "You know...feats of strength and all." Jon offered a sly half-grin that quickly faded.

"You can't go back to sleep," he reminded her. "I'll go first. Just watch what I do."

"Let's hope you don't fall," Sansa snarked, and Jon looked back at her in surprise. "Since you sound so confident," she explained. Jon arched his brows.

"I won't fall. This is my strong suit," he countered. "Probably my only one, actually."

"I can think of others." A flush rose on Jon's face and he turned away.

"Just watch what I do," he grumbled, and took to the wall. Strong hands found purchase on the rock. Despite herself she took note of where he found footholds and handholds, and when he was nearly to where the ruin ended and sky began, she drew in a breath and started the climb.

The rock was cold and yet slick with sea-spray; Jon had made it look so bloody easy. If only Cersei and Joffrey could have seen her now...if only Dickon could have seen her now. The pretty girl in the silk dress, all that she had been, was gone. She looked up and Jon was kneeling at the top, leaning over the edge to watch her. "You're doing well. Almost there," he coaxed, and held out a strong hand to her as she neared the top.

Their hands clasped, hers shaking with effort and his strong and sure, and he pulled her up.

"Kneel, don't stand," he ordered, as she scrabbled over the edge, gasping and trembling.

The wind raged here, a lion's roar, the shrieks of witches and the whistling of ghouls. And beyond this crumbled wall lay a rocky shore...and beyond that, thousands of tents.

It was a city, an entire people. She hadn't seen so many people in one place since King's Landing. Campfires dotted the mucky ground; there were so many people that Sansa could not even see the camp's edge.

"Wildlings," she breathed.

The long avenue leading to the front of Horn Hill was lined with apple trees that had just burst into blossom, and up ahead, three peacocks strutted about before the fountain. Everything was near mathematical in its perfection. Everything was symmetrical; everything was planned. Dickon heard Theon guffaw with disgust. Once upon a time he might have been angry, but all that he had been was gone, and he was disgusted by it, too. The blatant show of excess seemed foul—particularly in light of the simple, barren way in which Jeyne Stark lived. She and her son barely had enough food to eat, yet come autumn the apples would fall from these trees and the gardeners would pick them up and toss them aside, so that their rotting remains would not mar the landscape.

And there, at the glossy front door, stood Melessa Tarly, his mother... Dickon realized now that he had begun to forget her face. There was a flash of pain that nearly gutted him: he saw Sam's face in hers. She looked different, though. Worn, older. He watched her eyes widen as he approached her, watched her try to stifle her horror at the man he had become. The servants fanned out on either side of her, the servants who had served him all his life.

Dickon came to a halt before his mother, and for a moment, the only sound was that of the trickling
fountain behind him. He swung down from his horse, his northern boots crunching on the gravel. His men were behind him, bearing his father's ashes, the ashes of the man he had killed.

"Mother, it has been too long," he said politely. He was the Stranger; that was why he had never known the Stranger's face, for it was his own. His sister was beside his mother and she could not quite hide her own horror at the sight of him. He watched her sherry-colored eyes rove over his scars, over his shorn hair, over his darkened riding leathers, over his gaunt form.

"Dickon Tarly," came a cool, sly voice... And from behind Melessa, Lord Petry Baelish came, swathed in burgundy and gold brocade. He set a beringed hand on his mother's plump shoulder.

"Lord Baelish," Dickon said flatly. All eyes were on them; he looked to his mother, who bit her lip and cast her gaze to the side in shame. Baelish smiled, and it sickened Dickon. He heard Theon drop down from his horse, and Dickon glanced at him. Theon's sly eyes were on Baelish in curiosity, his head cocked to the side, studying Baelish. Dickon looked back to Baelish, meeting his green gaze.

This man had ruined his life; Dickon would not let him do it again. Perhaps Baelish thought he controlled everything, but Dickon had killed before and he could kill again. He would not let Baelish reroute his life ever again. The man might craft clever letters; he might have spies; but he was flesh and blood just like Dickon's father had been, and Dickon studied the man's throat. His hand would fit round that spindly neck.

"Our journey has been long; I wish to speak to my mother in private," Dickon announced. There was a flurry of activity as the servants hastened to the horses, and Baelish bowed out of the way. Dickon walked up to his mother, and she turned from him.

"Follow me," she said, and she stepped inside, into the hall.

"Still handsome, though so much more northern, now. So northern ...and so fierce," Baelish said from behind him. Dickon paused amid the gilded foyer to turn back to this man. Baelish stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the early sunlight. The air was heady with apple blossoms and mint, and the endless perfumes that everyone wore here. He had forgotten how sweet the air smelled in the south. He did not like it anymore.

