and no net ensnares me

by thimbleful

Summary

Since Jon left, Sansa has struggled to keep things together and she longs for his return. However, when he does return things only become worse. Jon learns about his parentage and doesn't know how to make sense of anything, how to fix the inevitable mess the reveal will create, or how to protect the people he loves. But at least, after all these years, the pack is finally back together. Then, one day, Sansa disappears.

Post season 7 fic.

Notes

When I say "dark dany" I mean that I won't shy away from the darker aspects of her character (or, tbh, any character). But since it's a sensitive subject with her in particular, I wanted to tag it.

Re: major character death. Neither Jon nor Sansa will die! Major character(s) from the show will, though. Maybe I'm using that warning wrong idk.
Sansa

Chapter Notes

So I'm at it again. I feel incredibly rusty, but let's keep our fingers crossed this will work lol.
I'd like to thank my friend who, despite her non-jonsaness, read this chapter through when I wasn't so sure about it. All mistakes are, as always, mine, though. I'd also like to thank her for helping me in settling on a title, which, lbr, is one of the hardest things.

TW: mentions of contemplating suicide. very brief. and some mentions of abuse.

Sansa reaches for the quill, Jon’s chair creaking as she shifts her weight. If she closes her eyes and breathes in deeply, she finds beneath the smells of parchment, wood, and ink the lingering scent of him. By now it’s faint. So faint she sometimes wonder whether she’s imagining it. And yet, when responsibilities are nipping at her heels and the shadows are full of mockingbirds and sisters and the rooms echo with old pains, when all she wants is to float away from her own body and leave a docile doll behind, his scent never fails to ground her. It reminds her of why she’s doing this. Why she must cultivate what they’ve built together. Why she must fight on. No matter how tiring it all is.

If only he were here, everything would be different. Easier. Arya wouldn’t hate her. Littlefinger wouldn’t be so bold, so insistent, and--

“What does it feel like, sitting in the King’s chair?”

Baelish sweeps over the floor like a shadow, quiet and fluid and dark. Sometimes she forgets he’s there. Sometimes, as though his constant machinations have found a way to weasel into her mind and twist it about, she’s so aware of it she can’t think straight.

“Do you miss him?” Baelish stops by the window and turns to her, so that he’s back-lit and his face is shrouded in shadow.

“Who?”

“The King in the North.”

Sansa pretends to study the numbers in the ledger in front of her. “It’s easier to get work done when he’s not here.”

She hears Baelish pushing air through his nose, softly, and knows just what kind of smile her exasperated tone elicited in him.

“Surely you must miss him at least a little? You spent many evenings together before he left, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t keep count.”

When his reply doesn’t come, she looks up, finds him staring at her, his face still obscured. Only his eyes reflect the wan light of the hearth behind her.
When Jon was home, she could treat Baelish differently. But now she has to be careful, kinder. Frailer. Most of the time, she remembers. Sometimes she forgets. Sometimes she just can’t help herself.

“I’m sorry.” She offers him a smile, offers him complaisance. “I’m in a mood today.”

“You never have to apologize to me, my lady,” he says, sweeping closer. But then he stops. Rubs the pads of his gloved fingers against the pad of his thumb. “Did he? Apologize. For not telling you about his plans before he told the lords.”

Sansa swallows, keeps her eyes on the ledger. That night, after Jon told them all about his decision, she sat in her chambers with sewing in her lap and worry on her mind, waiting and waiting and waiting for Jon to come. To talk. To say goodbye. To explain why he kept her in the dark. To promise he’d do everything in his power to come back. But no one knocked on her door and, the next morning, Jon merely waved goodbye from the back of his horse before riding off.

She’s been quiet for too long. Littlefinger’s stalking even closer, the light of the hearth now playing on his intrigued face as he reads the truth in hers.

She schools her features and lays her hands in her lap, hidden beneath the desk.

“He didn’t? I’m surprised he would leave you without clearing the air. But then… He didn’t say goodbye either, did he?”

“We were never close. Spending a few evenings together, staring into the fireplace in silence, it doesn’t change that.”

“Doesn’t it?” Baelish adjusts his collar, the mockingbird pin perched there. “Something changed, though. Surely, you’re closer now than you were as children. Because you weren’t, were you? Close.”

“No. Mother never liked him. And I… I wanted to please Mother.

“Yes, the evidence of her husband’s infidelity, seated at her table, eating her food, playing with her children…”

“She was afraid Jon would inherit what belonged to us.”

Baelish’s mouth twitches with a smirk. “A not entirely unfounded fear, it seems.”

“I’m the Lady of Winterfell. I sleep in the Lord’s chamber. Jon hasn’t taken anything from me.”

“Hasn’t he? We came for you, Sansa. Me and the Knights of the Vale. You have bled for the North, for your name. You are Ned Stark’s trueborn daughter. And now the bastard who would’ve lost the battle if not for you, is named king. You sacrificed so much to get your home back. He sacrificed nothing. No one would blame you for finding that unfair.”

“Jon didn’t choose to become king. They named him king.”

“They did. And he accepted, without discussing it with you. But then he does that, doesn’t he? Makes his decisions. And now…” Something resembling warmth softens Baelish’s features. “Why didn’t he say goodbye? You’re his beloved sister. He might never see you again.”

Sansa sighs. “If you have something to tell me, then do so.”
Baelish nods, clasps his arms behind his back, and returns to the window, speaking with a light voice. “Your sister is back. His favorite. The one who didn’t care about Cat’s disapproval. A girl--a young woman--with strong opinions, a strong will. What happens when you disagree? Who will he support?”

“You think Jon will ignore me in favor of Arya?”

Baelish turns around, warmth still in his eyes, in the soft quirk of his mouth, almost good enough to fool her into believing he cares. “I’m worried about you, my lady, that’s all.”

They’re becoming more frequent, conversations like this, where Littlefinger hints and prods, searching with nimble fingers for weaknesses in her defenses. She’s becoming better at hiding them, at masking them with either cracked porcelain or smooth steel depending on what he seems to be after. Perhaps she should thank him for all the practice, but every so often his prodding reveals something. To her. Something she’s done her best to suppress. It’s there now, whispering at the edges of her mind, begging to be let in, begging to be acknowledged.

“If he truly loved you,” Littlefinger says and the numbers on the pages blur, “wouldn’t he reject the kingship and insist that you, Ned Stark’s trueborn daughter, got the crown?”

“I’m just a girl,” she says to the ledger.

“And what are you leading me to believe? she thinks. That Jon doesn’t care for me? Or that he only does because I’m all he has left…”

She’s not all he has left anymore, though, is she?

“If he truly loved you,” Baelish says with his most tender voice, “wouldn’t he have sat by your side, night and day, when you fell ill? Like I would’ve done, had it been appropriate. But there’s nothing inappropriate about a brother caring for his sister, is there? So where was he?”

Beneath the desk, Sansa curls her hands around her thumbs.

A couple of weeks after they took back Winterfell, she came down with a cold. Nothing serious. She was only bedridden for three days--three lonely days--of Brienne standing by the door, making sure Baelish wouldn’t enter. But on the second of those days, Jon visited. At noon or so, she woke up from a fever sleep and found him sitting in a chair by her bed. A small smile, soft brown eyes blinking, his hair a dark cloud around his head. His hand cool and dry around hers. He murmured a wish about a swift recovery and then he was gone, as though chased away by Lady Catelyn’s ghost.

He was never allowed in there as a child. Not even when he was sick or had nightmares or was scared of the thunder rumbling over the roofs of Winterfell.

Is that why he gave her the Lord’s chambers? Sansa always assumed he did it because he’s Jon. Selfless, humble Jon. But what if he’s too afraid of her mother, even now, to spend longer than a moment in her old room, in her old bed? Perhaps giving Sansa these chambers wasn’t selfless at all.

No. Sansa shakes these useless thoughts from her mind. Littlefinger’s been perched on her shoulder for too long. She shouldn’t let him get to her. Jon does care for her.

But he didn’t say goodbye.
Why didn’t he say goodbye?

A raven arrives from Eastwatch, written by the Maester there, telling her about a wight hunt, a dragon queen, and a Jon sailing south for a summit.

Sansa tucks the scroll into a secret pocket sewed into the lining of her dress, close to her heart. Lord Baelish doesn’t need to know.

Though the scroll’s not written by Jon, and it contains pure facts with no hints about his motivations or fears, or his standing with Daenerys, Sansa still reads it in bed each night, as though she’ll find hidden truths between the lines.

Why didn’t Jon send Sansa a letter himself before they left to find that wight? Why didn’t he write her and send a courier to deliver it directly to her hand so that she could know?

She doesn't tell Arya about it either. Arya, who handed her a knife and turned her back to Sansa, as though to arrogantly (correctly) say Sansa doesn’t stand a chance. Not even if she tries to stab her unarmed sister in the back.

How can she trust her? How can she trust what she’s become?

_I don’t know her anymore._

Sometimes she wonders whether it even is Arya. Those faces… What if someone stole hers? What if she’s a stranger roaming the halls of Winterfell, sent here by their enemies to spy on them. Cersei would do that, wouldn’t she?

Sansa needs Jon back, needs his calm, his support. His way of seeing right through the horseshit. A counterweight to the burden that is Littlefinger, who follows her around, asking one leading question after another until her mind is a tangled knot.

Jon never spoke much, but she liked that. After too many years spent in the company of people who love nothing more than their own voice, she liked that a great deal.

But what if he didn’t enjoy talking to her? What if he only was quiet because he had nothing to say?

_What if what if what if._

When a raven finally comes, one written by _him_, she’s so excited she almost tears the scroll when unfurling it. The excitement doesn’t last, though. She stares at his signature with her breath stuck in her throat and her heart beating like mad. Warden of the North. There it is, the evidence of his lack of care. She exhales sharply and taps the scroll against her desk. _His_ desk. He asks for her opinion _once_ and she thinks things have changed. She’s such an idiot, always was. What will it take for her to finally learn?

Littlefinger talks about Jon marrying Daenerys, talks about her beauty, as though it wouldn’t be a political union but... A lump forms in her throat and she forces it down, blinks away the tears in her eyes. What would happen then? If Jon married Daenerys. Would he move south and leave her up
here all alone? All alone with Arya. Arya, who threatens her and... confronts her and doesn’t at all whisper in her ear or tries to manipulate her, like Littlefinger is doing right now with his stupid leading questions. Arya might talk about playing games, but is she actually playing anymore?

No, she only handed her a knife and turned her back to Sansa, as though to say, “I trust you, Sansa. I trust you won’t hurt me. Trust me too.”

So why is she still listening to Littlefinger?

Because she should listen. Sansa leans back in Jon's chair and watches Littlefinger settling down opposite her. It's time she really listened.

It's time she was brave.

A blur of white brushes past her. She often sees the end of Ghost's tail slinking around a corner, or, when outside, the bright red of his eyes shining against all the white, as though he's always there, watching over her from a distance. But now he stops, tail wagging as he turns to look at her. Come, his eyes say. Come with me.

He leads her into the quiet of the godswood, where the clamor of people bustling about in the courtyard doesn't reach them. By the heart-tree sits Bran in his chair, watching Arya play with the Valyrian steel dagger. Her eyes snap to Sansa the moment she comes into view, and they stay locked on her even though she keeps twirling that dagger with a sure hand and a cocky smile on her lips. Had this been any other day, it would've deterred Sansa, sent her shrinking back into her safe little shell. Sent her back to Littlefinger and his sharpness. Today, though, is different. Today she finally realized what her sister was trying to say.

"Show-off." Sansa side-eyes her sister goodnaturedly. "Littlefinger thinks you dream of becoming Lady of Winterfell."

The dagger spins. Sansa follows it with her gaze. The sunlight flashing off the blade blinds her.

"Do you believe him?"

"No. That's not you."

"No, it's not."

"Arya, I'm sorry. I've relied on him for so long... It's become a habit." She smooths out the wrinkles in her skirt. "A bad habit. But no more. I'm done."

Arya catches the dagger and slips it into its sheath. "About time you came to your senses. Was starting to think you never would."

"You could've just talked to me like a normal person, you know."

"No, I couldn't."

They share a smile that's awkward and doesn't quite reach their eyes, but there's a gentleness there, one from days of old, that's comfortable and right. It's a start.
"Bran," Sansa says. "I need you to look at something for me. Regarding Littlefinger."

A storm whirls outside, snowflakes dancing into Jon's office through the gaps of the window shutters. Sansa pulls the cloak tighter around her body and tries not to think about how ships fare in this weather. She tries not to think about Petyr's lifesblood spreading across the flagstone floor, leaking into the cracks, soaked up by dust. Barely an hour has passed since the trial, but neither Arya nor Bran seem the least bit affected. They're poring over the scroll Jon sent, and the scroll from Eastwatch, commenting, speculating.

It was Arya's hand that held the blade, and yet it's Sansa's hands that can't stop shaking.

“If she went beyond the wall,” Arya says, "if she saw the army of the dead, why didn’t they come to Winterfell immediately? Why would Jon allow her to waste his time like this? Why would he kneel to that idiot?"

“I could look,” Bran says.

“No!” Sansa's hand flies out, connects with Bran's arm.

"It was so beautiful that night."

"Don't."

She stares at her brother, whose eyes go from brown to frightening white and back to brown in a flash.

"And you were so beautiful in your white wedding dress."

Bile rises in her throat. Eyes squeezed shut, she pushes Bran’s voice from her mind.

“You shouldn’t watch us, Bran,” she says without meeting his ever-blank eyes. “Not me or Arya or Jon. Not family. It’s not right and I won’t allow it. Do I have your word?”

Bran sits quiet, his face betraying none of his thoughts.

"I'm sorry for all that's happened to you. I'm sorry it had to happen here in our home."

She’s tensing up again, shoulders up by her ears, nails digging into her palms. She feels it even through the leather of her gloves. Every scar on her body burns, slithers around like snakes, like flames licking her skin. She stares at her trembling hands. Beneath the leather, they're as blemish-free as her face. He never touched her face. And he never left anything in her chamber with which she could’ve defended herself, harmed herself. She used to look, search, run her fingers over every inch of her prison cell. A forgotten fruit knife. A pair of scissors. Even a needle...

Her gaze falls on a hole in her sleeve--over the wrist, over the map of blue veins she used to study--left there by a hungry moth or fur beetle. Jon’s socks are full of holes too, but from wear and tear. She should mend them, before he comes home.

“Yes, Sansa.” Bran’s voice jolts her out of her thoughts. “You have my word.”

Exhaling, she forces herself to relax before finding her mending kit and the pile of Jon’s things.
“We can watch her, though,” she says as she threads the darning needle with yarn, threads calm back into her anxious body. “Her time in Essos too. How she acquired her dragons and her armies. How she’s dealt with her enemies. Get to know what we’re dealing with.”

“And the meeting,” Arya says. “I don’t think Jon would mind us watching the meeting, right? It wasn’t private.”

Bran looks to Sansa. She grabs the darning-egg, pushes it into the sock, and nods.

The whispers say Jon’s fallen for Daenerys, bent the knee out of love for her. Littlefinger’s work, Sansa knows. Only a few measly hours passed between his suggesting it to her and his execution, and yet he managed to get the rumor mill going. And now, a mere few days later, she stands in the Great Hall, her brother and sister by her side, in front of a crowd of agitated lords and ladies.

Voices bleed together until she hears only snippets of rumors that have grown and twisted as they’ve traveled from mouth to mouth. Did they marry already? Is Daenerys pregnant? Is she giving their castles to the Dothraki? Does she worship the Lord of Light, just like that red woman who burned little Shireen Baratheon? Is she expecting them to give up their children too? Will she feed them to her dragons? Or is it Daenerys herself they’re expected to worship?

Does she imagine herself a god?

Is she one?

“That’s absurd,” Lord Royce says.

“Well, she is a Targaryen,” Lord Glover mutters. Then he bores his eyes into Sansa. “We demand to know the truth, Lady Stark. Has your brother bent the knee?”

“Please, my lords.” Sansa’s voice, weak and shrill, floats into the room and gets swallowed up by the din. She clears her throat and tries again, using the muscles of her stomach to make it steady and loud. “Sit down! Quiet!”

The noise tapers off and then, a few at a time, they begin to simmer down. As she waits, her eyes find Samwell Tarly. Gilly’s by his side, their son in her lap. Their wagon rolled into the courtyard a week ago and Sam was all nervous smiles and kind words, and she liked him instantly. It was plain to see why Jon loved him like a brother and Sansa welcomed the bright energy he and his little family brought to the gloomy Winterfell. Then Bran saw Daenerys burning the Tarlys in one of his visions and told Sam about it with all the tact of the Three-Eyed Raven.

The first few days, Sam’s eyes were soft and sad and wet. But now, every time he hears the name of the woman who murdered his little brother and his father, his eyes are hard, lips pressed thin and white, hands curled into fists.

“There’s no pleasant way to say this,” Sansa says. “Daenerys Targaryen has burned Randyll Tarly alive, along with his son and heir, Dickon Tarly.”

A collective gasp, loud like a howling wind. Then silence settles over them, mouths hanging open, round and useless. Soon a few heads turn in Sam’s direction, then a few more follow until everyone gathered there stares at him for answers.
“They refused to kneel.” Sam’s voice is iron. “So she killed them. Burned them.”

Gilly holds her child closer, staring at the floor.

“You ask Lady Sansa why Jon’s bent the knee,” Sam says. “Why do you think? That he’d let her burn him and his men? That he’d let her burn us? He’s sparing our lives. He’s protecting us.”

Royce turns back to Sansa. “And now he’s bringing that madwoman here!”

“He is. Her and her armies and her dragons. To fight the Night King. Please, my lords.” She brings her hands together. “Remember why Jon is doing this. Don’t anger her. Don’t give her reason to abandon us. Don’t…” She lets out a shaky breath. “Don’t give her reason to murder you and your children. I fear we must swallow our pride for now.”

“And after the war?” Lyanna Mormont asks. “What then?”

“Then we’ll fight for the North.”

“And can we trust that?” Lord Glover stands, his mouth curled with disdain. “We should’ve known this would happen, your bastard brother repeating King Robb’s mistake. Who will Jon fight for: the North… or his wife?”

Arya frowns. “He’s not married her!”

“Yet. We’ve all heard about her beauty, and we all know how weak Stark men are for pretty Southerners.”

Arya sucks in a breath, body tight and ready to snap, but Sansa interrupts her before Arya can cause any irreparable damage.

“Tyrion Lannister won’t let them marry. Jon’s knelt. He’s just a bastard now. And, regardless, it doesn’t matter. Jon will choose the North.” She lifts her chin. “He’ll always choose the North.”

It takes over an hour to fully convince them, and when she returns to her solar, her head is pounding. Sam offers to get something from the Maester, while Arya join her by her desk and Bran sits by the fire to warm his legs. He’s blinking slowly at her, as though he can see straight into her mind.

It’s not an easy thing, admitting your own brother unsettles you. But those eyes… She imagines they’ve seen every part of her. Every horrible moment suffered. Ramsay, Baelish, Lysa, Cersei, Joffrey, the Hound… Every threat, every beating, every cruel word. Every cut and bruise. When she stood by her window in King’s Landing and contemplated ending it all. Just walking through the window and landing with a splat.

They must’ve seen every private moment, those eyes. Even those she once thought were happy. When Joffrey kissed her. When Loras strolled with her through the gardens and spoke of their wedding. When Margaery told her about what girls like and Sansa couldn’t stop thinking about it, not even at night when she lay in her bed and she touched herself and thought of Margaery’s kindness, of Margaery’s soft hands and rosy skin. And, years later, when she touched herself and thought of--

Sansa sucks in a breath and stands up so quickly the blood rushes from her head. She presses her fingers against her temple, steadies herself with her other hand against the desk. Bran can’t read minds, though, can he? He can’t feel what she feels. It was only once. Once. She was tired, had had too much mead. She was confused.
“I haven’t looked,” Bran says, as though he can read her mind after all, and a shiver travels through her. “I know I’m different now. I know I frighten you. But I gave my word. You can trust me.”

She clears her throat and picks up a few papers lying on her desk to suppress the need to fidget. “Do you think Jon knows? About the Tarlys. I wish there were a way for us to tell him.”

“And about Cersei lying about the armistice,” Arya says. “And the Night King’s dragon. If only there were a rookery on the ship.”

“We don’t need a rookery,” Bran says.

Sansa frowns. “Yes, we do. The raven won’t know where to fly.”

“I’ll fly the raven.”

“You’ll fly the… What are you talking about?”

“Oh.” Bran’s eyes move between Sansa and Arya. “Didn’t I tell you? I can warg into birds too.”

“You can warg into…” Sansa huffs a breath and slaps the papers on the table. “Brandon Stark. Are you telling me that all this time—all this time when I’ve wanted to talk to Jon—Gods, Bran. I could strangle you! Do you have any more secret skills we should know about? No? Arya, then?”

Arya shrugs. “I can bake pies. You wouldn’t want to eat them, though.”

Sansa sinks down into her chair, eyes moving between her odd little sister and her odd little brother. “How am I the only normal person in this family?”