_The whore has an heir_, the words on parchment had read. Dickon thought of Robb Stark's big blue eyes, thought of his laughter, thought of the way his warm little body had felt to hold, so solid and sweet. He thought of Jeyne's sweet sadness.

"Aye. See that you remember that, my lord," he said quietly, and he turned from Baelish to follow his mother.

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Sansa and Jon lay on their stomachs atop the wall, still staring in shock at the endless camp of Wildlings. At the foot of the Wall, on the other side, there were gashes in the sandy soil, to show where Mance and Quorin had landed, but Sansa could not pick them out among the thousands of people that milled about the tents.

"So this is Mance's army," Sansa whispered. She glanced at Jon; his eyes were hard as he stared at the tents, the hundreds of campfires.

"Aye, an army of sick, hungry people," he said disgustedly. "I wonder what Mance has promised them, in exchange for their lives."

She could see the beginning of rain in the distance, like a curtain of dark grey falling upon the edge
of the Wildling camp. The clouds were moving southward, and fast. "They must've just gotten here. The ground's not torn up enough yet for them to have been here long." He paused. "He'll train them here, while they wait for the steel they need, no doubt. He won't bring them over the Wall until they're ready."

"How can you be so certain he'll bring them across the Wall to fight?" Sansa countered. Jon did not look at her.

"It's Daenerys all over again," he said flatly. "He'll tell them he wants to free them, he'll tell them that the way they've been segregated from the rest of Westeros is unjust, and evil. And he's not wrong, just like Daenerys wasn't wrong about the slavery in Essos. It was evil, it was wrong, but in the end the slavery was never her reason for conquering; it was always just an excuse. She wanted glory and power, and Mance is no different."

Sansa thought on this. Rain began to dot her cheeks, freezing needles in her skin.

"I once wanted glory," she admitted sadly. "I wanted to be queen, beloved by all. It's no sin on its own, to want glory."

"Aye, and I dreamed of being the greatest swordsman. And then I got my glory and it tasted like infamy, and cost just as much," said Jon bitterly. "Any man who wants to be a leader shouldn't be. It's the ones who never wanted it that should get it. ...And maybe even not them, either. Maybe Beric is right. Maybe anarchy is the answer."

Sansa bristled.

"That's a lazy response," she countered. "Look at the Wildlings—this is anarchy, and it's not working. If it were, they wouldn't be here, now, willing to climb over the Wall to their deaths. They have nothing; they look no different now than they did centuries ago. Nothing has changed for them, while the rest of the world has moved forward. It's no coincidence."

Jon looked at her in surprise. There was something like heat in his gaze, but she couldn't tell if it was frustration or desire.

"So it's all about advancement, then," he snarked. "That's the measure of a society."

"It's part of it!" she insisted. "Art, and medicine, and knowledge, and—and music! Those are the measures of a society. The Wildlings have none of this because they have to focus on survival; there's no time for anything else." Jon held her gaze; she felt curiously out of breath. "The thing that struck me in the White Stag's essays was that a king cannot be the answer, because a king cannot protect the realm. I agree with you, Jon, that any man who wants to be a leader shouldn't be...but that doesn't mean that having no leader at all is the answer. You said yourself that the North feels like going back in time; I know you agree with me."

Jon swallowed and looked away at last, biting his lip, but his face changed.

"Oh. There's Mance," he breathed, and he placed a hand on her head, forcing her to duck down further. Mance and Quorin were near the water, speaking to a woman in furs. "We'd better get moving. Come on."

The climb down was harder, as the rain had caught up to them, making the rocks slippery... and deadly. Jon went down first and waited at the foot of the wall, poised to catch her, but Sansa somehow managed to climb down without falling, and the minute her too-large boots touched the mud, she felt a strange surge of something. It was a burst of happiness but it was different. But
there was no time to contemplate it; they dashed to the tied horse as the air became thick with rain, plastering their hair and clothes to their skin. Jon went to help her up onto the horse, but she stopped him.

"Let me try it on my own," she called above the downpour, and Jon waited patiently as she struggled to get up on the horse, nearly falling several times. The need for haste made her movements clumsier, and the horse was slick with rain, but finally she clumsily, breathlessly, was sitting astride the horse. Jon swung up with annoying ease behind her, and before she even had caught her breath, they were off again at a gallop. She looked back, but the rain was too thick to even see the Wall anymore. They could only pray that Quorin and Mance had not seen them.

"Who goes there?"