“Write a scroll, Sansa.” Bran looks calmly at her. “Write to Jon. I’ll make certain he gets it.”
Out here everything is grey, from the palest silver of the sky to the deepest charcoal of craggy cliffs in the distance. Even her children look grey: two powerful shadows circling above the ship. Whenever Dany sees them, her eyes still habitually searches for Viserion before she remembers with a pang why he’s not there. Drogon and Rhaegal feel it too, that loss, always flying close to the ship, close to her, their mother, instead of soaring high up among the clouds or taking off to hunt and explore.

Drawing a shuddering breath, she hugs her body and rests her gaze on the hazy horizon.

“Are you cold, Your Grace?”

Jon. With a small smile, she turns to him. “I’m not,” she says, but even if she were, his Northern burr would warm her from the inside out. “You must be excited to return home.”

“Aye. We have a lot of work to do.”

“That’s not what I meant. Your family. Don’t you miss your family? Your sisters, your brother.”

“Brother…” Jon glances up at the sky, eyebrows tugged together, and his deep sigh tells her his mind is only on her, on what she’s lost. “I wish we’d found another way.”

His gloved hand rests against the taffrail, black against red. Weeks have passed since he bent the knee to her, since he took her hand and refused to let go, and still the echoes of his touch linger on her skin. Almost painfully. Since boarding the ship, he’s not touched her even once.

“There’s no point in dwelling on the past.” She lays her hand close to his, fingers curled lightly over the taffrail. “We have to look forward now.”

“You’ve lost so much already.” He looks at her then, still with that concerned expression, so focused on her he doesn’t notice her discreet invitation to touch her. “Your brother. Viserys. You never told me how you lost him.”

“They can’t shed blood in their sacred city. But I can.”

Daenerys’ lips part and, exhaling, she looks out over the ashy waves. “I loved my brother,” she says hoarsely, “but he was not a good man. He threatened me--”

“He can keep the baby. I’ll cut it out and leave it for him.”
Her other hand moves on its own, curves around the flat of her stomach. It’s been so long. She’d forgotten the sharp bite of his sword against her flesh. How oddly numb she felt beneath Viserys’ gaze, powerful and powerless all at once, succumbed to the inevitable. She’d forgotten the warmth of Drogo’s hand soothing the mark on her stomach and the knowledge of what was to come soothing her worry.

“No, you can’t! Dany, please!”

She closes her eyes and waits for the tightness in her throat to lessen before turning to face Jon, her chin held high. “He threatened me and my unborn child. So my husband killed him.”

Jon glances at her stomach. “You were pregnant? When he threatened you.”

“I lost the baby too. The witch who killed my husband, she… She stole my child and made me barren.” Daenerys’ jaw tightens, hand tightens into a fist against her stomach. “And I made her pay for her crimes.”

Jon’s eyes flit between hers, lips sealed shut instead of sharing whatever’s on his mind. She relaxes her hand and lets it drop, while the other still rests on the taffrail, so close to his, still unnoticed.

Unnoticed? her instincts whisper. Don’t you mean ignored?

“No, you think ill of me? For allowing my brother to get hurt.”

“We don’t choose our family, Your Grace. I understand now, why you wouldn’t want me to call you… uhm.”

He offers a sad smile that makes her heart flutter, and she moves her little finger half an inch. Finally, Jon catches on and lays his hand over hers with all the finesse of a turnip farmer. Lips pressed together, she hides a smile. He’s not a delicate man, but she doesn’t mind that at all. If only he were bolder, though. If only he’d come to her cabin and put those rough hands on her body, show her he’s as good with a woman as he is with a sword.

Varys passes them, his gaze sweeping over their joined hands before moving to the men working the deck. Daenerys clears her throat and slips her hand from under Jon’s.

“I don’t mind it if you call me Dany.” Batting her lashes, she looks up at him and softly adds, “When we’re alone.”

That night, as her handmaidens brush out her hair until it shines like spun silver and dabs perfume behind her ears, on her wrists, and between her breasts, her heart beats so hard her pulse pounds in her ears. For once, she supped in the mess hall with the others. And, as she left, she let her fingers trail over Jon’s arm while giving him a hooded look full of promises before casually turning to Missandei and telling her she’d like to spend the evening alone. Jon heard her words; she made sure of that.

Once her handmaidens have helped her into a gossamer nightgown of white and icy blue, Dany sits at her vanity, arranging the curled ends of her braids to frame her decolletage invitingly. She paints her lips with a touch of red. Her cheeks need no color; the excitement has left them a lovely shade of pink. She angles her head to admire the lines of her face. He’ll find her irresistible.
Then she waits. She waits and waits, the spark in her eyes fading as moment after moment pass without Jon’s knock rapping against the door.

The small table in her cabin is set with delicate glasses and a decanter of Dornish red, and she pours herself a drink. When he suggested they sail together, she thought she knew what he meant, and the look they shared made her stomach swoop with anticipation. Did she get it all wrong? No. She’s seen the way he looks at her, those deep dark eyes always following her, watching her interact with other men—and yet he never stakes his claim. Even though she’s spent days giving him discreet hints. Even though she touches Ser Jorah any chance she get to spark some jealousy in the perpetually cool Northerner.

She downs her glass and fills it up again, sipping a bit too greedily as she thinks—as she stews, frustration and humiliation turning into anger. The whole ship must know by now exactly what she wants and that she isn’t getting it.

Another sip, another mouthful, another train of thought where hope wars with doubt. Soon Dany’s face is flushed and her mind bobbing in a burgundy sea, sloshing here and there without finding the shore where truth lies. She grabs a cloak; she needs air.

For the first time in days, the sky is clear: black as obsidian and glittering with stars. She takes lungfuls of air and watches her breath freezing as she exhales. The wind carries soft murmurs from the prow of the ship, and her body moves on its own accord to the steps leading to the forecastle deck. Halfway up, she can peer over the top step, and finds Jon and a dark-haired man leaning their behinds against the red taffrail as they chat. Although she barely feels the cold with all that fire and wine running through her veins, they’re both bundled up and passing a wineskin between them.

“I can’t stop thinking about my sister and her little girl.”

Jon takes a swig. “I didn’t know you have a sister.”

“I’m sure I have many.” The man laughs and Jon smiles, shaking his head. “Betta’s not my sister by blood, though. You know how it is for us bastards, finding family wherever we can. Well, not for you, I suppose, growing up in your father castle and all.”

“I was luckier than most, but…”

“Yeah, I know. Arya’s told me some.” The man holds out his hand for the wineskin, and as Jon hands it over, they share a sympathetic look. “Suppose I’m lucky too, in my way.”

Jon chuckles quietly in agreement.

“My mother died when I was little, but her best friend had a daughter my age. So we grew up together, Betta and I, and—” The man pauses and nods at Jon, flashing a grin. “Like you and I should’ve done, yeah? Like brothers.”

They share another look, one that speaks of familiarity, of many evenings spent like this, sharing stories over wine. Dany racks her brain for the name of that man, where she saw him first. How can someone from King’s Landing—a place where Jon had never set foot before the meeting—be so familiar to him? Familial, even.

“When I came back to King’s Landing,” the man continues, “Betta had a toddler. Nettie. Father’s some soldier. You know how it is. She’s six now. I’ve been helping them out with whatever I can. Chores. Coin. Protection. And now…” He draws a deep sigh. “Now I’ve left them all alone.”

“You’re protecting them in another way now.”
“Yeah, I am.” The man swallows down a mouthful of wine and hums to himself. “I can’t wait to see Arya’s face when we arrive at Winterfell.”

This time when Jon smiles, it’s open and broad in a way Dany’s never seen him smile before, and her stomach twists with jealousy. Who is this man? And why is Jon so different with him? Still taciturn, yes, but… Different.

“Have you told her I’m coming?”

“I’ve not told them anything.”

“Not even about pledging yourself and that?”

“I’ve sent a raven but…”

Face scrunched up, Jon gazes out over the open sky and sea, and Dany starts heading up the steps as though she was already moving and not at all eavesdropping. When his eyes land on her, they widen with shock before crinkling with a small smile. Head bowed, he moves closer and utters a respectful greeting and his company does the same before scurrying away. Dany follows the man with her gaze until he’s off the forecastle deck.

There’s something about him, something her instincts tell her to be wary of but her wine-soaked mind can’t catch. Who is he?

On the ship sailing south from the Wall—is that when she first saw him? A brother of the Night’s Watch who left his family in King’s Landing to defend the Wall, perhaps. A bastard, like Jon. The natural son of a lord sent to protect the realm.

But how would he know Arya Stark?

“Who is that man?”

Her words come out sharp, whetted by wine and suspicion; Jon takes the smallest step back. His eyes are roving over her face, his lips slightly parted, as though he’s too entranced by both her power and her beauty to form an answer. A thrill shoots through her. He is affected by her.

No, he’s stalling, her instincts whisper. Move closer.

When she does, Jon backs up until he hits the taffrail.

“His name is Gendry.”

“You seem close. Were your fathers close too?”

Jon’s gaze moves over the deck before returning to her face. “He knows Arya. They traveled together for a while.”

“That’s all? He travels with your sister for a while and now he wants to be your brother?” Eyes narrowed, she takes another step so that they’re so close she can smell the wine on his breath. “Who is his father?”

“I’ve never asked. You don’t ask a man about his bastards or bastards about their fathers.”

“And yet he knows about yours. If you’re lying to me--"

"I’m not."
"I don't tolerate liars, Jon Snow."

Jon straightens his posture and looks down at her with eyes as dark as the sky. “He took care of my little sister when she was all alone in the world. My father had just been beheaded and she had to flee King’s Landing before Cersei got her hands on her. She was just a child—the most wanted child in all the Seven Kingdoms—and Gendry took care of her, even though he didn’t have to. If he and Arya think that makes them family, then he's my family too.”

“You’re close with her, are you not?”

“I haven’t seen Arya in years.”

“But before that?” she asks but Jon gives no reply. “What about the other one. Tyrion’s wife. Lady Sansa?”

Jon’s nostrils flares. “She’s not--”

Then his eyes drop to the sliver of white peeking out from the slit of her hastily shrugged-on cloak, and the sight steals his voice. With a concerned frown, he opens the cloak to reveal the diaphanous nightgown underneath. As his gaze lands on her breasts, his lashes flutter and his lips part. The cold has coaxed her nipples taut and she knows just how little the nightgown hides.

“You Grace, you must be freezing. We must get you below deck at once.”

The cold bothers her little, but she allows him to tuck the cloak around her and wrap his arm around her back. She allows him to usher her down the stairs and below deck. Men are so simple. Give them a mere glimpse of what could be theirs and they want it instantly. The light spilling from candle sconces paints his profile golden, and she stares at the plush curves of his beautiful mouth, imagines it pressing against her own, trailing over her jaw, and breathing confessions into her ear.

They stop outside her door and she turns to face him, lets the cloak glide open to reveal her body, but he’s ever the gentleman, his eyes locked on hers.

“You Grace,” he says in a too-formal tone, and she knows with a sinking feeling in her stomach that he’s about to bid her goodnight.

“Sleeping on a ship is so soothing,” she rushes out before he’s had a chance to continue, “wouldn’t you agree?”

Jon blinks and releases the breath he was holding. “Uh, ser Davos would. I prefer land, Your Grace.”

“Then you must long for this journey to be over.” She pauses to let him protest, to say her company sweetens the journey, but he stays quiet. “I’m excited to see your Winterfell.” More silence. Dany stifles a sigh. “How long until we’re at White Harbor?”

“The winds haven’t been as generous as we hoped. More than a week, still, I gather.”

“That long? If only ships sailed as quickly as dragons fly. Euron Greyjoy’s fleet was so quick, everywhere at once, while my ships… Well, I hope the winds become more generous soon. Waiting makes me restless.” She lowers her chin and, looking up at him through her lashes, softens her tone as she says, “I’m tired of waiting. Aren’t you?”

Jon allows himself a small smile. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I promised Gendry and ser Davos dicing over some mulled wine.”
“At this hour?” She lays her hand on his arm. “Shouldn’t you get some sleep?”

“Aye, I should. But I like to keep my promises.”

“Yes.” She strokes his arm with her thumb. “So I’ve noticed.”

Jon takes her hand from his arm and, for a disappointing moment, she thinks he’ll let it drop, but then he lifts it to his lips instead, brushing a kiss to her knuckles.

“Goodnight, Your Grace.”

Then he leaves her with brisk steps and she slumps against the door, watching his cloak sweeping over the floorboards, her skin ablaze from his kiss, her mind a twisted knot of hope, disappointment, and utter confusion. The following morning, when she wakes to far too bright light spilling in through the porthole and a throbbing head, the twisted knot’s still there. It followed her into her dreams, even, where Jon was both brightest flame burning her and fluid shadow stalking her, chasing her dragons, her love, the treasure she left behind on Dragonstone.

Furs pulled over her head, she makes a feeble attempt to detangle her thoughts. She’s been more than clear about what she wants, and he wants it too, doesn’t he?

Granted, she didn’t think so at first, before she learned his character better. His response to her flirting was always so tepid. But then Tyrion said he loved her, and Jon held her hand and looked at her with new warmth and told her how wonderful he finds her... Perhaps he only meant as a queen to adore, not a woman to love.

And Tyrion has been wrong about plenty, lately.

Dany swings her legs over the edge of the bed. Pain throbs in her head, and she massages her forehead with a groan. Tyrion, yes, but first something for the pain.

After letting her handmaidens fuss over her, massaging her head and neck, pouring her a splash of dreamwine for the pain, braiding her hair, and dressing her, Daenerys finds Tyrion in his cabin with Varys. They’re seated by a round table decked with fish, savory pies, herb bread, cheese, and a decanter of wine. Her stomach rumbles. Varys greets her with respect before slipping out, and she takes his seat, grabs a clean plate, and starts filling it.

After an appropriate amount of smalltalk, she asks as casually as she can, “What’s Winterfell like. You’ve been there once or twice, haven’t you?”

“Why don’t you ask Jon Snow?”

“He’s not a particularly voluble man.”

“No.” Tyrion chuckles. “He wasn’t then either. A brooding young man—or perhaps one should call it sullen. He wasn’t quite as…” Tyrion gestures around his chin. “Manly as he is today. Not everyone can make brooding look as good as Jon Snow.”

She twists her lips into a wry smile. “You’re jealous.”

“He’s not only hailed as the greatest swordsman who ever lived, he also has the audacity to be both handsome and honorable. It’s rather greedy of him, isn’t it? I thought men like that only existed in songs.”

“Mm. Why was he so sullen?”
Tyrion draws a breath, eyes wandering as his mind searches through old memories. “He didn’t feel that he belonged at Winterfell. Lady Catelyn didn’t like him and he was always left out. He wasn’t even allowed at the feast.”

“That’s awful.”

“Well, he is a bastard. And not everyone is as open-minded as the queen who keeps women and dwarves and bastards and exiled knights for company. I’d say few are.”

Daenerys nods slowly, thinking about Jon’s words. We don’t choose our family, he said. But he had, in a way, hadn’t he? The Night’s Watch. That’s the family he chose, because his own wouldn’t treat him with the respect and love he deserved.

“Did he choose to join the Night’s Watch, or was he sent there?”

“As far as I know, he chose it. As to why, I couldn’t say. I would’ve rather taken my chances out in the world than to spend the rest of my days in the most dreary place in the realm, freezing my balls off. But then I suppose the brothers of the Night’s Watch don’t need their balls.”

“Mm... They swear a vow of celibacy, don’t they?”

“They do. Father no children, take no wives, and so on. Why do you ask, Your Grace. Are you considering a…”

Tyrion’s words become indiscernible, a droning backdrop to her thoughts, because now she finally understands: Jon’s never known a woman’s touch. And he’s spent a life living in the shadows of his trueborn siblings who wanted nothing to do with him. Small wonder he doesn’t enjoy talking about them. Small wonder he doesn’t knock on her cabin after all. He must think himself unworthy of her, when she can’t think of anyone better suited for her. They’re both different. Special. Magical. Those scars on his chest… She touches her own chest with light fingers as she remembers her first glimpse of his body. The greatest swordsman who ever lived. A king. A man risen from the dead.

And, she thinks with a smile, still a blushing maid.

Daenerys pops a morsel of bread into her mouth and nods to herself. She has to be the one who takes charge.

“Isn’t it for the best?” Tyrion asks.

“Hm?” She washes down the bread with a mouthful of wine. “Tell me more about the Starks. Especially your wife.”

A black bird descends from the pale sky and lands on the taffrail where Jon stands. Peering at him, it tilts its head as though to get his attention, and when Jon holds out his hand, it hops onto his palm. Intrigued, Daenerys watches their interaction from across the deck. Jon’s back is to her, but as far as she can tell, he’s touching the bird. Petting it? Then the bird jumps up his arm and perches itself on his shoulder, pecks at his ear, his hair, as though it’s grooming him, and Jon stands still as mountains instead of shooing it away. Once it’s satisfied with its efforts, the raven beats its wings and takes off while Jon leans forward, both hands on the rail, to watch his new friend flying into the light snowfall.
Oh, he is an extraordinary man, isn’t he? Even out here, where land is a mere smudge of grey in the distance, animals seek him out.

She crosses the space between them and calls his name. Jon spins around, eyes wide under furrowed brow, nostrils flared, mouth a thin, hard line, white as snow.

“What’s the matter?” She reaches out for him, but he shies away from her touch. “Jon?”

A harsh breath escapes him. Another follows, but unsteady and weak. He blinks, licks his lips, and swallows, shakes his head to bring himself out of whatever seized him. Then the smallest, most tender smile graces his lips and the softness he saves especially for her returns to his eyes.

“My apologies, Your Grace. I was deep in thought.”

“What troubles you?”

“The Night King,” Jon clears his throat. “I can think of little else.”

“That bird… A raven, wasn’t it? You have quite the way with animals.”

When Jon’s eyebrows tug together in confusion, she adds, “The raven. It liked you. As does Drogon. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him allow someone petting him. At least not since he was a hatchling. And my Hand tells me you have a direwolf for a pet.”

“He’s not a pet.”

“Ghost, Tyrion said. Is that correct?”

Jon nods and looks out over the waves.

“And he followed you to the Wall?”

“Aye.”

“Why didn’t you bring him with you when you sailed to Dragonstone?”

Jon stays quiet for a beat, still watching the waves flow by. The wind sweeps over his face, plays with the tendrils of soft hair at his temples, waters his eyes.

“He’s a thing of the North. He belongs in the North. He--”

The leather of Jon’s glove creaks when he tightens his hand into a fist and understanding strikes her with such clarity she can’t help but let out a soft ooh. Jon might not be close to his family, except a fondness for Arya, but that wolf was his only friend in a home cold as ice. He loves his wolf more than anything.

He loves his wolf as much as she loves her children.

“I’d love to learn more about Ghost. How he came to be yours.” Daenerys touches Jon’s shoulder lightly to bring his attention back to her. “You’re a private man. I respect that. You should come to my cabin tonight, after supper, to talk. It’s time we got to know one another better.”

“Is that a suggestion or a command, My Queen?”

My Queen. His voice is always a little rougher when he calls her that and the rasp of it runs pleasantly through her body, sends shivers down her back.
“An invitation,” she says. “Tonight, tomorrow... Whenever you haven’t already promised your evening to ser Davos and Gendry.”

She said it in a playfully teasing tone, but Jon still looks troubled, focused, his eyes searching her for clues as to what her invitation truly means. Is he that unsure of himself?

*He’s not interested,* her instincts whisper. *He doesn’t want to talk to you or warm your bed. He’s never stared at you longingly. Tyrion is trying to flatter you, to fool you, to mislead you.*

As if her thoughts conjured him, Tyrion approaches with a friendly smile and a happy greeting--and scares Jon away before she’s gotten a reply.

That night, she refuses to get ready. She doesn’t pour wine into a decanter, doesn’t let her handmaidens sweeten her skin with vanilla and cinnamon, doesn’t slip into something beautiful and translucent. Jon’s not coming, she knows. After their conversation on deck, he’s avoided her completely, chased away by her candor. He might want her for a queen, but he doesn’t want her in his bed. It was all in her head--because Tyrion told her Jon was in love with her. *Tyrion.* That’s what she gets for trusting the word of a Lannister. Anger flares up inside her and, without thinking, she pulls the door open and barks at the guard standing outside to fetch her Hand.

When the knock comes only moments later, she thinks it must be Tyrion, thinks she’ll have a firm and well-needed discussion about loyalty and what happens to people who betray her, but it’s not. It’s Jon.

*I didn’t think you’d come,* she wants to tell him. *I’d given up hope.*

But she only lets him in without a word and the door has barely closed behind him before one rough hand cups her cheek and the other grips her waist, and his lips are on hers.

She’s *melting,* and he’s kissing her and kissing her until she’s out of breath and she has to pull away to catch it.

“I asked you here to talk,” she whispers, panting.

“No, you didn’t.”

“No,” she murmurs against his lips. “No, I didn’t.”

He undresses her like a man who’s thought of little else the past few weeks. Quick, efficient, needing her dress to fall to the floor this instant so that he can feel her skin against his. He doesn’t even give her time to explore him, to kiss his scars, to taste him, so powerful is his need to be inside her. But afterwards, when she’s curled up against her lover, sated and sleepy, and watches his profile, the black of his lashes, the set of his mouth, she thinks they have plenty of time for that. They have plenty of time for him to explore and to learn.

“When you joined the Night’s Watch,” she murmurs, dancing her fingers over his chest, smiling when it jolts beneath her touch. “Did you swear a vow of celibacy?”

“I did.”

“Do you still remember it?”

“Every word.”

“Will you share it with me?”
“You want me to swear a vow of celibacy?”

“No.” She smiles against his shoulder, drops a kiss to a freckle there. “Because then we would never do this again. You see, I’ve heard that the honorable Jon Snow never breaks his vows...”

"Is that so?"

"Mm. Which means…” Her smile widens. “Before that, before you joined, did you ever…” She glances down at his soft manhood. “Hm?”

“Never.”

“And… after you left?”

“No.”

“No one?”

His silence tells her everything she needs to know. So it was true after all. The King in the North, a maid.

“Mm, now that you’re mine, Jon Snow,” she whispers, circling his belly button with her nail, “I’ll teach you everything I know.”

He slips out of her embrace and sits up, legs over the edge of the bed, back to her. “Was I that bad?”

“Not at all,” she says, stroking his back with her hand, his bruised ego with her compliments. “Quite the contrary. I’m very satisfied. Surprisingly so, considering I’m your first.”

Jon huffs out a chuckle and starts rummaging after his clothes; lying on her stomach, she props up her head in her hand and watches him stepping into his smallclothes.

“You’re not staying?”

“We should be discreet, Dany.”

“You’re worried about my honor? What a sweet man.”

He puts on his breeches. “I don’t want anyone to think I bent the knee to you because I’m fucking you.”

“Fucking me?”

“That’s what they’ll say.” He meets her eye, then, half dressed and painfully handsome. “If you want me to stay, Dany, I’ll stay. It’s your decision. But I don’t want people to talk that way. I don’t want them to think that. Do you?”

She rolls lazily over on her side to show off the curve of her hip. Jon’s eyes trail over her naked body and a flicker of hope ignites in her heart, but then he slips the tunic over his head and grabs his leather jerkin.

She sighs. “You’re right. We should be discreet.”

Jon picks up his boots and sits down on the bed to put them on, so she snakes closer and ghosts her fingers up and down his back.
“Are you worried about your family? How they’ll react. To us.” No reply. “From what Tyrion tells me, I think I’ll get along well with Arya. We have similar experiences as well. I too was hunted as a child—the most wanted child in all the known world—on the run, with only my older brother for company. But Sansa…”

Jon’s movements stop for half a heartbeat before picking up again and it encourages her to press on. This is where most of his pain lies. The rejection of his mother figure and of the sister who followed Lady Catelyn’s lead. A sister he spent months with before coming to Dragonstone. A sister who once more must’ve made him feel like a stranger in his own home. This is why he struggles to open up—even to her, even now.

“What is she like, Lady Sansa?”

“Tyrion didn’t tell you?”

“I want to know what you think of her.”

Jon shoves his foot into the boot, still quiet.

“You were never close, were you?” She toys with the curls brushing his tense shoulders. “If your sister can’t see past your parentage and love you for who you are, then she isn’t worth your pain, Jon.”

“…She…” Jon stands up. “She’s raised well. A proper lady. You don’t have to worry about her. She’ll treat you with respect.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about.”

Jon turns around, his features schooled into his usual cold mask. That Northern ice of which Ned Stark’s bastard has fashioned himself an armor to protect a gentle soul.

“I see you, Jon. I see how special you are. If she can’t, it’s her loss.”

Jon’s mouth twitches—and then he leans over the bed for a quick kiss before stalking out of her cabin. Dany knows then, deep in her heart, that once the wars are won, this will be her life’s mission: to melt his ice with her fire.

“You’re glowing.” Tyrion smiles at her over the rim of his wine glass. As has become their habit since boarding the ship, they’re supping alone in her cabin. “I take it that means Jon Snow found his way to your bed after all.”

“After all?”

“You chose me as Hand for a reason, Your Grace. I am quite perceptive. Your dancing around one another hasn’t escaped my notice. So…” He swirls the wine in his glass before taking a sip. “Has he dropped to his knees and proposed yet?”

His words are drier than the wine.

“You don’t approve.”
“Of fucking him?” Tyrion inhales, tilting his head as he thinks. “I don’t disapprove as such. A good fucking is a fine thing. But anything other than that… You didn’t listen to a word I said the other day, did you?”

“You’re forgetting yourself, my lord. Mind your tone.”

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.” He puts down the wine glass on the table separating them, and leans closer to her. “He’s not a king anymore. You can’t marry a bastard, Your Grace.”

“He’s the Warden of the North.”

“And the lord of nothing.”

“I can make him a lord. Lord of Winterfell.”

“Jon Snow will never accept that. You do know that, don’t you? He might not be close with Lady Sansa, but he’s much to honorable to steal her home and title from her.”

“No matter. Bastard, lord, king… I’ll marry whomever I choose. I’m the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. I can do what I want.”

“No, Your Grace, I’m afraid you can’t. No ruler can. No ruler should. What’s the point of marrying a man who’s already given you what you want? He’s bent the knee. He’s made sweet love to you on a ship sailing north to your new kingdom. Marrying for love… A luxury. A fantasy. You can’t do that, Your Grace. To secure your place on the throne, you need a favorable match. The son of an influential, respected family. The Tarly boy had been ideal if only you’d--”

“Oh, this again? It was necessary.”

Tyrion sighs deeply. “You need a Tyrell son. I’m sure there’s someone still alive somewhere. Or perhaps Robin Arryn. A sickly boy, granted, but important politically.”

“You want me to marry a sickly boy?”

“Well, if you’re very lucky, he won’t live long. And”--Tyrion pauses--”he’s Sansa Stark’s cousin. She’s already an important player herself, and if she decides to marry her cousin…”

“So what do you propose I do? Seduce a sickly boy?”

Tyrion leans back in his chair. “Fuck Jon Snow if it gives you pleasure. But once we reach Winterfell, you should stop. And befriend Sansa Stark. Manipulate her into suggesting--”

Daenerys scoffs. “The woman who refused your touch because of your height? The woman who treated her brother differently because of their father’s misstep? She’s small-minded. I could do without such friends.”

“Dislike her if you want, Your Grace, but you need her support. Especially now that her brother’s bent the knee. In more ways than one.”

Dany’s cheeks flush pink, a smile spreading on her face, and Tyrion’s gaze softens into something a little too sympathetic, a little too close to pity. Her smile dies instantly.

“You love him?”

“Love him?” She toys with the ring on her finger--her mother’s ring, the only thing she has left of her. “I barely know him.”
“No, you don’t. Your Grace, be careful. A woman in love is easier to control.”

“Are you suggesting Jon’s trying to control me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She exhales, rolling her eyes. “I would’ve expected this from ser Jorah, but not from you.”

“You think I’m jealous but… Well”—Tyrion shrugs and grabs his wine glass—”perhaps I am jealous. But that doesn’t make me wrong.” After emptying his glass, he scoots off his chair. “If I didn’t warn you, I wouldn’t be doing my job. Now, I shall waste your time no longer. I assume he’s on his way?”

When her only reply is a beaming smile that can’t be suppressed, Tyrion shakes his head fondly at her and moves to the door. But before he opens it, he turns to look at her over his shoulder.

“Think about what I’ve said, Your Grace. When you play the game of thrones, you should be mindful of whom you trust. You can never be too careful.”

No, her instincts whisper as she watches the little man leave. No, you can’t.
Sansa

A small, gloved hand closes around Sansa’s, stilling the nervous rubbing of thumb against palm.

“You’re doing it again. People will notice.” Arya takes Sansa’s left hand and pulls it down to her side, gives it a squeeze. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Not much. And poorly when I did.” Sansa lets out a breath, lets her shoulders drop. Then she leans closer to her sister and lets her voice drop too, “According to that Maester, she flew beyond the Wall to save Jon—Jon—and now they’ve—”

Arya shakes her head in exasperation. “You and that letter.”

"But--"

“Stop it. The rumors aren’t true.”

“But why would she do that?” Sansa gives the people around them a quick glance, and once she’s certain no one’s listening in, she continues, “She could’ve been rid of the King in the North. Instead she flies in and saves him and he bends the knee. If he did that because—because—”

“Jon wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t know him anymore. He’s a man now and men…”

“Think with their cocks?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“Jon wouldn’t do that,” Arya says, enunciating every word.

“He’s fallen in love with the enemy before.”

“She burned Sam’s father and brother alive.”

“Perhaps he fell for her before he knew and then it was too late.”

Arya’s sharp gaze lingers on her and the scrutiny sends Sansa’s heart racing. She closes her mouth, swallows, and looks forward again, stares at the gate through which Jon soon will ride. Jon and Daenerys.

Somewhere deep down in her gut, Sansa knows Arya is right. Somewhere deep down in her gut, she fears Arya isn’t right at all. Jon’s made emotional decisions before, and worrying about his motives for bending the knee is her duty. That’s what kept her up all night. Her duty to protect her pack, her people, and the North. That’s all.

Warmth squeezes itself between her and Bran, who’s sitting to her right in his rolling chair; a nose nuzzles the hand Arya isn’t holding. Sansa scratches Ghost behind his ears and, when he looks up at her with calm eyes, she buries her fingers in the fur at his neck and soaks up his quiet strength. Ever since the trial, she’s seen little of him. No bushy tail slinking around a corner. No soft padding following her through the hallways. But, as though he knows just what she needs, the past week or so he’s started following her around again. He’s even taken to sleeping in her bed, at her feet.

“Open the gates!”
Sansa lets out a long breath as calmly as she can, Arya’s hand firm around hers. Ghost steady by her side.

The gates open.

Oh, Littlefinger was right. She is quite beautiful. Long pale hair, wide eyes, and a generous mouth. Rosy cheeks from the winter cold. She must be quite the vision on that large black dragon of hers, like something from a tapestry Sansa would’ve admired and daydreamed about as a child while her siblings rumbled on around her. Behind the Dragon Queen, as though he’s part of her retinue, rides Jon. His hair is dark, his clothes are dark, his horse is dark; she’s all white and her horse is silver. They look like opposites.

And opposites attract. They look beautiful.

Sansa tries catching Jon’s gaze, tries reading his flat mask, but he’s sweeping his gaze over their surroundings, over each person gathered there, without pause. Arya’s shoulder nudges her, brings Sansa’s attention to the too-tight grip she has on her sister’s hand. With a quick apologetic smile, Sansa lets go.

Daenerys’ silver horse stops in front of them and as the Dragon Queen dismounts, Sansa drops to her knee. Behind her, wool and leather rustle and creak when her people quickly follow suit and she steals a glance at the Queen. Head held high, she’s gazing down upon her newly-acquired subjects with a small but unmistakably satisfied smile—and whatever hope Sansa had that Bran’s visions, the rumors, and her preconceived notions were all wrong, crumbles.

If only Littlefinger were here, he and his devious mind. He would’ve figured Daenerys out in a heartbeat and known just how to move her.

“Where’s the Imp?” Arya whispers in her ear.

“Shut up,” Sansa hisses, fighting a smile while Arya makes no effort to hide her grin. “Behave.”

Arya’s mischievousness shifts into sincerity. “You have me, Sansa. Remember that.”

Sansa gives a discreet nod, staring at the untouched snow before her. For days, the snow’s poured down from the overcast sky and Winterfell now rests beneath a blanket of white. Today the sky is the color of milk, and no snowflakes dance in the whispering wind. It’s calm—too calm—and she doubts she’s fully prepared for the oncoming storm.

A voice as clear and crisp as the winter morning starts spouting off titles and accomplishments, and Sansa glances at the people before her. Against a backdrop of Dothraki men clad in a combination of furs, leathers and, unless she’s mistaken, Lannister armor, stands the announcer: a beautiful, brown-skinned woman who looks as if introducing the Queen is her greatest joy. Tyrion Lannister, Hand-brooch pinned to his chest and a thick beard covering his chin, stands on the Queen’s other side, looking equally satisfied as he takes in the kneeling people. And in the middle, Jon with Daenerys on his arm, his face still inscrutable.

“Your Grace,” Jon says, “please meet Lady Sansa Stark.”

“Stand, Lady Stark.” Daenerys’ eyes go round once Sansa has stretched out to her full height. “My, you are tall. When we made camp last night, I asked your brother what you were like, and he told me, ‘She has red hair.’ When I asked him again, he said, ‘She’s tall.’” Daenerys smiles at Jon. “You weren’t exaggerating. Pray tell me, my lady. Are all Northern men as laconic as your brother?”

“Many are, Your Grace.”
“Mm. Oh, this must be Ghost! Oh, Jon, he’s beautiful.”

Daenerys leans forward, hand stretched out for Ghost to sniff, and looks at him with the joy and adoration of someone approaching a puppy. Ghost stands unmoving, neither growls nor bares his teeth, but his eyes burn into Daenerys, and Sansa knows well how that red glare unnerves even the bravest of men. For all her ferociousness, the Dragon Queen is no exception. With a quick, nervous smile she pulls back and turns to Arya instead.

“Lady Arya! You, I’ve longed to meet.”

Jon’s eyes rove over Arya’s face, taking in all the little changes—her hair and clothes, so similar to Father’s; Needle at her hip; that sardonic smile she so often wears—but instead of holding his arms out and letting Arya fling herself into his embrace, he stands obediently by his queen’s side while introducing his family. As Daenerys exchanges awkward pleasantries with a smirking Arya and an aloof Bran, Sansa drinks her fill of her brother. He looks tired, with dark circles under his eyes and new lines in his face, and both hair and beard have grown too long. But the scars that were fresh when they reunited have faded and his hair curls over the fur collar of his cloak and she can almost smell him, almost, and there’s a strange squeezing feeling in her chest. Jon’s throat bobs. He shoots her a quick look—hard under furrowed brow—and then he returns his attention to the others. A quick one-armed hug with Arya, a squeeze of Bran’s shoulder, and then it’s Sam’s turn.

“And who’s this? Another brother?”

“No, Your Grace. This is… This is my best friend—”

“Sam? Sam!” An older fair-haired knight steps forward with a bright smile on his face, and claps a gaping Sam on the shoulder, brings him in closer to Daenerys. “My Queen, this is Sam from the Citadel. This is the man who risked his own life to cure me, and enabled me to return to your service.”

Sam’s face is hard as stone, but she must take it for nervousness, for a genuine smile blooms on Daenerys’ face and, for a moment, she looks soft and inviting and like someone with whom anyone could fall in love.

“My lord, I am forever grateful for your bravery and wisdom. Ser Jorah has told me of your hard work, of your compassion and determination to heal my dearest friend when the Maesters would not. I don’t know how I could ever thank you.”

“You owe me no thanks, Your Grace.”

The words come out shaky from a Sam flushed red with barely held back rage, and even though they’ve all agreed to pretend knowing nothing about his family’s fate, Sansa knows with a thrill that’s both frightening and oddly exciting where this is headed. Sense tells her to interfere, and yet instinct compels her to stand back and observe. To learn.

Daenerys shares a look of approval with Jon before turning back to Sam. “Your modesty is admirable, my lord. Your parents have raised you well. Once the war is over, I’ll invite you and your family to King’s Landing, so I can thank your mother and father for raising such a compassionate and intelligent son.”

Sam trembles, his lips white as bone. “You’ve already met my father, Your Grace. My mother, however… Oh, I don’t think my mother would enjoy meeting you. You see, you killed her husband and her youngest son. You burned them alive. Perhaps you remember them? Randyll and Dickon Tarly.”
Daenerys’ blanches to the color of her hair. Wordlessly, she seeks assistance from both her knight and her Hand, but they both stare at her with horrified eyes, mouths slack and useless. A tense silence fills the courtyard. No one whispers or clears their throat or even shifts their weight. Sansa looks to the skies. In the distance, a dark smudge mars the pure white. A raven, an eagle, a dragon? Dracarys. That’s the magic word the Dragon Queen uses to make men writhe in pain, in flames, before turning to ashes. Dracarys. That’s all she needs to end any confrontation, to snuff out dissidence, to force men to their knees.

Daenerys’ beautiful eyes lock with Sam’s with an intensity that sends Ghost creeping almost imperceptibly closer, hackles raised. She opens her mouth. Sansa sucks in a breath—and then the strangest noise escapes Arya, shattering the tension.

“How…” she says, staring at something farther back.

They all follow her line of sight. Among the row of Dothraki guards stands a young man in the thick kind of patchwork coat the Wildlings wear. He holds a large hammer in his hands and wears a lopsided, cocky grin on his face. Only the shuffling of his feet betrays his nerves.

For the first time since they rode into the courtyard, Jon smiles—truly smiles. “I brought a surprise for you, Arya.”

Without taking her eyes off the man, Arya shakes her head and mumbles something indescribable before making her way to him. She’s stiff and awkward, but Gendry—for who else could it be?—holds out his arms, and she hesitates only for half a heartbeat before letting herself be enveloped. They part quickly, but Arya keeps a hand on his arm, as though to make sure he’s really there, solid beneath the palm of her hand, and Gendry smiles down at her in a way that makes Sansa ache.

Jon’s watching them too, with a small and oh-so-soft smile on his face. She trails her eyes from his face down to the flat lines of his chest, and feels a pull in her own chest, as though his heart is calling out to hers, whispering at her to come closer, to come close, to hold him and finally fill herself with the scent that no longer lingers in his office.

Why didn’t he say goodbye? Why didn’t he hug her then?

Why won’t you hug me now? Why won’t you touch me and smile at me? Why won’t you look at me?

Look at me.

As though he heard her plea, Jon’s eyes snap to hers. A sharp pain shoots through her and she has to suppress a shuddering gasp. His jaw tightens and then his gaze drops to his boots. Daenerys tilts her head to the side, observing Sansa instead of Arya and Gendry’s heartwarming reunion.

Sansa forces her lips into a polite smile. “Your Grace, you must be weary after the long journey. Please let me show you to your chambers. I’ll have a bath drawn for Your Grace. Perhaps you’d also like something to eat and drink?”

“I’ll do it.” Jon’s voice is rough, his shoulders high. “Which chambers?”

“Mine,” Sansa says and there’s something in his gaze that almost makes her crumble. “They’re the best in the Keep.”

Jon gives her another odd look, but then he nods andwhisks away his queen, her retinue trailing behind them.

Watching them leave, Sansa massages the hollow of her palm. Something’s wrong. That’s not her
Jon.

Was he ever? No, you were the only thing he had left, that’s all. And now he has Arya and Bran and Sam and her. He doesn’t need you anymore.

Sansa tightens her hands into fists and closes her eyes, blocking out the voice trying to weasel into her thoughts and water the seeds of doubt Littlefinger planted there.

“I’m sorry, Sansa. I didn’t mean to be rude. It just slipped out.”

She opens her eyes and finds Sam in front of her, face pinkish now and glossy with sweat despite the cold air. He’s twisting his hands, shoulders hunched, and looking more like a little boy than a grown man.

“It’s all right, Sam. It’s a difficult thing to deal with.”

“Indeed,” comes Tyrion’s voice behind her, and it’s an effort to turn around calmly instead of spinning around with her heart in her throat because she let her composure slip in front of the enemy. Her former husband looks up at her with a tight smile and sad eyes before looking at Sam instead. “It wouldn’t be reasonable to expect good manners from a man whose family was just executed. Our Queen understands that.”

Sam’s eyes flick between them before he bows awkwardly and slinks away.

“Lady Sansa,” Tyrion’s smile is genuine now, and she slips into the dusty old feathers from her time as a caged bird in King’s Landing, returning his smile in kind. “It’s good to see you again. You look as beautiful as ever.”

“And you look very handsome, my lord.” She nods at the brooch. “It suits you. Hand of the Queen.”

Under friendly smalltalk that does nothing more than fill the silence, she leads Tyrion into the Keep, down hallways, and to the room the steward’s prepared, Ghost following them like a pale shadow. Usually, she has no trouble handling this type of conversation, but today her mind is scattered, trying its best to pick apart everyone’s behavior and anticipating future disasters to prevent. And each time Tyrion’s mundane comments pull her back to the present, she feels disoriented, frustrated, and has to bite her tongue lest a snarky remark pops out.

“You seem... absent-minded today, Lady Sansa.”

“Forgive me, my lord. I fear my focus never left the Great Hall. We’ve spent the morning preparing for tonight’s feast.”

“A feast?”

“A modest one. Winter is here and I’m afraid modest is the best we can do.”

“Our Queen will appreciate the gesture, but... Is it wise? Considering.”

"Yesterday's wars don't matter anymore. Only the Great War. Everyone knows that, even Samwell Tarly. But I'll speak to him. It's in everyone's best interest that we all get along."

Tyrion nods and they keep walking. Nothing of significance leaves either’s lips until they stand outside the door to the guest chambers, where he adopts an expression that brings back old memories of the two of them walking through the gardens with Shae and conversing with the ease of fellow prisoners. It’s an expression that begs for her trust, but she’s not that little girl anymore. She knows
better than to trust the man who invited Jon to Dragonstone under false pretenses and kept him there for months.

“If you don’t mind my asking, how did you learn about…” Tyrion trails off, eyes widening as he realizes Ghost’s padded behind them the whole way. “Ah. Protects his mistress, I see. He’s a good boy. Diligent.”