He was thick-necked, red-faced, and clearly an idiot. Dacey regarded the gatekeeper to Mole's Town with disdain.

"Dacey Mormont, of Bear Island," she said boredly. "If you couldn't tell by my bloody tartan. Were you born under a rock?"

He only turned redder. With any luck his head would simply pop off from the pressure, and she could be on her merry way.

"Was not," he argued stupidly, then puffed himself up, and Dacey rolled her eyes and resisted the urge to whack him over the head. She had been traveling for days without rest or food and all she wanted at this point was some ale and a bath, and it was only this fool standing in her way of what she wanted. "What business do you have in Mole's Town?" he demanded.

Behind him, the pathetic dump of Mole's Town sat in the mud like an open sore. Its houses were in shambles and its roads were rivers of mud, and the Sept that crowned the town was barely more impressive than a thimble. Everyone acted like Bear Island was so remote, so desolate, but at least its buildings weren't falling apart. She had seen to that herself. These people had no selfrespect.

"A bath and some ale," she said loudly. "And your town needs the business, so let me through."

The idiotic gatekeeper at last stepped aside, and Dacey dropped off her horse and led it through the timber gate into Mole's Town.

She'd stayed away long as the redcoats were here. She didn't need any more stupid trouble; the goddess knew she'd had enough of it with that trumped-up lizard queen, waddling around with that abomination inside of her and the bear carcass draped on her like she had earned it. Just thinking of it turned Dacey's stomach, but worse yet was thinking of her mother, and how pathetic she had grown in her desperation for power. And now the word is that Queen Incest Lizard is teaming up with Asha Greyjoy. How does that dish taste, Mother? she wondered, embarrassing tears pricking her eyes. She blinked them away and put Mother from her mind. She had a mission; this was no time to get weepy.

Another man dressed all in black, too skinny and with ears the size of King's Landing, was riding down the rutted street, toward a bakery. Dacey scowled at him, hoping to scare him off, but to her surprise he offered her a brilliant smile.

"A Mormont? Here We Stand," he called merrily, and angled his horse to approach her. Oh, for fuck's sake. Dacey clenched her teeth in something like a smile. "Welcome to Mole's Town."

"Thanks," she said shortly. "I'm looking for an inn for the night."
He smiled at her again.

"The best one's the Chubby Grumkin, up north, close to the Sept," he said. His bright eyes were too intense; his gaze was too prying. "Sorry for the state of the town. We're still recovering from what Sansa Stark and the Direwolves did."

Her mouth went dry. There was no accident that he'd brought this up; he was suspicious of her.

"That's alright; I won't be here long," she dismissed. "Thanks for the tip." Before he could question her further, she hastened away from him, but his gaze burned her back like a too-close fire all the way.

"Think they found 'em?" Bronn and Jaime watched the others laugh and talk; they had sequestered themselves from the others at the edge of the room. Even from inside, Jaime could hear the rain crashing on the roof. It would make it harder for Jon and Sansa to track the two men. On the other hand, it would make it harder for Jon and Sansa to find the way back, too. It had been hard to let someone else track Mance, but he knew that he was being watched more closely than anyone else. To try and disappear would be foolish, and impossible. Dalla, in particular, was keeping an annoyingly close watch on him. If he didn't know better, he'd think she wanted him.

"He'll be skilled in this sort of thing," Jaime conceded. "Though Sansa will slow him down. Don't know why he insisted on bringing her."

"He's thinking with his cock, just like you used to," Bronn dismissed before taking a swig of his whiskey. The movement made Bronn's arm brush against his, and Jaime knew they had both noticed, and were both pretending they'd not noticed, both to each other and to themselves. "What's your plan?"

"I don't have one yet," Jaime snapped. "Until we have information, there's no point in planning."

"You really plan on hanging about this dump forever?"

It was the larger question. Jaime inexplicably thought of Brienne, and felt ashamed for it. He felt ashamed that he missed her, missed their life together. It was foolish, and pathetic, and the whole time they'd spent together he had been missing Bronn. Now he had Bronn but he missed Brienne. He couldn't win.

And yet even beyond this foolishness he still had the sense that he'd had for weeks, a rising in his soul, the same feeling he always got before a new campaign. Something, he knew, was about to start. He had to rally himself, had to prepare for a hard fight, but this time he didn't know what it was, where it might come from, or whom it might be against.

"No," he admitted at last. "I don't." He glanced at Bronn and wished he hadn't: their gazes grazed each other and they looked away hastily. "Do you?"

"I go where you go."

The words had been so brotherly, before. Why weren't they, anymore?

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