“We received a raven. That's what you wanted to know, wasn't it? How we learned about the Tarlys.”

Tyrion’s eyes narrow slightly, but even though she can tell he wants to ask from whom they received that raven, he only glances at Ghost before nodding quietly. “It was… unfortunate. Randyll Tarly was a great man and his demise a great loss for Westeros. But this is war, Sansa, and soldiers die in war.”

“If you say so, my lord. I don’t know anything about war.”

“'My lord...' There’s no need for formalities, is there? We used to be married, after all. Or are we still? I never quite did figure that one out. Either way… We’re old friends and it’s my hope that we once more can converse as friends. Perhaps we’ll have a chance to get reacquainted over a glass of wine at tonight’s feast? Or a cup of mead, if that suits you better.”

“I hope so, my lor--” Sansa smiles. “Tyrion.”

“It’ll be like old times.”

“Yes…” Her fingers find the braid resting over her shoulder and she remembers gentle hands and harsh truths, two things she’s always needed. “All we’ll be missing is Shae.”

Tyrion’s smile slips for a touch before growing stronger. Too strong. He’s not grinning like a fool--he’s a better actor than that, she knows--but there’s a strained quality to it that tells her to pay attention.

“Over the years,” she says, “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking of her.”

“You’ve spent a lot of time thinking about your handmaiden?”

“She was my friend. My only friend.”

“Now, not your only friend, truly.”

_The only friend who didn’t want something from me._

“You were always kind to me,” she says, “but friendship between women is different.”

“Ah, yes. I won’t pretend I can offer that type of friendship.”

“What happened to her? Do you know?”

“Shae?” Tyrion puffs up his cheeks with air and lets it out through loose lips.

“If Cersei believed we were behind Joffrey’s murder… I’m worried Shae was punished for something she didn’t do.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows arches and he shakes his head once, lips pressed together tightly. “If memory serves me, Varys helped her out of the city. She returned to Lorath with a healthy amount of gold.
To protect her from my sister’s wrath.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. I must thank lord Varys for his generosity.”

“Did you ever learn who…?”

“I did. It was Lady Olenna. And Lord Baelish. They planned it together.”

“You knew?”

Sansa shakes her head. “Not at the time.”

“And where is Lord Baelish? I was expecting to see him in the courtyard.”

“He’s no longer present. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have matters to attend to.”

The steward is waiting for her in the Great Hall, but Sansa needs a moment alone to gather her thoughts. In the privacy of Jon's office, she slips out of her cloak and her gloves and relaxes in a chair by the fire. Shae is dead. That much is clear to her. But she doesn’t have time to cry about it now, so she wipes away the few stubborn tears that have escaped her eyes. Perhaps Tyrion still feels the need to protect Sansa from the ugly truth, some leftover duty from their short marriage, some need to be knightly in a world that refuses him that role.

“Don't trust anybody. Life is safer that way,” Shae once said, but Shae was wrong. Sansa can trust her family. She can trust Jon and his judgment.

He’s up to something. He has to be. Even if Daenerys’ beauty and power have entranced him, he’s still wouldn’t risk everything they’ve worked so hard for just for the chance to bed the Dragon Queen. Not Jon.

*Daenerys and Jon seemed comfortable with one another’s touch, though, didn’t they? I daresay they’re close.*

As has become her habit in quiet moments, Sansa pulls out the letter from the Maester at Eastwatch. By now, it’s worn from frequent reading, and even though she knows it by heart, she reads it one last time before crumbling it into a ball and throwing it into the flames. She won't find any answers there-and, besides, now she can finally ask Jon directly.

Jon, who might be sharing a bath with his queen at this moment, instead of spending time with his family. A repulsed shiver travels through Sansa, and as though it can ward off intrusive thoughts, she wraps her arms around her stomach and closes her eyes for a moment. The fire in the hearth crackles cozily, suffuses her with warmth. She can allow herself the smallest of kips...

A knock on the door pulls her out of a light sleep. She shoots to her feet and adjusts her braid, tucks a loose strand behind her ear.

“Yes?”

“It’s me,” Jon calls through the door and her stupid nerves are back, sending jitters through her body,
painting her cheeks pink.

As he stomps inside, he brings cool winter air and dark energy, eyes moving over every inch of the room. His hair is dry, she notices. He’s not changed into fresh clothes, only removed his gloves and cloak. There’s still dirt underneath his fingernails. Never has she been so happy, so relieved, to see his dumb dirty fingers.

“I got your letter.” Jon still doesn’t look at her, too busy searching his office. She half-expects him to crouch on the floor to look beneath the desk. “Bran’s a warg, then?”

“Among other things. How did you know?”

Jon presses his finger against a scar over his eyes. “I’ve run into one. Where is he?”

“Bran? In his chambers. Or maybe with Sam.”

“No. Littlefinger. Where is he?”

“Oh. He’s gone.”

Frowning, Jon steps closer to her. “Gone?”

“Dead. We had a trial. We executed him.”

“Executed…” Jon exhales harshly. “And I suppose it never occurred to you that it was information I could’ve enjoyed receiving in that letter?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think--”

“Do you know how worried I’ve been? The things he told me-- I’ve barely been able to think of anything else since I saw Brienne at the Dragonpit! Why did you send her away?”

“I was invited. By Cersei. Brienne went in my stead.”

“And left you alone with--”

“You left me alone, Jon! You did! Do you know how hard it’s been without--”

“I had to! I had to persuade Daenerys to join our cause or--”

“I know!”

“Then why are you yelling at me!”

“Because you left me!” She blinks away the angry tears filling her eyes and forces herself to calm, to lower her voice lest the whole castle hears their arguing. “You have no idea what it’s been like without you. You don’t know how hard it’s been.”

“Did he--” Jon moves closer another step, and when he speaks again, his voice is hoarse and trembling. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.”

“Touch you?”

“No, he’s not attempted that in a while.”
“So he’s…” Jon swallows, nodding, sword-hand flexing. “He’s done that before? Touched you.”

“Mostly innocently.”

He rolls his eyes and exhales in an angry huff. “Innocently.”

“He’s kissed me. Stroked my cheek, my hair. Held my hand.”

“He’s kissed you?”

“He’s dead now, Jon. What does it matter?”

Scrubbing a hand over his beard, Jon sighs deeply and his shoulders droop into a defeated slouch. “Because I left you with him. I promised I would protect you and then I left. I was gone for months.”

He looks so heartbroken it pains her own heart. She closes the distance between them and tells him with a teasing smile, “I suppose you better expect Father’s ghost after all. He’ll come back and haunt you for abandoning me.”

“Aye.” Jon chuckles and the breathy noise of it dispels the last of the tension. “I think he’s already haunting me.” He sighs again and rubs at his eyes. “Haven’t slept well lately.”

“You do look tired.” She chances a hand on the ball of his shoulder, gives it a squeeze when he accepts her touch. “What can I do to help?”

“Forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she says and he gives her a fond smile. “You need to trim your beard.”

“Aye.” Jon’s smile grows. “My hair too.”

She’s not aware of moving her hand until she sees her pale fingers against his sun-kissed cheek and the soft, dark bristles of his beard. Jon’s eyes widen, smile slipping, and it feels as though someone’s wringing her insides. Oh, she’s spoiled it, this tender moment. They don’t do this. It’s odd. Inappropriate. But just as she starts pulling back, he lays his hand over hers and secures her there. It’s warm, his hand, the skin rough, and the softness in his gaze chases away any remnants of worry.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you.” She smiles gently. "I'm glad you're home.”

“Sansa, I....”

He leans in closer, just the smallest touch closer, and she feels herself do it too. His eyes drop to her lips while his own part, softly. Her stomach swoops, as though she’s standing on the precipice of something terrifying, something wonderful.

Jon draws a breath; she holds hers.

“I fucked Daenerys.”

Sansa’s breath rushes out of her. Ice fills her veins, fills her gaze, and she knows when Jon flinches that it burns worse than fire. Without a word, she turns on her heel, turns her back to him, and walks toward the door almost in a trance, images she never wanted flashing before her mind’s eye: naked flesh; silver hair fanned out on a pillow; mouths gasping in pleasure; fingers trailing over flushed skin; secret smiles shared over things she’s never experienced. Never will experience.
She wants to crawl into bed, pull the furs over her head, and hide from this awful, awful day. Not until she feels the cold metal of the handle against her fingers does she remember that her bedchamber isn't her sanctuary anymore. That it's occupied by her.

“If you,” she says to the plain wood of the door, “if you *fuck* her in Mother and Father’s bed--in *my* bed…”

“I won’t. Sansa, it’s not what--”

She doesn’t stay to hear the rest of it.
With groans and heavy sighs, Jon kicks off his boots and starts peeling off his many layers. He’s not had a change of clothes or a good wash since leaving White Harbor. A tub of hot water stands in the room—in his room with his bed and his things and his solace—and he can’t wait to slip inside, hide in its soothing warmth, and wash off dirt, grime, and humiliation.

Why is he such an idiot?

He’s working on the laces of his breeches when someone knocks on his door. His stupid heart picks up its pace. He rushes forward and pulls the door open with his breath in his throat and his chest as laid bare as his feelings.

Oh.

“That’s just the face I want to be greeted by. Makes me feel really welcome.”

“I’m sorry, Sam.” Rubbing his eyes, Jon lets his friend inside. “I was…”

“Expecting someone else? Daenerys, perhaps?” Sam peers at him; Jon gives him a tired look. “Ah. Good. I was afraid you’d fallen for her.”

“I’m sorry about your family.”

Sam nods and nudges Jon’s discarded jerkin and tunic aside before sitting down on the edge of the bed. “I shouldn’t have said what I said. I didn’t even think I was that angry anymore and then she started talking and, well, I was. Angry. Which is why I’m not coming to the feast tonight. I’ve been so worried about my mother and Talla, it’s made me sleep poorly. If I get some ale in me, who knows what else I’ll say?”

There’s an almost proud lilt in his voice, an incredulously happy glint in his eye. Imagine that he, Samwell Tarly, disrespected the Dragon Queen and lived to tell the tale. Jon can’t help but grin and shake his head at his friend. No, Sam shouldn’t have said what he said, but considering the stupid shit falling out of Jon’s mouth, he’s hardly in a position to judge him.

“She’s fallen for you, though, hasn’t she?”

“Aye. Seems that way.”

“Have you…” Sam lowers his chin and finishes his question with a pointed look.

Jon averts his eyes and nods.

“Ah, well… Yes.” Sam gestures at the tub. “I’ll let you get to it. You do smell.”

Jon laughs. “It’s good to see you again, Sam.”

“Just one more thing… Bran wants to see you. We both do. After the feast. But before you go to bed. You really shouldn’t go to bed before– Well…” Sam’s eyes flit around the room. “It’s no hurry, really.”

“What’s it about?”

“Oh you know.” Sam tugs down the corners of his mouth and shrugs. “Just things.”
“What things?”

Sam’s eyes keep moving while he searches for a good lie, but Jon knows all his tells and when he shakes his head fondly at his old friend, Sam gives up with a sigh. “Your mother. He knows who your mother is.”

“What?” Jon says, stepping closer. "Who is she?"

“Eh…” Sam lifts his shoulders, eyebrows high on his forehead and cheeks puffed up with air. “Just… a woman? It can wait. Until after the feast. I think you need to be there. At the feast. Can’t very well let your poor sister deal with Daenerys on her own, can you?”

Exhaling, Jon drags a hand over his mouth. “No. No, I can’t.”

“You don’t have to worry about the feast, though. Everyone will behave. Sansa’s prepared them well.”

Just a woman, Sam said, but she can’t be, can she? Jon’s mother. The news will be upsetting. That’s why Bran wanted to wait until after the feast, so that Jon wouldn’t be distracted during it. (As though he won’t be either way.) Could she be Essosi? A foreign whore Father met during a drunken night in the South--a scenario too ridiculous to entertain. A married highborn lady, then. A beauty whose husband was off fighting in the war. Or a Lannister, he thinks with a shudder. From his seat at the hearth, Jon glances at his reflection in the looking glass standing on Sansa’s vanity. With that dark hair, those dark eyes, no, not a Lannister.

“Jon!”

Inhaling through his nose, Jon tears his eyes from the looking glass. “What?”

Deep in thought for only the gods know how long, he’d forgotten who occupied the room, and when he sees a silver-haired woman before him instead of one with hair like copper, Jon’s head spins. Mouth lax, he stares at Daenerys as if she were Lady Catelyn’s ghost standing with her hands on her hips and demanding to know who in the seven hells let him into the Lord’s chamber.

Daenerys gestures at the three dresses held by her handmaidens. “Which dress should I wear?”

“Why are you asking me?” He sighs and massages his forehead, muttering, “I shouldn’t even be here.”

“Why shouldn’t you be here?”

“I have things to do.”

“Yes, like helping your queen in finding a suitable dress for the feast where she’ll meet her new people for the first time.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Dany. I’m distracted.”

“You’ve spoken with Sam.”

“Aye.”
Her face softens, but he can’t decide whether it’s with empathy or guilt or merely an attempt to look sweet and innocent. Perhaps it’s all three at once. She dismisses her handmaidens and settles down in the chair next to him. She smells of herbs and spices he cannot name—and yet their taste still clings to his tongue.

“I didn’t know they were your friend’s family.”

“Would it have changed anything?”

“I gave them a choice. They wouldn’t kneel, they wouldn’t go to the Wall…”

“You offered them to go to the Wall?”

“And they refused.” She takes his hand, rubs her thumb over the back of it. “I’m not here to murder. That’s not me. I save people. I protect people. But I never force them to follow me. I give them a choice. Randyll and Dickon Tarly chose death, so I gave them death. It gave me no pleasure, but if I’d changed my mind, how would I have looked? Weak. A queen can’t afford to look weak. No ruler can.”

When Jon says nothing, Daenerys drops his hand and gets to her feet, looking down at him. “You don’t agree.”

“What we can’t afford is killing people. We should all be on the same side. Everyone who’s breathing, on the same side. And Randyll Tarly might not have been a good man, but he was a good military leader. We could’ve used him on the battlefield.”

“I hadn’t seen the Night King yet. I didn’t know what I know now. I’m dedicated to your cause, Jon. To our cause. I’ve come to save the North, not burn it.”

Jon bites his lip, nodding.

“Your bannermen. Do they fear me?”

“You have dragons, Dany. Everyone fears you.”

“Even you?” She sits down again, so close he can feel the heat of her through his many layers. “Do you fear me?”

“Do I seem afraid?”

She shakes her head. “No, not you, my love,” she murmurs and runs her finger-tips through his beard, drops her gaze to his mouth. “Not my brave wolf. Will you--”

“The gray one.”

Daenerys’ lashes flutter. “What?”

He gestures at the three dresses now laid out on the bed: one as blue as sapphires, one the black and red of her house, and one as white as snow.

“You’ll stand out. And if that’s what you want, any of them would do. But I think the gray one is better. The one with the…” He gestures vaguely at his shoulders. “It suits you.”

“Which gray one? I have several.” She rifles through her trunk and pulls out a dark gray dress with flecks of silver that gleam in the firelight. “Did you mean this one?”
Her words come out breathlessly, from lips curved into a smile that makes her eyes sparkle. He doesn't remember the dress, but from her reaction he knows he better nod.

Daenerys blushes. “I knew you were a romantic deep down, Jon Snow.”

She calls back her handmaidens to get dressed and he fights the urge to get up and pace, to walk out the door and leave. Not until she stands before him, in that dress with her braided hair snaking down her back, does he remember it. It’s what she wore when he pretended to bend the knee. It’s what she wore when he knocked on her door and gave the little of himself he could give.

“How do I look?” she asks, but all he hears is: will they like me? Do you like me? Do you love me?

And as she stands there, young and hopeful and so very beautiful, not a warrior or a dragon rider or a fire god from ancient lands, but a maiden waiting for his approval, his heart aches for her. For all the things he lets her believe.

Jon pushes up the corners of his mouth until his cheeks ache, until Daenerys beams, and proffers his arm.

Jon nods an absent-minded thanks to the serving maid filling his tankard and takes a mouthful of ale. Sam was right. Although calling the Northern lords and ladies friendly would be generous, they are all polite and respectful and uncharacteristically calm. Daenerys doesn’t seem to mind, or even notice, most likely thinking they’re all like Jon. Sansa was clever there, when she told the queen that many Northerner are laconic, when Jon knows just how boisterous they become with ale in their bellies and music in their ears. And she’s clever now, when she grabs her cup and leaves the head table to mingle, to encourage her guests to enjoy themselves and treat this evening like a proper feast.

She’s in a new dress and she’s bathed, the braid she wore earlier now combed out in soft waves that run down her back like a river of molten copper. When the first course was served, when she still sat next to him, the scent of her hair wafted to him every time she moved. Rosemary and lavender: the scent of quiet evenings in front of the fire.

Her thoughts, though, she kept to herself.

Before the night ends, he must tell her the truth about him and Daenerys. He can’t stand the way she looks at him, the few times she actually does. She’s not alone in it, either. Little Lyanna Mormont keeps shooting him daggers--especially each time Daenerys touches his arm and gives him the intimate smile of a lover. And Arya… She doesn’t look at him at all, too busy talking to Gendry, Podrick, and Brienne. But then she doesn’t look at Daenerys either and that, he thinks, is a boon. She’s changed, his little sister, grown from a cub to a wolf. To a predator. If she sets her sights on the Dragon Queen...

“You have a little something,” Daenerys murmurs in his ear, wiping that little something from his mustache.

Out on the floor, Sansa throws him a frosty glance. Her red hair sways when she whips around and settles down with Tyrion, who’s braved the sea of skeptic Northmen to converse with Yohn Royce and Lord Manderly.

Now Jon sees a side of her he’s not seen since they were children, one he expected when she
appeared at Castle Black before he learned how much she'd changed: the demure lady who converses with sweet smiles and a soft femininity that draws the attention of many men. Like the Hound, who’s barely taken his eyes off her all evening. Like Tyrion, who japes and grins to lure another laugh out of her. Like the Dothraki guards, the ones who joined them on the ship. They never speak the common tongue, but after a couple of months surrounded by them, Jon understands enough Dothraki to know two of them find her red hair pretty while the rest find it awful, witch-like, frightening. They all want to fuck her, though, to dominate her, to own her—especially those who hate her hair and find her pale eyes unsettling.

A delicate laughter comes from Sansa. Tyrion looks infuriatingly pleased. Jon spears a potato with his fork.

“What’s wrong, my winter wolf?” Daenerys’ hand drops to his lap, where she strokes his thigh beneath the table in a manner she must think is soothing. “You’ve barely said a word all evening.”

Jon takes his time chewing the potato and washes it down with ale. “The Dothraki. Your army. Shouldn’t they be here by now?”

Daenerys arches a brow, the hand on his thigh now still, firm, a gentle reminder of her sharp talons. “You think they’ve stopped to loot and pilfer?”

“They’re riding through snow, Dany. They’re not used to hunting in winter.”

“You’re worried.” She smiles, her hand resuming its ministrations. “If you’d like, Drogon and I could look for them. See how far they’ve come.”

Ser Jorah, their constant shadow who’s spending the evening standing behind them instead of partaking in the feast, leans in closer to be heard over the loud music and the growing din. “My Queen, it’s too dangerous. Remember: one arrow is all it takes.”

“If you leave now, it won’t look good. Look at them.” Jon nods at the room full of people he still views as his. The ale, the food, and the music have all finally done their part in breaking the suffocating tension. It looks like a proper feast, with drunk people singing and laughing and flirting. Even Lyanna Mormont is smiling, now seated with Brienne and listening with awe as the older woman tells a fighter's tale. “They’re all here,” he continues, “feasting in your honor after kneeling to you. You told me you’re dedicated. But they don't know that. You have to show them. And I... I need you here, Your Grace.”

“You do?”

“Aye.”

So I can keep my eye on you.

Daenerys gives him an adoring smile while her hand travels up his thigh, dancing dangerously close to the part of him she’s thankfully left alone since they reached White Harbor. It excites her, he knows, this little game. She did it on the ship as well. Not at first, but a few days in she started touching him when no one was looking, touching him and whispering in his ear to work herself up before summoning him to her cabin. He knows why too, knows just how to subtly steer conversations in the right direction and then staying quiet and letting her talk and talk and talk. The Essosi aren’t prude, she’s told him. In Qarth women wear dresses that leave one breast bare and so did she. The Dothraki fuck beneath the open sky for anyone to see, and so did she and her husband. She’s used to an audience. Sometimes he thinks she craves it.
Sometimes he thinks that, deep down, she fears it’s all a lie, and that the only thing that can quell that fear is public displays of devotion.

“She’s watching us again,” Daenerys whispers. “Your sister.”

He looks at Sansa, but she’s smiling at something Lord Glover said and not looking at Jon at all.

“She’s worried I’ve bent the knee for the wrong reason. And this”—he touches Daenerys’ hand beneath the table—“isn’t helping.”

Daenerys nods discreetly at one of his bannermen, who has a serving maid on his lap, while his friend is entertaining another serving maid whose large tits bounce when she giggles a little too loudly.

“I don’t think they care, Jon. They’re not even looking at us.”

Mischief sparkles in her eyes. She moves her hand to palm him and he doesn’t know what to do, how to stop her without drawing attention to them, without feeding the doubt she surely feels whenever he doesn’t pretend well enough, but she only gives him a quick squeeze before pulling back.

“I’ll be a good girl. I wouldn't want you to punish me.” She takes a sip of wine and the look she gives him over the rim of the glass tells him she'd like that very much. “Nor would we want your dear sister to think you let your feelings for me cloud your judgment. Would we?”

“No.”

“Why is her opinion so important to you? I thought you weren’t close. Have I been misinformed?”

“She’s the Lady of Winterfell. Her opinion is important to everyone.”

“Mm, I see. If she’s displeased, they’re displeased? Then why is she sitting out there? Shouldn’t she sit with me and show them how welcome I am in her home?”

When Daenerys turns to give one of the Dothraki the order to escort Lady Sansa across the Great Hall, Jon stops her with a hand on her forearm, glaring at the guard.

“I’ll do it.”

As he approaches his sister, she holds up her hand as to signal she’s busy, and he waits patiently while she finishes her conversation. Without looking at him, she leaves her seat and returns to the head table, where her chair has been placed opposite Daenerys, the backrest facing the crowd. When he sits back down he steels himself for Daenerys’ possessive touch on his thigh, but she still holds that wine glass, gesturing gracefully with it as she speaks.

“Lady Sansa, allow me to thank you for this splendid feast.”

“Your Grace is much generous with her praise. Winter is here and food is… Well, this was the best we could do.”

“I’m not like most highborn ladies. I’ve lived a nomad’s life. I’ve lived in tents, wandered the desert, lived off of nothing but horse meat and the little water we could find. I’m not a pampered woman, my lady. This”—Daenerys indicates the food with a sweeping hand motion—“more than pleases me.”

Sansa smiles politely and bows her head a touch. “I hear Your Grace have more armies coming.
Perhaps we ought to sit down tomorrow and speak about the practicalities? My brother might be the military man, but as the Lady of Winterfell, it’s my duty to ensure everyone’s clothed and fed.”

Sansa pauses, her lips slightly parted as she studies Daenerys, and seeing where this is going, Jon gives her a subtle shake of his head.

“Did you bring any food, Your Grace? Or other resources.”

With a sigh, Jon closes his eyes. He hears the clink of Daenerys’ wine glass as she puts it down, and opens his eyes again.

“I’m here to save the North. The least the North can do in return is feed my armies. Wouldn’t you agree, my lady?”

“My apologies, Your Grace. I merely wanted to assess the situation. I’d never demand that my guests feed themselves.”

“What a generous hostess your sister is, Jon.” Daenerys tilts her head to the side, smiling sweetly at Sansa. “But is she wise to waste such valuable resources on one feast? It doesn’t seem very prudent to me.”

“I hardly think one feast will put such a large dent in our stores that my sister won’t be able to feed everyone.” Jon catches Sansa’s eyes and gives her as soft a look he dares. “She’s prepared us well for winter.”

“And soon the war will be over,” Sansa says. “Either we win and your armies march south again. Or we all die and it won’t matter.”

“My,” Daenerys says through a laugh, “that’s a rather bleak way of looking at it. Have you so little faith in what your brother and I can accomplish on the battlefield?”

“Not at all. As my friend once said: ‘Together, you’ll be difficult to defeat.’”

“You friend sounds wise. I do hope I’ll have the privilege of meeting her.”

“Him.” Sansa’s mouth stretches into a wide smile. “And so do I, Your Grace.”

Daenerys leans over the table and speaks in the hushed tone of a confidant, an intrigued smile playing on her lips. “Did you say him, my lady?”

“A friend of the family, that’s all.”

“Oh.” Daenerys leans back in her seat with a disappointed sigh. “Your brother has told me so little about you. I know nothing about your life, whether you’re married or betrothed or…”

“I’m neither.”

“Shouldn’t you be? As the lady of a great house.”

“I should, it’s true, but I find Your Grace so inspiring. You’ve accomplished a lot without a husband by your side.”

“Mm, I have. And yet I’m intent on marrying.” Daenerys’ hand does find his thigh then, and the movement draws Sansa’s attention. Her nostrils flare, her mouth tenses up, but she keeps her composure. “Once the right suitor comes along. Do you have any? Suitors.”
Sansa’s eyes flit to Jon before returning to Daenerys. “A few.”

“What?” Jon clears his throat, sits up straighter. “You have suitors?”

She purses her lips. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“Of course not,” Daenerys says. “You’re a very beautiful woman. Isn’t she, Jon?”

Jon swallows and manages something between a shrug and a nod.

“And do you like any of your suitors, my lady?”

“I haven’t given it any thought, Your Grace. Preparing for the war has kept me busy.”

“Surely, you must have some opinions? Tell me, woman to woman, are they handsome? Honorable? Brave? As honorable and brave as your brother? As handsome?”

Sansa stares at the half-filled plates and he can tell from how her arm moves that she’s fidgeting beneath the table.

Daenerys gives Jon’s thigh a squeeze and leans her head on his shoulder. “It must be hard, finding someone who can compare.”

“Stop it.” Sansa’s words are low but harsh, her gaze still locked on the plates. “We can all see what you’ve been doing beneath that table. What you’re still doing. The way you touch him. Every person in this room sees it. You might be intent on marrying, but we both know it won’t be Jon. A queen can’t marry a bastard. But that doesn’t mean you can treat my brother like a whore. Not in my home. Not in front of the people who still look at him and see a king.” Sansa rises to her feet and lifts her eyes to meet Daenerys’. “There are people in this room who believe Jon bent the knee so he could bed the Dragon Queen. Don’t make the rest of them believe it too.” She curtsies. “If it please Your Grace.”

Then she spins around and returns to Tyrion’s side, where she slips back into conversation with him effortlessly. Only the flush of her cheeks and her nervous hands betray her true state.

Daenerys leans back in her chair with a hum, wine glass in hand, and Jon holds his breath for a reaction that never comes.

He feels as if he’s comprised of cobbled-together sticks, that even the weakest gust of wind could scatter them and leave him broken on the ground. He can’t think of her, think of her reaction, her words, because every time he does, his eyes seek out her red hair without his permission. And every time, he fears Daenerys knows.

He downs his ale and gestures at a serving maid to fill up the tankard. The rest of the evening, he focuses on his food and drink while Daenerys talks to Missandei and ser Jorah and whispers with Varys until she tells Jon she wants to see her children. She doesn’t ask him to join her to the fields over which they soar, but he can tell she’d like him to offer. After telling her he must see his brother before bed, however, she thankfully accepts his offer to only escort her outside.

As they leave the Great Hall with her guards, Missandei, and ser Jorah in tow, he sees in his peripheral a flash of copper, but he keeps his gaze on the door and thinks about nothing but Bran, Sam, and the news they want to share.

He was born in Dorne. Their winters are as mild as a Northern summer. Has his mother ever seen snow? If she’s alive, he could find her and ask her, and if she has no one, no one but him, perhaps he
could even bring her to Winterfell. She could grow old here, be a grandmother once Jon… No.

Jon looks up at the black sky, at the fat snowflakes dancing in the air. How could he ever find someone to marry when he feels this way?

“What is troubling you, my dark wolf?”

Daenerys runs her fingers up his arm and, when he shivers, takes it as an invitation to move closer, to toy with his hair and the lobe of his ear. He suppresses another shiver.

Sometimes he wonders whether she expects him to call her pet names too, like her husband did. Moon of my life. Is that what she wants? For him to call her his… silver dragon or fire… blossom? Oh, he’s not good at this. Even thinking it makes him cringe. He’d never be able to get those words out and sound sincere.

“Is it your sister? She was quite upset. Hm, if I didn’t know better... “ Daenerys pulls him along as she puts some distance between them and her followers. Then she positions herself in front of him and examines his expression as she speaks. “Tell me, my love. How close were you really before you left?”

With a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach, he understands what she’s after, understands that her indecency wasn’t to excite but to provoke. Rage bubbles up in him, mingling with the fear that’s been creeping up his spine ever since learning of her jealous nature, and it takes every ounce of willpower he has left after an already draining day to keep his calm.

“You’re handsome; she’s beautiful. And you were all alone in a big castle for how many months?”

"What are you talking about?"

"Younger sisters often dream of marrying their older brothers."

Jon laughs, because what else can he do? It’s preposterous. Isn’t it?

“I recognize jealousy when I see it, Jon. She couldn’t take her eyes off you when you rode into the courtyard.”

“She’s my sister. We hadn’t seen each other for months.”

“Yes, she is your sister. And so is Arya and she doesn’t seem to mind. So why does Sansa? Shouldn’t a sister be happy that her brother has found love? Shouldn’t your happiness make her happy? Hm? She’s jealous, Jon.”

“No. You don’t know her, Dany.”

“And you know nothing about women.”

Jon tugs down the corners of his mouth, nodding. “So I was unsatisfying, then?”

Daenerys smirks. “You know some things about women. I’ll give you that.”

“She’s my sister. She ruled the North in my absence, and I bent the knee without talking to her. Wouldn’t you be upset?”

“I’d be furious. I’d also be furious if the man I loved brought home another woman.”

Jon heaves a sigh, shaking his head. "She's upset because she thinks our relationship affected my
decision and she’s not alone in it. She’s afraid that if people knew, they'd turn on us when we need to fight together. If you want us to be open, Dany, we can be, but I think it’s more important that they all get a chance to see you for what you are. To see why I really bent the knee.”

“Mm. That's fair. I even think you're right. We should be discreet.”

"Thank you, Dany. For understanding."

"I do understand. More than you think. You see, I couldn't help but notice something... As the beautiful lady of Winterfell, your sister should have many suitors, and yet you seemed surprised. Surprised and… displeased?” Daenerys moves closer, her eyes round and innocent, her lips soft and voice cool. "I'm a Targaryen, Jon Snow. You don't have to be ashamed of such feelings in front of me. Tell me: is she my rival?"

His heart pounds in his chest, sends his blood rushing through his body, roaring in his ears, and his mouth starts moving on its own, starts spilling out trembling words. “You and her? You’ll never be rivals for my affections. Never.”

He watches his breath, his words, his fervent confession freeze in the cold air. Inside, he’s burning. It’s the closest he’s ever been to saying it out loud, and instead of being burdened by shame, he feels light and free, as though he can stand tall for the first time in moons, and Daenerys responds to it, gazes up at him with so much love the feeling dissipates and leaves him drowning in self-loathing.

“Perhaps you should tell her that.” Daenerys pushes herself up on tiptoes and brushes a kiss to his cheek; her lips sting like nettles. “Good night, my wolf.”

He pretends to watch her leave but nothing registers. Snow must be falling but he can’t feel it, can’t feel the cold against his face nor the wind playing in his hair. He doesn’t hear the clamor of the feast through the thick stone walls of the Great Hall or the song of dragons in the distance. He didn’t convince her. She still thinks Sansa… That he and Sansa--

His breath leaves him with a whoosh. Then he darts off. In the Great Hall he finds Arya and learns Sansa’s retired for the evening, that she’s sharing chambers with her sister. He doesn’t remember leaving the Great Hall, or walking over the courtyard, or up the stairs to the Keep, or down the hallways to Arya’s chamber. But he must have. Because one moment he’s talking to Arya, and the next he’s pulled the door open to her chambers and is blundering inside.

Sansa spins around with a gasp, clutching a dress to her chest. “Jon! What are you doing?”

He stalks up to her, eyes boring into hers. “What am I doing? What are you doing? You can’t speak to her like that!”

“I can’t? You’re judging my behavior after that display? That awful woman treats you like a tavern wench! Like a whore!”

“I expected better from you! I thought you were smarter than this! I don’t care how you feel about her. I can’t have you behaving like some-some jealous woman who’s angry I brought another--”

“Jealous!”

The force of her outcry slaps him in the face, forces him back until they're half a room apart, and he gapes at her in horror as the accusation that slipped from his lips settles in his consciousness.

“How dare you suggest such a thing.” Her voice is low and shaking with fury. “What is wrong with you?”
“Sansa, I didn’t mean--”

“Didn’t mean what?” Her lips curl in distaste. “To insinuate I’m in love with my own brother? You think I admire Cersei that much? That I’m becoming her?”

“No, it wasn’t--”

“Shut up.” Sansa blinks. A tear slips down her cheek. “Get out.”

“Sansa, please, I didn’t--”

“Get out, or I’ll call the guards and have you thrown out.”

Jon tightens his hands into fists. “Yes, my lady.”

He’s shaking once he reaches Bran’s chambers. Shaking throughout their conversation. Shaking afterwards, when he sits on Bran’s bed and stares into his empty palms and tries to understand. Someone hands him a tankard of ale. He drains it. New ale sloshes into it. He drains that too. Someone is speaking to him, but his blood is rushing in his veins and all he hears is the sound of waterfalls.

Nothing makes any sense. It can’t be. It ruins everything. If it comes out…

Head fogged up by confusion, exhaustion, and too much ale, he gets up and leaves the room. Some part of him registers Sam calling his name, but Jon’s legs keep moving down dimly lit hallways until they stop outside a closed door he shouldn’t open.

Is she in there, still? Will she let him in?

Jon leans his forehead against the door. He needs her.

He lifts his hand and knocks.
Chest jolting with each shuddering breath, Sansa stares at the closed door. She should lock it. It takes several tries before she gets the key into the hole. When she hears the click, she remembers Arya and turns back the key. No. Arya can pick locks. Sansa locks the door again, pats the handle and walks two-three steps into the room before she stops and takes a look around. What was she doing when he barged in?

Over by the washbasin, in a heap of wool on the floor, lies her dress. One she took such care in sewing, with twin direwolves embroidered on the chest. The light of the hearth plays on it, casting the folds in amber light and black shadow, reflecting in silver thread and beads of mother-of-pearl.

Sansa touches the delicate necklace resting against the bare skin of her chest before smoothing a hand down her waist. Did she talk to him in nothing but a shift?

A wrung-out washcloth hangs over the rim of the basin. Had she finished cleaning herself? Sansa stares down at her hands. They still tremble. She clenches them into tight little knots and pads to the bed, where she sinks down and stares at the closed door. Her throat feels tight, sore. Did she yell? She must have. He did.

“You can’t speak to her like that!”

Her shoulders rise to her ears, as though she can shield herself from the echoes of Jon’s harsh words. His accusations. Jealous. A hissed word, slithering like a milk snake in the far too hollow cavity of her chest and belly.

The door grows blurry, a smudge of brown against the dark stone walls. She blinks to clear her vision, but it's useless. Whenever tears fall from her lashes, fresh tears fill her eyes, blurring everything again.

She saw them, out in the courtyard. She saw… Sansa shakes her head to disperse the image her stupid memory produced.

A heartbeat later, or the time it takes to mend a hole in a sock, or perhaps even the time it takes to knit a new sock--she honestly can’t tell--Arya steps through the door. Sansa didn’t even hear the lockpicking.

“Sansa? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re crying.”

“I’m always crying.” She gives her sister a grateful smile when Arya hands her a handkerchief. “You’d think I’d learned not to by now, but…”

Arya settles down next to her. “There’s nothing wrong with crying.”

“You never cry.”

Sansa, examines her face, her bare arms. “Did someone hurt you? Cos if they did, I’ll kill them.”

Sansa shakes her head.

“Jon was looking for you,” Arya says but it sounds more like a question.

“Oh, he found me.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing I didn’t deserve.” Sansa dabs away her tears from her cheeks, lets her hand fall to her lap, and stares at the tear-stained pattern on the pale fabric. “I was stupid. An idiot.”

Arya touches her arm. “What did he do?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re crying over nothing?”

“He scolded me for being rude to Daenerys. I’m just sensitive.”

“Well, what did he expect? If he didn’t want people to be rude to her, then maybe he should’ve left her in the South where she belongs.”

“I don’t think Jon would agree with you.”

Arya turns to face Sansa fully, one leg bent and resting against the mattress while the other dangles over the edge of the bed. “Are they…?”

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t love her, though.”

“I don’t know, Arya. At first I thought... But he sounded protective of her. And when I left the Great Hall, they were in the courtyard, over by the gate and they--” Sansa sniffs and crumples the handkerchief into a ball. “I think he loves her.”

“If that’s true, he can rot. I hate her. I hate her stupid face and her stupid braids and her stupid dragons.”

Sansa laughs wetly. “Me too.”

“I can’t believe I have to share him with her!” Arya frowns and folds her arms over her chest, looking an awful lot like the little girl who once sulked her way through embroidery lessons. “It was bad enough I have to share him with you. He’s mine, not hers.”

Sansa’s eyes widen. “You’re jealous.”

“Of course I’m jealous! Aren’t you? We finally have him back, but instead of spending time with us, he’s off fucking her in Mother and Father’s room! The Mad King’s daughter! What would Father say? I’m not just jealous, I’m livid! How could he?”

“I’ve told him he’s not allowed to… do that. Not in there.”

“Why would that stop him? He’s already proven he doesn’t care.”
“He’s so afraid of the Lord’s chambers, he barely even visited me when I was sick. I think he’s afraid Mother will come back and haunt him.”

A smile creeps across Arya’s face. “Oh, so that’s why you gave Daenerys your chambers.”

“No,” Sansa says, smoothing out the wrinkles in the handkerchief and folding it into a neat square, “I gave her my chambers because the lords want me for their queen and I need to make her feel special so that she doesn’t feel threatened by me. And so we can keep an eye on her.”

Arya’s smile grows until it stretches from ear to ear.

“Honestly, Arya. I didn’t.”

“You’re devious, lady Stark. I approve.”

“What does it matter? He’ll just find some other room to fu--”

Sansa’s voice breaks and her stupid face crumples. Throughout the day, in every quiet moment, the images his confession conjured this morning have crept back into her mind to plague her. Their display at supper only solidified them. And then the courtyard… It’s become all too easy to imagine their lips meeting, their bodies writhing, their hair tangling against the linen in a whorl of obsidian and silver-gold as they cuddle up afterwards, sweaty and sated.

Perhaps Shae was right after all. Trust no one. Life is safer that way. Because people who beg for your trust only ever break it as soon as you give it.

“I’ve worked so hard to get everyone to trust him,” Sansa whispers. "To make them all believe he bent the knee because he had to. I’ve worked so hard so that Jon wouldn’t lose his army. And then he does this. How could he? I don’t understand. He already got himself killed once because he did something his people didn’t want and now he’s doing it again. Why? I don't understand, Arya. Why?"

For a moment, her question hangs unanswered in the quiet. Then Arya sits up properly, a deep line formed between her thick brows, eyes flitting back and forth as she thinks.

“It doesn’t add up,” she says. “I avoided watching them, cos every time I did, I wanted to jab Needle into her eye. But… It didn’t look right. And even if he’d fallen for her, he wouldn’t just give away the North. Not Jon. He can’t have changed that much.”

“You know why we were able to fool Littlefinger, don’t you? It’s not because we’re more clever. We’re not. It’s because he loved me. Being in love makes you stupid, Arya. You stop thinking clearly. You make terrible decisions and stupid mistakes and you trust people you shouldn’t trust.”

“Not Jon. No. It doesn’t feel right. We’re both upset and disappointed and shouldn’t make assumptions. Didn’t work out that well last time, did it?” She gives Sansa a pointed look. “We should know better by now. If we want to know why, we have to talk to him. Sort it out. All right?”

“You’re right.” Sansa sniffs and wipes her cheeks, nodding. “Of course you're right. I'm being stupid. We'll talk to him tomorrow.”

“Is this a bad time to tell you I’m not planning on sleeping in here tonight?”

“What? Where are you sleeping?”

“Gendry and I--”
“Arya, you can’t be serious!”

“Calm down. We’re going to talk, that’s all. We have so much catching up to do. He’s got a niece, sort of, and he’s lived this whole life. And so have I. And since my brother’s too busy kissing the Dragon Queen’s arse, I’ll--”

“Ayra! Stop!” Sansa gags, a shudder traveling through her body. “Please don’t speak like that. You’re making me picture things I’d rather not.”

“Sorry. I’ll stay if you like but…”

“You can go. I’m fine. As long as you promise me you won’t do anything improper or unwise. And as long as you promise you’ll not spend the night, only talk, and be back in a couple of hours. I won’t have you out all night with a man. The last thing this House needs is another scandal.” She fixes her sister with a stern look. “Promise.”

“Yes, Mother,” Arya says, rolling her eyes. “I promise.”

Sansa pulls the window shutters open and lets cool midnight air wash over her. She feels every tear track, how they turn to ice on her burning face. She must look awful. Puffy and splotchy and awful. Eyes closed, she takes calming breaths and enjoys the balm of winter, lets its invigorating chill restore her defenses. Jon was right. She is smarter than this--or should be, at least. Arya was right too. Things are not what they seem. If only Sansa stops being so emotional and applies some logical thinking...

But she saw them. They didn’t see her but she saw them and their intense conversation. No words reached her, but she knows it was a heated confession. The adoring, elated look on Daenerys’ face before she kissed him told Sansa as much. As did the way Jon stared after Daenerys when she left through the gate, as though he couldn’t bear to part from her. Better men have lost their heads around beautiful women. Even her father, her wonderful honorable father. Lord Eddard Stark would never betray his wife, but he had, hadn’t he? All it took was a beautiful woman for him to come home with the evidence of that betrayal all bundled up in his arms.

Crying won’t change that, though, and neither will freezing to death.

Sansa shutters the window and, rubbing the gooseflesh from her bare arms, moves to put another log on the fire when someone knocks on the door. She stills, log in hand, staring at the door she forgot to lock. At this hour, it can only be either a raven or--

Another knock.

“Sansa. Please.”

The log falls to the floor and she rushes up to the door, pulls it open. No snowflakes melt in his hair, no winter air clings to him, and yet Jon’s shivering body is pulled taut, his arms tight against his sides and shoulders held high as if he’s come in from the freezing cold. His glassy eyes searches hers for answers to questions she’s never heard, and all she can do is open her arms. Jon’s breath rushes out of him and he falls into her embrace, the force of it sending her tumbling backwards. But his arms wind around her waist and pulls her close, anchoring her before she falls. Anchoring himself to her, clinging to her body as though the solid warmth of her is the only thing keeping him together. When
he burrows his face into the crook of her neck, she feels hot breath and tears against her skin; she feels how he breathes her in, as though her scent comforts him, means home to him the way his scent means home to her.

Or did. With him so close she should’ve been able to finally find her own comfort in his scent, but it’s cloaked by a heavy layer of ale, cinnamon, spiceflower, and other herbs found in Essosi perfumes. Her heart twinges, but she blocks it out, can’t think of how those scents latched onto his skin now that he needs her. So she murmurs soothing noises and strokes his back, the tension in his body abating with every caress.

Over Jon’s shoulder, she sees a large, pale shadow slink in through the still-open door. Ghost watches them with worry in his red eyes before nudging the door closed and padding up to Jon. The wolf doesn’t whimper, only noses at them before walking past, and she hears the rustle of furs and fabric as he settles in on Arya’s bed.

Once Jon’s shivering has stopped, once his breathing moves in an even flow, she pulls away slightly, just enough to see his face.

”Jon,” she murmurs. “What’s wrong?”

With his arms still around her, hands resting at the small of her back, Jon looks at her with eyes dark as the midnight sky.

“I’m not your brother.”

Something odd coils within her, wraps itself around her heart, around her throat, stealing her voice.

“Aunt Lyanna…” Jon blinks, lips moving without any sound coming out. “Lyanna was my mother.”

Sansa steps back, shaking her head, and wraps her arms around her body while his arms fall limply to his sides.

“Bran told me. He saw everything. She died giving birth to me.”

“Rhaegar Targaryen,” Sansa whispers, a shiver trickling down her spine as everything slots into place. “He’s your father.”

Jon’s whole body moves when he sighs, and he trudges forward and slumps down on the edge of Arya’s bed, carding his fingers through Ghost’s fur. Sansa slips into a bedrobe, closes it tightly around her body, and secures the belt at her waist with a firm knot. Then she stays there, by Arya’s armoire that now holds both their clothes, staring at the dejected slope of Jon’s back.

“They married.” Jon stops petting Ghost and folds both hands in his lap. “My name is-- My-my mother named me Aegon Targaryen.”

“Targ… But that would make you…”

“A prince?” Jon chuckles mirthlessly. “Aye. Never thought learning I wasn’t a bastard after all would make me so miserable but…”

“Daenerys. She’s your aunt. Oh, gods. Jon! You’ve bedded her! Were you careful? Can she be pregnant? Oh, gods, what if she’s pregnant? Why did you have to--”

“I didn’t come here to be judged!” Jon shoots to his feet and whirls around, glaring at her. “I came here to--” He huffs, dismissing the rest of the sentence with a harsh motion of his hand. “I don’t
know why I came here.”

After another hard look—one that shames her so deeply she ducks her head to avoid it--Jon turns to leave, to storm out that door for the second time today.

Sansa’s body moves on its own, rushing forward and spinning him around with a firm grip on his elbow. “I’m not judging you!”

The scowl is still on his face and he holds his body as though he’s prepared to spring away any moment, but at least he doesn’t pull away, at least he’s looking into her eyes, waiting for her next words, so she gives them: “I’m sorry, Jon. I’m so used to preventing disasters and solving problems--I’m not judging you. I promise.” She licks her lips, lowers her gaze and adds, “You can’t help who you fall in love with.”

“I don’t love her!”

It takes a beat for his words to sink in. Then relief and joy and a slew of other emotions too complicated, too frightening to define, reel in her chest. She pulls in one short breath after another without remembering to exhale until it all rushes out much too loudly. Her head is too light, her knees too weak, and she spins around and grabs the bedpost for support. With a hand pressed against her jumping stomach, she takes control of her breathing, of the tears already filling her eyes. She takes control of herself. She can’t cry in front of him. She can’t let him see. She can’t--

“Sansa?”

She clears her throat, straightens up, and turns back around, everything about her controlled and measured. An armor of courtesy, of ancient stone and ice. She’s Lady Catelyn’s daughter; she’s the Lady of Winterfell.

“You thought…” Jon’s brow furrows with disbelief, with disappointment. “What you said before, that I only bent the knee so I could fuck Daenerys, you believed that?”

“I didn’t want to believe it.”

“But you did. You did believe it.” Jon backs away, puts distance between them, and when he speaks again his voice is as hoarse as his face is incredulous. “You, Arya, and Bran mean everything to me. You think I’d betray you? Is that what you think of me?”

“Not betray. Especially not after Arya and Bran came home. But I did think--I feared--that a beautiful woman made you lose your head. When we fall in love, we do… terrible things, without meaning to. I know that better than anyone. If I hadn’t loved Joffrey, Father might’ve still been alive. Mother, Robb, Rickon... Lady.”

“That was not your fault. None of it.”

“And yet I’m not entirely without blame.”

She gives him a curt smile and walks over to the hearth, where she picks up the forgotten log and throws it on the fire. The flames crackle and flare up before settling. Then follows silence. It’s stifling and loud and uncomfortable, everything silence hasn’t been between them since they found each other again. She feels Jon’s eyes on her back like the softest touch on bruised skin, and she rubs the hollow of her hand with her thumb, presses the pad hard against the flesh, digs her nails into the back of her hand.

“You were a child, Sansa,” he says and she closes her eyes and soaks up the gentleness in his voice,
the absolution. “You didn’t know. You couldn’t have known.”

His hand touches her shoulder and it would be so easy to give in, lean into him, feel his body pressed against hers. To feel his hand shift to the ball of her shoulder, to her upper arm, glide down to her hand, entwine their fingers. Or would he move it to her waist? Would he crush the thin fabrics of robe and shift as he pulled her flush against him?

Her cousin. He’s her cousin. Her cousin.

He’s her brother.

“Why did you do it?”

The words fall out before she can stop herself, and she rolls her lips into her mouth as though she can take them back, tuck the hurt in her voice somewhere inside her where no one can ever hear it.

“Do what?”

Don’t make me say it.

“Sansa?”

With a steeling breath, she turns around. “Do you want her?” she asks and her voice is as steady as the walls around them. “Is that it? Just some… frivolity before the world ends. Because it’s either that or…” She trails off when Jon seems to fold in on himself, eyes dull, cheeks pale. “She forced you.”

“No. Not really. She thinks I… I let her believe whatever she wants to believe. Because I’ve seen what her dragons can do. And when someone like that, someone who could turn the world to ashes before you’ve even drawn your sword, someone who holds the fate of everyone you love in their hands, when someone like that wants you… How do you say no?”

The shards of his broken voice cuts through her armor and she can't control her emotions any longer. Her bottom lip quivers, eyes blink furiously to handle the well of tears, and it only gets harder when she sees her reaction mirrored on his devastated face.

“I’m so sorry, Jon.” She sniffles and wipes her cheeks with her sleeve. “And I’m sorry I was angry with you.”

“You didn’t know.”

“I should’ve known.”

“It was all for nothing,” he mumbles and sags down on the bed, elbows resting on his knees, head hanging. “If she learns who I am, she’ll kill me. How am I supposed to protect you if she kills me?”

“I won’t let her.”

Jon looks up at her with the kind of smile you give a barking puppy. “You can’t stop her.”

“Yes, I can.” Nodding, Sansa paces the room, massaging her hands as she thinks. “You said Lyanna and Rhaegar married, which makes your claim stronger than hers, but… Jon, do you even want the Iron Throne?”

“Of course not! But that won’t matter to her. You once told me no matter what we did, Rickon would die, because as long as he lived, Ramsay’s claim to Winterfell would be contested. Do you think this is different?”
“She’s not Ramsay. She’s not that bad. She wouldn’t be here if she were.”

“No, she’s not. But I’ve been around her for months. The Iron Throne is all she thinks about! If she perceives me as a threat, she will burn me alive.”

“She could want to marry you. You’re a prince now. You’re good enough for her. Perhaps not a politically wise choice, but you are a prince and a Targaryen so I’m sure—”

“I am not a Targaryen!” He’s on his feet again, chest heaving, nostrils flared, hands clenched so hard his knuckles pale. Then he deflates, the anger fading as quickly as it flared, and he sits back down and tells her in a tired, quiet voice, “Please don’t call me that.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean… Oh, Jon. Of course you’re not.”

Sansa sinks down to her knees before him. His hands lie on his lap, palms up, fingers gently curved, like empty cradles. She slips her own hands into those cradles and smiles when he accepts her touch by closing his fingers around the backs of her hands.

“I don’t care what your birth name is. You’re Jon.” She squeezes his hands to emphasize her words. “You’ll always be Jon. And you’re still a Stark.”

“No,” Jon says, averting his gaze.

She shuffles closer, nudging herself in between his knees, and cups his cheeks. It takes a couple of breaths before his gaze glides from the hearth to her necklace and then travels up her face to finally meet her eyes.

“You are a Stark. Just as much as before. And Father loved you. He risked everything to protect you. So now it’s our turn. Mine, Arya’s and Bran’s. This changes nothing for us, Jon. Nothing. You’re still our brother.”

That dull look returns to Jon’s eyes, and with each slow blinking, tears slide down his cheeks, slip into the seam between her skin and his, disappear into his beard where his mouth forms a sad curve. He doesn’t believe her. And why would he? She’s shown little trust in him today. Why should he trust her?

She tilts her head to the side and softens her gaze. “You are. You’re still part of the pack, and the pack protects one another. Do you understand me? I will protect you. Like Father, I’ll do everything in my power to protect you. Or his ghost will come back and murder me.”

With a encouraging smile, she nods at him in hopes of seeing some relief in his features, but she’s met by nothing but a forlorn hollowness that tears at her heart.

“Oh, Jon,” she whispers, but when she tries to brush away his tears with her thumbs, he jerks his head away from her touch.

“You shouldn’t sit on the floor. You’ll get sick again.”

She rolls back on her feet and pushes herself to stand, gives him the space he needs. Grumpiness has replaced sadness. He’s even pouting. And when he gets to his feet in a sluggish manner, it finally registers that he reeked of ale for a reason.

“How much did you drink?”

“Not enough.”
“Do you need to lie down?”

“Where is Arya? I need to tell her.”

“I don’t know. Would you like to rest until she gets back?”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Jon, you’re tired, drunk, and very upset. Take the bed. Lie down with Ghost for a bit. Go on.”

“And let you sleep on the floor? What do you take me for?”

“I’m not sleeping. I need to solve this. I won’t be able to sleep until I do.” Sansa pauses, weighing a question in her mind.

Jon gives her a tired look. “What?”

“I’m sorry for asking, but can she be pregnant? Because if she is…”

“She’s told me she can’t have children.” Jon’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “At least one less thing to worry about…” His face scrunches up in confusion. “Fewer? No.”

“What?” she asks but he only shakes his head. "Please stay? I'm worried about you. I don't think you should be alone tonight."

He sighs but nods his consent and moves his fingers to the straps of his gorget. With growing frustration and a growl rumbling in his throat, he struggles to get them open. When he starts swearing under his breath, Sansa sighs goodnaturedly and closes the distance between them, stills his fingers with her own.

“Let me help.”

The twin direwolves on his gorget gleam at her as she works. He is a Stark, and she knows her duty, knows she must do whatever it takes to protect the pack. She’ll solve this. She’ll take care of everything.

She lays the gorget on Arya’s nightstand and finds the straps of his leather jerkin at his shoulders. When she pulls it off, he exhales with satisfaction and she wonders whether it’s a similar release to removing your corset. Perhaps not quite, not with that thick doublet beneath. Smiling to herself, she ghosts her fingers up the laces of the doublet and starts loosening them from the top.

She’s halfway down his chest when Jon’s hand closes around her wrist. Sansa’s eyes flit up to meet his. They’re dark again, darker than the deepest shadow. The air between them changes, thickens, becomes hard to breathe. She can hear her own labored breaths, hear his, hear her own heart beating. Her hand rest over his chest, two fingers slipped into the opening of his doublet. Jon’s gaze is steady, deep, drawing her in until she sees nothing but his eyes, how wet his lashes still are, the fine lines in the delicate skin surrounding them.

“What is it?” she says, or tries to. It comes out like a whisper, like waves kissing the shore.

Jon’s features harden. He shakes his head and then he’s gone, gone so quickly her hands are still raised when the door closes behind him.

Sansa inhales sharply, staring at the empty room, at the closed door. Even though he must be halfway to his own chambers by now, his name still leaves her lips, as though it will pull him back to
her.

But it doesn’t. Of course it doesn’t.

On the bed, Ghost lifts his head. “Go after him,” she says and opens the door. “Go on. He needs you more than I do.”

The wolf hesitates for only a moment before trotting off and leaving her alone with the echoes of this awful, shameful evening.

Oh, what’s wrong with her? Jealous, Jon called her. Jealous. When Arya is jealous too. But he doesn’t know that. He thinks Sansa loves him--is in love with him--and what does she do? Invites him into her bed--insists on it--and starts to undress him. Shame burns through her. What must she have looked like? A desperate and needy woman taking advantage of her own brother in his vulnerable state.

Sansa shakes her hands, pacing the room where everything mocks her. The rumpled sheets where he sat, the discarded leather jerkin on the floor, the twin direwolves of his gorget. In the firelight it looks as if they’re laughing at her. And why shouldn’t they? She’s a stupid, stupid girl.

A stupid girl who can’t stay in here where humiliation haunts her.

Once more clad in dress and cloak, Sansa flees Arya’s chambers.
Sansa

Chapter Notes

Sometimes you guys ask questions in the comments, and I generally keep my answers short because I don't always know whether they're rhetorical. So I’m just gonna ask you here: would you like me to ramble more about the fic when I reply to your comments? Or do you want me to stfu? Knowing me, I’m not gonna go into great detail. I don’t want to spoil too much, and I also don’t want to tell people when they interpret things in ways I did not intend. Because the reader has to be able to make their own interpretations. I also think you should be able to speculate without me ruining it lol. But I definitely could ramble a little bit more than I do today. So… What do you guys think? Oh, and while I have your attention: thank you so much for reading and commenting! I appreciate it more than I can express. <3

The wind picks up, rustling branches that powders snow over her like sugar over lemon cakes. Sansa pulls up the hood of her cloak and keeps moving through the cold. What she wouldn’t give for a treat like that: a plateful of lemon cakes still warm from the oven, a good book, and her bed--her old bed in her old room with her old pillows that smelled like childhood. She’d shed Lady Stark and curl up in bed as Sansa, safe beneath warm furs. The want is so strong she can almost taste it in the air, that sugar-drenched tartness, how it melts in your mouth…

A twig snaps.

Fear arrests her for only a blink of an eye before it fades and she walks on. It’s an animal. She’s Lady Stark and she’s home, surrounded by people who want to protect her. It’s nothing. And yet she can’t help but turn her head slightly, to adjust the hood so that she can better hear whether something’s coming up behind her.

And there, beneath the whisper of the wind and the muted din of the feast still reaching her, snow crunches softly in an uneven pace. Like footsteps. The large heavy footsteps of a drunken man. The faded fear flares up once more and her eyes flit over her surroundings to find an escape, a protector. Although the godswood is dark, the shine of moon and stars reflected by snow provides her with enough light to see. Several different tracks cover the ground--tracks not-yet filled in by the light precipitation–even the wheels of Bran’s rolling chair. But she sees no one, hears no one, no one but the person gaining in on her.

If she runs, will they run too? Or will they laugh and call her name and ask her to stop being silly?

She is, isn’t she? Silly. This is her home. She only needs to shout to alert a guard or even Ghost. No one would dare hurting her here. It must be Arya hoping to frighten her.

Sansa draws in a deep breath and turns around to scold her sister.

“Do you ever wonder what would’ve happened if you’d only come with me?”

The rasp of his voice sends her back to King’s Landing, to judging eyes and cruel words and cold steel against her back, against her lips. Sandor Clegane moves toward her, almost saunters with a drunken sluggishness, a crooked smirk on his scarred face. He stared at her during supper, she
knows. Not because she noticed—Jon and Daenerys consumed her focus—but because Tyrion pointed it out. And now Clegane leers unabashedly, eats her with his eyes as though she were a lemon cake after all.

“You would’ve found your sister sooner,” he says. “No marrying the Imp or that bastard Ramsay. Just you, me, and Arya on the road.”

He takes another step toward her. Sansa’s instincts tell her to run, but what threat does he truly pose? He doesn’t want to kill her. And rape her? He wouldn’t dare. He only wants to scare her, to feed off the quiver of her bottom lip, the tears in her eyes, and the trembling of her body.

Sansa lifts her chin and forces herself to meet his gaze without wavering.

“What are you doing out all alone at this hour?” Another step takes him so close to her the scent of leather, wine, and sweat wafting from his body reaches her nose, but she refuses to back away, refuses to give him the fear he craves. His eyes move over her face, and then the leer turns into a frown and his hand moves to the hilt of his sword. “You’ve been crying. Has someone hurt you, little bird?”

“I’m not yours to protect.”

“Do you want me to swear myself to you, is that it? Do you want me to kneel and lay my sword at your feet and say all those pretty words knights say? Or do I frighten you too much?” He tilts his head to give her a better view of his scars. “Do you still find me too unseemly to look at?”

You don’t scare me, she wants to say. Go away. Leave me alone. I’ll call the guards. I’ll call for Jon.

But tonight’s emotional turmoil has stripped her bare and she has no fight left, nothing to offer except a wide-eyed frozen stare she hopes looks fearless. One she learns doesn’t look fearless at all, for that hungry glint is back in his eyes. He even licks his lips.

“You’re a woman now. Ripe for the plucking. Have you been plucked, little bird? Did your bastard husband ever get that far before you fled?”

“Why are you like this? Arya said you took care of her. Arya said--”

“You want me to take care of you now? Thought you said you weren’t mine to--”

“Clegane!” The voice is all wrong, too bright, too cheery, and yet Sansa’s filled with disappointment when it’s not Jon but Tyrion who steps out from the shadows, wineskin under his arm. He tips his head at her. “Lady Sansa.”

Clegane glares down at him. “I didn’t see you there, little lord.”

“I’m easy to miss. Especially when you’re in your cups.” As if he were seven feet tall and strong and armed with a mighty weapon, as if he could take on the Hound and win, Tyrion positions himself by Sansa’s side. “Say, Clegane, don’t you have a bed waiting for you somewhere? I’m sure it misses you and your flatulating terribly.”

“We’re just talking,” Clegane says, sounding more like an obstinate child than a big, scary man. “And why are you so eager to be left alone with her?”

But despite the question, he doesn’t stay to hear an answer. Instead he merely shoots Tyrion a dirty look before heading back toward the courtyard. Once the darkness has swallowed the Hound,
Tyrion turns to her with a familiar gentleness, one that makes her feel like a stupid little girl who knows nothing but isolation and pain and useless crying.

“Sometimes wine brings out the worst in people,” he says, and when Sansa glances at the wineskin he’s carrying, Tyrion shrugs. “Me? I’m a happy drunk. Most of the time.” He flashes a smile. “So, what are you doing out all alone at this hour?”

He looks at her calmly, as though he didn’t notice his little slip, how the emphasis on the word *are* told her he’s been eavesdropping on her and Clegane before deciding to interrupt and play the hero.

“Praying, my lord.”

“Now, Sansa, what did we agree upon?”

“I’m sorry”—she pauses and gives a good-natured sigh—“Tyrion.”

“Much better! Tell me, do Northern ladies often get up before dawn to pray?”

“I couldn’t sleep. I’m not alone in that, it seems.”

“Don’t worry about him. He wouldn’t dare hurting you. The smell of fear makes him bark, that’s all. But, if you’re worried, I could escort you back to your chambers. I know my size isn’t particularly impressive, but my title is. If the Hand of the Dragon Queen tells you to leave, you leave.” He gestures at the dark woods with the wineskin. “As I just demonstrated.”

“Thank you, Tyrion, but I’m staying…” She bites her lip, considering him. “Would you like to join me?”

Her suggestion lights up Tyrion’s features, and he follows her deeper into the godswood. At the heart-tree they settle down together among the roots and, after two-three sentences of polite smalltalk, Tyrion steers the conversation back to the place they’ve both been eager to return ever since they parted outside his chambers. A place they could not revisit at the feast where eager ears and thirst for gossip surrounded them. His is not a smooth maneuver, however, and along with how carefully he pronounces his words, it reveals to her that wine hasn’t just loosened his lips but also dulled his wits a little. She knows that if she only keeps her answers satisfactory but not over-filling, he’ll talk more than is wise.

“I’ve often wondered where my sweet wife went after my nephew’s unfortunate wedding.”

“Lord Baelish whisked me away. I stayed with my aunt Lysa for a while. When she died, I went back home and married Ramsay Bolton.”

“And where is Ramsay Bolton now?”

“Dead.”

Tyrion regards her for a beat, eyes sharp despite his inebriated state, but then he takes a sip of wine, allowing her to move the conversation forward.

“And you?” she asks. “What happened to you?”

“Oh, nothing intriguing. My family threw me in a dungeon for a murder I didn’t commit. During my trial, once I realized I would be found guilty regardless, I asked for a trial by combat.” He sighs deeply, shaking his head. “So close… Alas, my champion lost and I fled, found Daenerys, impressed her with my considerable wits and charms, and here I am.”
“That would be your second trial for a crime you didn’t commit, wouldn’t it? I hope you’ll be more lucky in the future.”

“Yes.” He lifts the wineskin in a toast. “Here’s for me never finding myself on trial a third time. Not even for the murders I did commit.”

It’s an offhanded revelation and he looks as casual as ever, but she can’t help the chill sweeping over her.

Something in her expression must’ve alerted him of her unease, because with his back hunched, making himself small and unimposing, he suddenly explains in the most gentle voice, “My father. I happened upon him when I was fleeing King’s Landing. He knew I was innocent and he wanted me found guilty nonetheless. Self-defense. It’s always been self-defense, or to protect someone. Like your lady mother! I told you about that, didn’t I? During our short marriage. When we were being attacked by men of the mountain clans? I’m not an… aggressive man, Sansa. You have nothing to fear from me.”

“I understand.” She stays silent for a beat to give the impression that she’s carefully considering whether to share her own story, and then says quietly, “Ramsay’s hounds were ravenous after we took back Winterfell. So I let them into his cell. I’m sure you can deduce the rest.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows fly to his hairline and he lifts the wineskin in another toast, as though to honor her. “You’ve changed.”

“Sometimes life forces you to change.”

“For the better, I hope?”

“Well,” she says, smoothing out her skirts, “that remains to be seen.”

Tyrion grins. “And where are those hounds now? Do I need to lock my door tonight, once I find my way back to the chamber you so graciously prepared for me?”

“No.” She gives a smile, just a light quirk of her mouth. “You’re quite safe.”

“And my queen?” He shakes the wineskin while staring at it, as though to assess how much wine remains. “Is she safe?”

“Why would I hurt our queen who’s come to save us?”

“Our queen?” He chuckles. “You’re clever, Sansa. I saw it at King’s Landing, and it seems the harsh grindstone of life has honed the sharpness of your mind even further. What you’re not, however, is a good actor.”

“I’ve been acting?”

“Indeed you have. And badly at that.” He passes her the wineskin; she pretends to sip before passing it back. “You noticed tonight what our queen and your brother are to one another.”

“Didn’t everyone?”

“No. Unlike you, I tore my eyes off Jon and Daenerys on occasion and paid attention to the people around me. And most people did not notice.”

He waits for her to comment but she remains silent, wills her cheeks to cool.
“You’ve pretended to be mad at your brother. But you’re not, are you? You’re disappointed that he fell in love. You’re…” Tyrion squints at her as he searches for words and she tries not to let it show that she’s holding her breath, that she’s bracing herself for that awful word that has plagued her all night. “Hurt.”

She blows air through her nose as she moves her mouth into a faint smile, looking down at the snow-covered roots. “Wouldn’t you be if your brother found someone so beautiful he handed her the kingdom he left you to run, all without ever consulting you?”

“And what was it like? Ruling the North.”

“It was work. Hard work. Long hours in Jon’s office. Endless meetings and petitions. Things to oversee, to plan.”

“You enjoyed it. And now you’ll have to step aside as Jon becomes Warden of the North.”

“Only a fool would let Jon warden the North after what he did.” She leans in closer and adds in an almost intimate tone, “And you’re no fool.”

“Some would call that debatable,” Tyrion says with a wide smile. “Yohn Royce tells me you’ve ruled the North wisely in your brother’s stead. I found that information rather... valuable.” For a moment he lets the words hang there like a prize just out of her reach. “He also told me we’re to expect a betrothal between yourself and your cousin. A good match, I suppose.”

“What?” She blinks, swallows. “What cousin?”

“I wasn’t aware of an abundance of cousins from which to choose.”

“Forgive me. I’m merely surprised. Did Yohn Royce really say I’m to marry Robin Arryn?”

“Not in so many words. It was implied. Besides, you’ve been betrothed before without ending up married to your intended.”

He pauses and looks at her expectantly, as though he’s challenging her to figure out what she has already understood. What she started to suspect at the feast, even, when Tyrion sought out Yohn Royce. But he doesn’t need to know quite how sharp her mind has become, so she pretends to think it over while fidgeting with the hem of her cloak.

“You want a marriage alliance between the Queen and my cousin,” she says, slowly, as though she’s weighing each word. “And if I help you…”

“Yes, and if you help me, I’ll prove I’m not a fool after all.”

“But… The Queen loves my brother. Does she not?”

“We both know she can’t marry a bastard.”

“Does she know that?”

“She does. She left someone behind for that very reason. But... love makes us foolish, my dear. Perhaps love has blinded her to what’s sensible. Perhaps she doesn’t have the strength needed to nip things in the bud before they must be torn out by the roots. Perhaps someone who loves her and has her best interest at heart and wants to see her on the throne could make her see reason?”

“You want me to discuss this with Jon. And what makes you think he’d listen to me?”
“He left the North to you. That shows at least a modicum of trust.”

“He left the North to me because I was the only available option.”

“Oh, I doubt that. He respects you. And I know he’s a bastard, that you were never close, but he certainly must love you. And you him?”

“No. Jon and I…”

While deliberately massaging her hands the way Arya has pointed out is her tell, Sansa pauses and pretends to choose her words with care, even though she already knows how to play this. Yes, Jon ignored her in the courtyard and at the feast, but he came to her after Bran told him about his parentage. Perhaps he’ll never love her the way he loves Arya and Bran, but he does trust her and her knowledge about the game. And so she must trust in him, that he ignored her for a reason, and play this the way he expects of her.

“Jon is my father’s son. Jon was my king. It's my duty to care for him.”

“But?” Tyrion says and, when she doesn't fill in the rest, does it himself: "He was never your brother.”

Sansa clasps her hands in her lap. “I didn’t say that.”

Tyrion lays his hand over hers and gives her a kind smile. “You didn’t have to. I know a little something about being judged for your appearance. A bastard son picked over a trueborn child just because she’s a girl? It shouldn’t be allowed. You’re King Robb’s rightful heir, not Jon.”

“Well, Bran is--”

“The crippled boy who can’t have children? No. A king needs an heir. Had the world been a better place, you would’ve been named queen.”

“That’s interesting of you to say.” She turns to looks at him head-on. “I’ve heard gossip that the Queen is barren.”

“An exaggeration. She miscarried once. You know how facts get twisted once they fall into the hands of gossipmongers. The Queen won’t have troubles conceiving heirs.” Tyrion pats her hand before removing his, and takes a swig of wine. “You’ve heard many things, it seems. This, the Tarlys… What else have you heard?”

“That she burned all the food from the Reach. Is it true?”

“Not all the food. Pray tell me, Sansa dear, who’s providing you with all these news? Your brother?”

“Jon tells me nothing. He didn’t even tell me he decided to bend the knee until after the fact. It must’ve been a touching moment. Was she very pleased?”

“I couldn’t say. It happened in private.”

“Sounds romantic.”

“I’m sure it was. And I’m also sure you’re evading my question. Did a little bird tell you? Perhaps one that’s perched at the throat of a little man?”

“Perhaps.”
“And will this trusted friend of yours make an appearance during our stay at Winterfell?”

“If needed. Hopefully, it won’t come to that. I like him better where he is now.”

“Is he one of your many suitors? I hear you have a few.”

“You seem very interested in my suitors, Tyrion. You’re even trying to steal one from me.”

“Perhaps it’s a blessing. You could find someone better suited for you. Perhaps even someone to love?”

“Love…” Sansa shakes her head. “I’m done with all that.”

“So young and already done with love?” He empties the wineskin with two deep swallows. “Heart breaking.”

No, she thinks, it’s love that breaks your heart.

“I’d rather find a man who’ll give me a child or two but then leave me be.”

“Shall we pray to that? My arse, if you pardon my language, is starting to get numb.”

Sansa nods and they bow their heads in prayer. Not that she actually prays. His words have sent her thoughts racing. If Jon bent the knee in private—Jon, who lets Daenerys believe whatever she wants to believe—then has he bent the knee at all?

And if Jon hasn’t bent the knee, if Jon isn’t her father’s son, if Jon isn’t Robb’s heir, if the North is still independent, then what would that make her?

“He was named King in the North. He can be unnamed.”

If the news about Jon’s true identity came out, they’d insist on it, wouldn’t they? They already want her for their queen as it is.

No. She can’t afford pondering this too deeply until she’s safe from Tyrion’s watchful eye. Not until she’s mastered the art of masking her emotions—something he so kindly reminded her she’s yet to do.

So Sansa breathes in deeply of the crisp winter air and looks out over the still godswood, forcing her mind to clear. And there, in the murky space between two trees, she sees something that would strike fear in the heart of most, but only brings her relief: a pair of red eyes gleaming in the dark.

As Ghost breaks free from the shadows and pads over to them, Tyrion gets to his feet, and with a wary glance at the direwolf, offers Sansa his hand. With a sweet smile, she takes it and allows him to help her stand.

“Ghost! Here, boy!”

A now becloaked Jon comes out of the shadows, his hair flowing freely in the wind, and if her heart beats a little faster it’s only because of tonight’s drama. When he notices them, he stops so quickly he slides an inch or two in the snow, and his eyes drop to their joined hands.

“Jon!” Tyrion lets go of her and grins a little too widely. “I was just escorting the lady back to her chambers. We’ve been praying.”

Jon nods, lips pursed. “I’ll take it from here. If it’s, uh…” His hands twitch. “Unless my sister disagrees.”
Tyrion glances up at Sansa, who shows her consent through an easy smile. Tyrion’s gaze flickers between them. A bad actor, he called her. Hurt. Hurt could be an innocuous way to imply jealous. Is that how she seems to everyone? Is her smile too eager? Does she look as if she couldn’t be happier to let Jon escort her to her chambers in the middle of the night? Would letting that smile slip be strange? Can Tyrion tell how she’s straining to keep it on her face?

“Well then,” Tyrion peers at her one last time. “Goodnight, my lady. Jon.”

When Tyrion walks away, Sansa breathes out her relief, lets her face relax, while Jon follows Tyrion with his eyes. But, unlike her, he knows how to give nothing away, and his face remains an impassive mask. After a while, Jon throws a look over his shoulder and cocks his head as though he’s listening. Then, once he’s certain they’re alone, he takes a step closer to her and speaks in a low voice.

“It was a trap. That invitation. Set up by him, not her. I know he treated you well, but you can’t trust him.”

“You think I trust him? I don’t trust anyone who’s not a Stark.”

Jon inhales sharply before closing his mouth into a grim line. Instinctively, she moves toward him, to reassure him that she still seems him as a Stark, that she does trust him, but when her fingers graze his arm, Jon recoils. Sansa snatches her hand back, tucks it into the flare of her sleeve.

He does think it, then, that she loves him—and it disgusts him. Her touch disgusts him. She does.

You’re wrong, she wants to say. I’m not in love with you. I’m not!

But shame burns so fiercely within her that the words incinerate before they can leave her lips. All she can do is stride past him with her chin held high. And so they walk together in complete silence, every step an agony. Silence with him should be solace, not this twisted thing it has become. Jon won’t even walk beside her like he usually does, instead choosing to walk behind her. And when they reach the stairs and their hands accidentally brush against one another on the banister, he pulls away instantly. All she wanted was to comfort him, and he treats her as though she has greyscale—and it feeds the flames of her shame until it turns into anger.

By the time they’ve reached Arya’s door, that anger is boiling in her gut and she does nothing to hide it when she turns around to thank him and bid him good night. But he’s not even looking at her. Despite the torch on the wall casting him in soft, golden light, he looks as hard and cold as the Wall.

“You shouldn’t go out alone at night,” he tells her boots. “It’s not safe anymore.”

“Well, you had Ghost and Brienne was asleep and—”

“Then wake her. Or stay in your bloody chambers.”

“Do you think you can order me about just because you’re a prince now, Aegon?”

Jon’s eyes snap up to hers, wide and filled with hurt, and regret mellows the anger back into shame.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I’m being awful. I’m sorry.”

Jon shakes his head, his shoulders slumping. “It’s late. We’re both tired. We should go to bed.”

His words conjure an image of the two of them curling up in bed together, his arm around her, her head pillowed on his chest, and she can't help but blush. Jon's eyes widen again, but this time they're
filled with panic and she could swear he's blushing too.

“T’ll get you your clothes,” she mumbles and ducks into Arya's chambers.

When she returns with the gorget and leather jerkin, Jon hasn’t moved even an inch. He looks as if he’d rather be anywhere than where he is—and she can’t blame him. She’s so uncomfortable she doesn’t know what to do and ends up laying the garments on the floor before heading back into the room and locking the door behind her, just to avoid talking to him or looking at him or accidentally touching him.

In the safety of the locked chamber, Sansa lets out her nervous energy freely by pacing the room and wringing her hands. He’s her brother. Her big brother. What changed? When he left for Dragonstone, they were fine. Weren’t they?

But he didn’t say goodbye. Did he suspect something even then? Did she do something inappropriate? Murmur something odd when she was sick, perhaps? Did she reveal-- No. No, she can’t afford pondering things that will lead to nothing but anxiety.

Not when she has a problem to solve. And, thanks to Tyrion, a solution has already started forming in her mind. All she needs is time to think.

When Sansa wakes, Arya lies by her side, snoring into the pillow. As though she just came in, her feet are cold against Sansa’s shins. So Sansa tucks both their furs around her sister’s body, and brushes a lock of hair from her cool cheek. When she sleeps, she looks so small and innocent, and Sansa remembers nights when Arya still was young enough to admit nightmares frightened her. Nights when, even if they’d quarreled all day, Arya would pad into Sansa’s chamber and sneak into her bed. She’d put her pillow at the foot side, and then they’d whisper and kick at one another and laugh until they fell asleep top and tail. Some mornings, Sansa would wake up with Arya’s feet in her face and she’d shriek out her disgust and then they’d be quarreling again and pretend they didn’t get on, as though daylight exposed all their differences and turned them into cracks in their bond.

Smiling at the fond memories, Sansa gets ready as quietly and quickly as she can. Ever since she and Theon fled, she’s avoided handmaidens, can’t stand other people’s hands on her body. Only people she trusts deeply. Sometimes she gets help with her hair, but that’s all. If she needs help with a garment, she asks Arya or Brienne, but most of her dresses are sewn by her--and sewn to be as easy to slip into as they are to remove.

Whenever her thoughts wander to Jon, she grabs them by the skin of their necks like a mother wolf and steers them in a more productive direction. By the time she leaves Arya’s chamber in search of him, the solution is finally fully formed.

She finds him in his office. Him and Davos and Daenerys and Bran and, well, everyone. She slinks inside and positions herself at the wall where she won’t be noticed, where she can observe in peace. Jon’s eyes follow her as she moves only to skitter away when she’s settled in. He looks even more tired than she feels, with dark circles under his eyes and a sallow complexion beneath the too-bushy beard.

When Father returned from his travels, Mother would take care of him herself. She’d have a bath drawn and scrub his back and his feet, wash his hair and his beard, and get the shears, and she’d
polish and polish until the weary traveler fell away to reveal Lord Eddard Stark.

Something a sister could do for a brother—especially a brother who doesn’t have a wife to take care of him. Who else would? Not the bathing, of course, he’s taken care of that himself and that would be…

_Droplets clinging to bare skin, slicked-back hair with rivulets of water running down his back, her hand holding the washcloth sweeping over—_

Jon looks up from the map he’s examining and his eyes find her, bore into her, and it feels as though her intrusive thoughts are written on her skin in deepest red. *Jealous*. She averts her eyes. Before that accusation, she never had thoughts like this.

*Yes, you did,* a voice whispers in the darkest part of her. *Stop lying to yourself.*

Sansa smothers that horrible voice with logic. She was confused, that was all. Confused. And now when she sees him and Daenerys together—even though none of last night’s possessive behavior or intimacy is on display—the unease that fills her isn’t *jealousy*. It’s empathy. For what Jon had to go through. That’s what that pain is, that trouble to breathe whenever she thinks of Jon and Daenerys together. Empathy and a reminder of what she herself has gone through because of powerful men wanting her.

Perhaps she and Jon are like her and Arya, only the opposite. Perhaps daylight doesn’t expose the cracks in their relationship as much as the dark of night muddles their boundaries. Growing up, they never were brother and sister. They never learned how to love each other as siblings. That’s why everything’s so strange and confusing now. He fears she still looks down on him because of his parentage. She fears he only accepts her because Father would’ve wanted it. And, somehow, that tension appears to be something it's not.

Yes, daylight is what they need. Daylight and a room less intimate than a bedchamber where they can talk without interruptions, where she won't allow either of them to bolt out the door. The prospect of it fills her with dread, but it must be done. She cannot allow this misunderstanding to go on.
A Wintertown girl in a threadbare dress and cloak, an old rag wrapped around her head to protect her from the snowfall, clutches a letter in her hands. Refuses to hand it to anyone other than the Lady of Winterfell, she told the guard, who does little to hide his frustration as he shares the information with Jon and the others. Sansa moves through the crowded office, breaks the seal, reads the letter carefully. Then her gaze flits over to Brienne before she fishes coins from her purse and presses them into the girl’s hand with a few murmured words Jon doesn’t catch. Shining with gratitude, the girl curtsies and scurries away.

Without even the slightest change in her expression, Sansa walks to his desk and it’s enough for his dumb heart to up its pace. Her scent fills his nose, and his eyes flutter shut as he breathes in deeply. (*His face buried in the warm slope of her neck, her hands running over his back, her body pressed against him, her soothing voice whispering in his ear.*) When he opens his eyes, he finds Davos piercing gaze on him. Jon sits up properly. Behind him, Sansa throws the letter into the fireplace, her arm brushing against his back.

Davos still watches him.

Jon returns his attention to the meeting--or tries to, at least. His head is pounding, from too much ale and not enough sleep. Neither has he eaten, which his stomach kindly reminds him of with a cranky rumble every so often. He presses his fingers against his forehead with a grunt.

At least Daenerys is behaving today, treating him like just another adviser. Despite the revelations he’d tucked into the back of his mind for now, everything was going well until Sansa showed. Her presence makes it difficult. It makes everything difficult. He can’t focus. Not after what happened last night. What didn’t happen. What could’ve happened. What she hopefully didn’t feel. How close to her was he standing when she undressed him? Jon rubs his temples. He can’t remember. And now she’s moving again, across the floor, opening the door, talking to someone outside.

Davos catches his eye and shakes his head discreetly. Whatever that means. Oh, Jon knows exactly what it means. Stop staring at your damn sister. That’s what it means.

A moment passes of hopefully coherent communication. Then, on his desk, a cup of tea appears. It smells of bark and herbs and honey.

“For the headache, My King,” Maester Wolkan murmurs before bowing and leaving the room.

(They do that, still, some of his people; he hasn’t had the heart to correct anyone yet.)

Jon grabs the cup, blows at the hot tea, takes a sip. Then his eyes find Sansa again. She’s giving him a small smile and, oh, he could kiss her. He could kiss her and her kind heart. Davos clears his throat. No. Not kiss her. Thank her for procuring some tea. Thank her. That’s all.

Jon puts the mug back on the desk and tries to understand what ser Jorah is talking about. This meeting will be the end of him.

When people finally start filtering out of his office, Jon collapses into his chair, closes his eyes, and breathes out his relief. A short moment to gather himself is all he needs. His stomach makes itself known. Ah, yes, a short moment and some ham and bread. A talk with Arya. And no Sansa to twist him about. If he’s lucky, whatever she read in that letter will keep her occupied today.

“Jon?”
Oh seven hells.

Jon opens his eyes. Her red hair falls in soft waves over her shoulders and her blue eyes gleam in the light of the fire, but there’s nothing soft about her expression and it sobers him up in an instant.

“I think I have a solution.” She tilts her head to the left, alerting him of Davos’ presence. He’s standing by the window and makes no effort to conceal how intently he’s watching them. “I'll give you a moment to eat first. What do you want? Ham and that herb bread you like? An oatcake too? They made them with blackberries this time.”

“Yeah, it’s, uh… Thank you, Sansa.”

He presses his lips together to fight the silly smile threatening to bloom on his face. Of course she knows what he wants when he’s hungover and feeling sorry for himself. Throwing a glance at Davos as she goes, Sansa finally leaves the room. Jon drags a hand over his mouth and sighs deeply, tiredly. Davos stays silent. Not until a servant’s brought a tray of food and Jon has his mouth full of ham, does Davos move a chair to Jon’s desk and takes a seat.

“I don’t know what’s going on between you and your sister, but whatever it is, it needs to stop. Now. It’s not right.”

“Nothing’s going on between us,” Jon says and when he hears his own sullen voice, he sinks deeper into his chair.

“She’s your sister and you’re looking at her is if she’s--”

“My cousin. She’s my cousin.”

Davos inhales and then he sits there, blinking at Jon with his mouth hanging open.

Jon gives a joyless smile. “I’m the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. The legitimate son. They married in secret.”

The air leaves Davos slowly, his brows seemingly permanently attached to the top-half of his forehead. Taking in the information, he nods a little to himself. Then the corners of his mouth lift in a jolly grin that’s only a little forced.

“I suppose you can marry her, then. Your sister-- Er, your cousin.”

Jon almost laughs. “I don’t think Sansa would agree to that.”

“But you would?”

He wheezes out some sort of noise while searching for a good answer. He finds none.

“You love her. I’ve suspected it for a while, but didn’t know until yesterday. But you don’t think she returns your affections?”

Jon shoves bread into his mouth.

“Jon is my father’s son. Jon was my king. It’s my duty to care for him… Love, I’m done with all that…”

He didn’t mean to eavesdrop. Ghost lured him into the godswood, and when Jon heard his own name, he stayed in the shadows even though he shouldn’t. He’s her duty, not her love. And yet sometimes… Sometimes he thinks she’d let him kiss her if he tried it. But he doesn’t want her to let
him, does he? He wants her to want him. He wants her to be the one who kisses him.

When Jon doesn’t reply, Davos scoots the chair closer and says quietly, “I assume Daenerys doesn’t know about your parentage--or your fondness for your sister.”

“She can’t know. No one can know.”

Davos fixes him with a stern look. “Then you’ll have to do a better job at hiding how you feel.”

Jon closes his eyes with a heavy sigh.

“And this solution lady Sansa talked about, is it regarding these news?”

“Aye.”

Davos rises from the chair, but lingers with his hands against the desk. “You’ll let me know, I hope?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. And I’d tell you not to hurt her, cos she’s been through a lot. But I have a feeling the only person you’ll end up hurting is yourself with all your moping.” Davos shakes his head. “This is quite a mess you’ve gotten yourself in. And at the worst possible time.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“Well, I won’t detain you. I’m sure your sister is waiting outside for me to leave.”

Sansa sits in silence while he finishes his food. Her back is straight, her mien stoic, and she watches the hearth, the plate, the window, the desk. Anything but him. When only the oatcake remains, he breaks it in two and offers her one half. Everything about her softens instantly only for her to close up again and slip back into her cool demeanor.

“You need it more than I do.”

“Treats aren’t as good when you don’t share them with someone.”

The look she gives him—exasperation sweetened with too much fondness to offend—warms him down to his toes and she keeps shooting him wonderful glances as she nibbles on the oatcake while his half lies forgotten on the plate.

“You didn’t get any sleep at all, did you?” she asks. “You look awful.”

“Thanks a lot. Makes me feel loads better.”

“You look like a Wildling, Jon.”

He runs his hand over his beard and laughs. “I can think of worse things.”

“How are you?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs and bites off a chunk of the oatcake. “It feels like nothing.”
“I’m so sorry, Jon.”

She reaches over the desk and lays her hand over his and her touch obscures everything else. All he knows is her soft fingers against his skin, and how those fingers caressed him last night, undressed him. Had he not stopped her, how many layers would she have removed? Would she have slipped out of her robe and lain down with him? His body responds all too readily to her touch, to the images it provokes: her head pillowed on his shoulder, her lips brushing against his collarbone, her hand resting over his heart, over the scar, while his hand grips her hip and tugs her--

Jon sucks in a breath and pulls his hand away, hides it beneath the desk before he has to hide something else too.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles. “I forgot.”

She curls her fingers into her palm and wraps the fist with her other hand.

They sit in their most uncomfortable silence yet; he swears he can hear the snowfall outside. Then the legs of the chair scrape against the floor and Sansa stands. The heels of her shoes clack across the flagstone as she walks over to the window. There she stands for a moment, even though the shutters are closed and she can’t look outside.

When she turns around again, she looks like Lady Stark.

“Jon, we need to talk.”

The moisture leaves his mouth. “I, uh”--he moves paper on his desk, eyes frantically searching for a good excuse--”I have work and--”

“Work can wait. I won’t leave your office until we’ve talked.”

Jon sighs and drops the papers, weighs them down with the flats of his hands and nods at the chair as an invitation for her to sit down again. She stays on her feet.

“I don’t know how to be a sister to you. You’re used to brothers, to boys, and you’re used to Arya. But I’m not like them. If you’re hurt, I can’t offer to kill someone for you. I can only hug you or hold your hand. If you’re sick, I’ll tuck you into bed and get you soup. And if your beard’s too long, I’ll remind you it needs a trim. That’s how I am a sister. Maybe you’ve never had that kind of relationship with someone. Maybe that’s why you think--”

Her cheeks go pink and, even though she moves closer, she looks down at her hands instead of meeting his eyes.

“If my touch is that unwelcome, I won’t touch you. But… I don’t…” When she doesn't find the words, she throws her hand out in frustration, her armor clattering to the floor as her emotions flow out. “I can’t even be jealous without you thinking awful things about me!”

“Je--” Jon clears his throat and shifts in his chair. “Jealous?”

“Yes. I was. You were right. I was jealous.”

His heart beats so hard he can’t sit still. His hands move on their own, finding things to fiddle with only to put them down again. He moves to run a hand through his hair, but it’s pulled back in a bun. He wipes his hands on his breeches. And then he gets up from his seat and finds himself in front of her, staring at her beautiful face and expecting things he has no business expecting.
“I’m done with all that,” she said.

And that she didn’t love him. Was she lying? It didn’t sound like a lie. But then neither does this.

“You look terrified,” she whispers with a smile he can’t interpret. “You don’t have to be. It’s not what you think.”

She holds his gaze for a moment before looking away, and the blush that had only begun to fade deepens. It’s when she looks at him that way that hope lights a flame in his heart. Because it does happen, perhaps not frequently, but enough times for him to have to put some effort into smothering that flame into embers.

“Ever since leaving home,” she says, “everyone around me has always wanted something from me. My claim, my body... My pain. And I prayed and prayed that someone would come and save me. I daydreamed about Robb riding through the gates of King’s Landing, into the throne room, and lifting me up on his white horse. I dreamed that he would save me. But he never came.”

A tremor moves through her face, but she suppresses the flare of emotion and continues, “No one came. No one would risk a war for a stupid little girl. No one would risk anything at all. So I was a prisoner. For years. At King’s Landing, at the Eyrie, even here, in my own home. Until I fled. Until I found you.”

Her eyes fill with tears and she scrunches up her face, purses her lips, and furrows her brow as she’s struggling to force it all down, and he can’t help but move toward her, so that he can pull her into his arms and hold her like she held him. So he can soothe her pain with his embrace, stroke her back, her hair, her cheek. Whisper to her that he’ll never ever let that happen again. Vow that he will protect her, always.

“You didn’t want anything from me,” she whispers and Jon stops. “You didn’t want my claim or my body or my pain. You only wanted me safe.”

He staggers back and sinks down on the desk and, gripping the edge, stares down at the floor as he listens.

“I can’t describe... I don’t think you understand. Everywhere you go, people love you. You make friends from enemies. I know you’ve struggled. I know you’ve suffered. But this loneliness... Knowing that no one--no one in the whole world--cares about you... But you cared! You let me be Sansa. And I had you all to my own. My kind big brother. And when you left, I felt alone again. You were my-- I wanted you to come home. I wanted us all together, you, me, Arya, and Bran. But instead you came home with her.”

And there it is. A tremble, a darkness in her voice that feeds his hope. The same kind of darkness and hurt he saw in her at the feast. But he was wrong then and he’s wrong now. It’s not that kind of jealousy. She doesn’t have to continue, for he finally understands, but he stays silent and lets her empty herself, lets her douse that flame for him.

“So, yes, I was jealous. And so was Arya. We wanted our big brother back not... Not Daenerys’ lapdog. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being angry with you. I’m sorry I didn’t understand. And I’m sorry for being jealous, but please, Jon.” She moves closer, hands pressed together as if in prayer. “Please don’t think that means I’m-- I couldn’t stand it, that you’d think me capable of such a horrible thing. That everything I’ve gone through would’ve twisted me so badly I...” She draws a shuddering breath. “That I’d want my own brother. I’m not in love with you, Jon. I’m not.”

Jon nods slowly. A lump has lodged itself in his throat and all the noises around them become

“You don’t believe me,” she says.

“No, I do. I believe you.” His voice sounds raw, feels raw, as though every word grates at his throat. “I never thought you… I never thought you felt that way.”

“Oh.” Sansa clasps her hands, that tell-tale rub of thumb against palm that shows more of her discomfort than even her still-pink cheeks. “Good. That’s good. I wouldn’t want you to think that’s the reason for… Well, I think I know how to solve our problem and it’s going to sound a bit strange.”

Jon tilts his head back and looks at her with knitted brow. She’s Lady Stark once more, her back straight and chin held high. He drains the last of his now-cold tea and wishes it were ale.

“You told me you let Daenerys believe what she wants to believe. Tyrion told me you bent the knee in private. You didn’t bend the knee, did you.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Sansa’s rigid posture relaxes with a loud exhalation and a hint of a smile touches her lips. “You’re playing the game. Which means you’ll need my help going forward. That’s why you came to me first, wasn’t it? After Bran told you.”

Jon nods and keeps the whole truth to himself.

“This means you’re still our king. But once the truth comes out—and it will, Jon. Someone will slip up. Someone will overhear and spread the word. So, we have to control this or we’ll have a disaster on our hands. Do you think they’ll want to follow you if they learn who you are?”

“No. No, I don’t think they will.”

“While you were away…” She trails off, regarding him before adding quietly, “They wanted to unname you king and make me queen. And if this comes out, I think they’ll insist.”

“Is that what you want?”

“If I wanted to be queen, I already would be. But my being queen solves nothing. It will only divide everyone. And we still need everyone to follow you, to trust you, or we’ll never win these wars. We have to show them—prove to them—that you’re loyal to House Stark and the North. Not to Daenerys. And we have to do it in a way that she believes benefits her.”

Jon chuckles mirthlessly. “And how do you suggest we do that?”

“Rumors,” she says and starts pacing around the room, “we start with rumors. Awful rumors. That you and Daenerys are secretly married. That she carries your child. That you knew you were a Targaryen before you left. That you always intended to give the North away. Different versions of similar things. All their worst fears come true. But also that we’ve known for a while we’re cousins. That you and I…” She stops and averts her eyes, hands back at fidgeting. “That you and I are betrothed and will wed after the war.”

Betrothed. Jon blinks. Wedded. Bedded. Images flashes before him, images in no way new to him, of Sansa in a beautiful gown in front of the heart-tree and him cloaking her. Of her smile before she
leans in and kisses him. Of them alone in her bedchambers--their bedchambers--and his hands working the laces of her bodice, caressing the fabric from her back as he showers her neck, her shoulders, her spine with kisses before spinning her around and claiming her mouth.

Of their children growing up at Winterfell, tumbling about in the godswood, climbing trees and walls, riding and sword-playing, and shrieking as they splash water at one another from the cool spring in the heat of summer.

But why would she give him everything he’s ever wanted when she just said...

“And when they confront us,” she continues, “we confirm the least horrible rumor.”

Least horrible. A horrible thing. That’s what she said, didn’t she? That loving him would be a horrible thing. Even now. Even now, when he’s...

“You want us to lie,” he murmurs. With a sigh he reaches back, removes the tie of his bun, and drags a hand through his hair, shaking his fingers through the knots. “You don’t mean we’re actually getting married, do you?”

“No. Of course not. Betrothals are broken all the time. And if the gods are good, Daenerys won’t survive the war. And if they’re not, I know Arya will be up to the task. We don’t have to go through with it. We only need her to believe it. We need the lords to believe it.”

“I don’t…” Jon rubs his tired eyes. “Why do we want Daenerys to believe it?” He stands, gesturing pointedly as he speaks. “That’s what I’ve been trying to avoid! She’s the one who thought you were jealous! And if she, if she--”

He stops himself before he says too much, panting as he gawks at Sansa, who seems insultingly calm when he’s caught in a maelstrom of conflicting emotions.

“You think I’d be that stupid? That I wouldn’t arrange everything with her first? As soon as she learns who you are, she’ll either want to burn you or marry you. And I assume neither option is particularly desirable? So we must give her something she wants more than she wants you: the Iron Throne.”

“And how are we going to give her the Iron Throne? She has ten times the men we have. She has dragons.”

“She can’t have children. She needs an heir. An heir who can take care of those dragons once she passes away after having lived a long happy life. And any hatchlings those dragons might have. She needs a Targaryen heir. Or, at least, that is how this must be presented.”

“You mean me?”

“No. I mean your children. Our children.”

“Our…” Jon squeezes his eyes shut and tries to wrap his already exhausted mind around Sansa’s convoluted plans. “You want us to give her our child? You want us to have children? You said you don’t want me-- That-that we’re not to marry and now you want me to put a babe in you?”

“Jon,” Sansa says so very softly, walking closer to him, her hands held out as though she will envelope him in her embrace.

But then she pulls her hands back and he knows, deep in his heart, that she’ll never touch him again. That he’s ruined it. But it’s for the best, isn’t it? A good start. And once the wars are over, if he lives,
he'll ride South and get warm after all while she becomes queen and marries some Northern lord. One of all those suitors she apparently has.

Jon turns around and leans against the desk, forcing his labored breathing to calm.

“I know you’re tired,” Sansa says, still in that soft voice. “Perhaps you should sleep and we’ll talk later. I have somewhere to be, so--”

“Where are you going?”

“To Wintertown. I’m talking a walk with Brienne and Tyrion.”

“Ty--” Jon huffs a breath and spins around. “I told you you can’t trust him! He lied in that scroll to get me to Dragonstone. He sent me on a bleeding wight hunt. He--”

“You’re so worried that he’s playing me, but did it ever occur to you that perhaps I’m the one playing him? We can’t come to Daenerys with this suggestion. It has to come from one of her advisers, because she has to think we’re doing it for her. And I know that if I talk to him, I can plant enough seeds that, when we come to Daenerys with the truth about your parentage, the right idea will sprout.”

“You know? He’s been playing these games all his life and you're just--”

“A stupid little girl? I learned something long ago, something I’ve used to my advantage ever since I left home: people underestimate me. Especially men.” She’s so close to him now he sees the faint freckles on her nose, the disdain in her eyes. “Even you. You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

She’s calm as a windless day, as hard as the cold steel of the sword at his hip. As sharp.

“Even marrying me?” The words are out before he can stop them; Sansa’s eyes widen, her mouth forming an o. “They might insist. That we marry before the war. That I do my best to put a babe in your belly in case I die. Did you ever think about that? With all your careful planning. What then, Sansa? What would you do then?”

Sansa tilts up her chin. “Then I’d marry you. If you’ll have me.”

“If I’ll…” Jon exales in a self-deprecating smile, shaking his head. “I can’t ask you to do that for me.”

“I wouldn’t do it for you. I’d do it for all of us. It's what Father would've wanted, for us to do what's best for the pack. We have to remember that, now more than ever.”

Her words are strong and sure, but beneath the conviction she looks as miserable as he feels. She doesn’t want him, and he doesn’t want to be her duty. He doesn’t want her dutiful kisses, or her dutifully opening herself and letting him in only to make an heir.

“You don’t have to decide now. Think this over. Talk to Davos if you must. I won’t start spreading any rumors before you’ve agreed. And if you want us to keep quiet and hope for the best, we can.”

"You don't think we should."

"Bran doesn't think before he speaks. And look at what happened with Sam and Daenerys. Just… decide quickly. Please.”

She moves for the door, but then she stops, turns around to look at him. Her red hair falls in soft
waves over her shoulders and her blue eyes see all too much. She knows. He’s certain of it. She knows and it terrifies her. He sees it in her every movement. So hesitant, so careful, so controlled.

“I will,” he says and then he slumps into his chair, folds his arm over the desk, and collapses.

But Sansa still lingers by the door. He can hear her breathing, the light scuffing of sole against stone and the rustle of fabric when she shifts her weight.

“You’re still part of the pack, Jon,” she murmurs. “There are only four of us left, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to protect my family. Nothing.”

Then the door opens and closes, and he’s alone, crushing those embers into ashes.
Jon pulls his wild mop of curls into a bun and secures it with a leather tie. Supper is hours away and yet the sun already hangs low in the sky. Darkness falls so quickly in winter. He steps into the courtyard, where people have paused their work to stare up at the sky, at Drogon and Rhaegal dancing in the distance. A carcass hangs from the former’s talons. An elk or a deer. Hopefully. Daenerys has assured him he needn’t worry about their hurting anyone, that they won’t burn a human unless they pose a threat to her or someone for whom she cares. Just as she’s assured him the Dothraki won’t pillage their way north or hurt anyone once they arrive.

She still hasn’t told him how she got them all to follow her. He’s not sure he wants to know.

A scullery maid shivers and cuddles closer to her friend. The blacksmith rubs his arms and returns to the forge with a stony face. The children who’ve all become so good at their archery while Jon was away now lift the bows with trembling arms and miss their marks. The dragons do fill people with wonder, Daenerys was right about that, and they do fill them with fear. Him too. Something he never feels around Ghost. But then he didn’t know who he was when he interacted with Drogon. Perhaps that knowledge reduces the fear. Did Drogon know? Could it smell it on him, who he is?

Jon shakes his head to clear it and moves on. He needs to find Arya and tell her the truth before a new disaster distracts him.

Between the trees of the godswood, voices travel: one smooth and light; one teasing. Jon finds them over by the glass gardens, where Gendry is showing off his hammer and the moves he’s learned—or at least tries to, while Arya adjusts his stance and picks on his technique.

“Not like that. What did I tell you about your feet?” She gestures at her own stance. “Maybe you can bring them here, after the war is won.”

“My feet?” Gendry flashes a grin. “You think your sister would agree to it?”

“I think so.” Arya sighs. “You’re doing it all wrong again.”

He opens his mouth to retort, only to shut it when he notices Jon approaching. After weeks together on a ship, back and forth and back again, they’ve become good friends. But something in Jon’s demeanor must be deterring, for Gendry bows and walks away. Arya looks wary as well, approaching Jon slowly, asking him what’s wrong. But how can one talk out here, where anyone could be lurking in the ever-murkier woods?

The open field proves a better place. Her suggestion. Wants to see the dragons, she says, and he can’t deny he’d like that too. Learning who he is has filled him with a fascination he’s not entirely sure whether he should indulge. And yet he does, from a safe distance, mind you, as they watch the dragons burn and eat their prey. He feels Arya glancing at him every so often, but he doesn’t know where to begin, how much to tell. At last, once the dragons have curled up together to rest after their
meal, he just blurts it out. The truth about his parents; the horror that is his heritage, his name, his blood. Targaryen. He can scarcely think it. If Arya calls him that, if she looks at him as if he were a traitor, something abhorrent—

“But that means you…” She grabs his arm, her little face scrunched up in disgust, and he braces himself for her verdict. “Jon, you’ve fucked your aunt.”

Relief bubbles out of him in a liberating, quiet laughter that sends his shoulders bouncing and eyes filling with tears. Gods, he can’t even remember the last time he laughed, and now, even though it’s not funny, shouldn’t be funny, he can’t stop. Months of pent up tension dissolves into the wheezing air he breathes out with each chuckle until he finally calms down with a satisfied hum.

“I’m glad you find this entertaining. I’d be vomiting.”

Arya’s comment only sets him off again—until he remembers Sansa, the way he dreams of her, the way no brother should, and it strangles that laughter completely. If Arya knew, she’d never look at him the same way again. He glances at his little sister, but she’s looking out over the field. The green one, Rhaegal, has lifted its head and is peering at them. A shiver runs through Jon and he’s mesmerized, trapped in the curious gaze of a magnificent beast that could burn him and Arya to a crisp. It’s still far away, though. Not that it couldn’t cover that distance in the time it would take for them to draw their weapons.

“That’s Rhaegal,” he murmurs. “He was named after… After my father.”

“He was not your father.”

She says it with so much conviction, Jon can’t help but pull her into a hug. She smells like oil and leather, like Father and Robb and childhood. Jon holds her even tighter.

“All right, that’s enough,” Arya says, but she squeezes him hard before letting go. “Do you think you could ride him?”

“And how would I explain that?”

“The Hound says he’s ridden one. The big black one. Is it true?”

“Bran’s not told you what happened beyond the Wall?”

“No. Sansa’s told him he’s not allowed to spy on us.” When Jon looks at her to prompt her into elaborating, she adds, “He watched her with Ramsay. She didn’t like that.”

Jon nods, thinking back on quite a few things he wouldn’t want Bran seeing. Then he tells his little sister about finding a wight, fighting the dead, and losing a dragon, about everyone flying off while he sank deeper into the lake. He could’ve died without ever seeing Arya and Bran again. All because of Daenerys’ truce with a snake of a woman. And he tells her how he dragged himself out of the lake, even though it’s not true. He wanted to give in to the pull of the depths, to close his eyes and let someone else save the world for a change. But in the warbled lens of water, he saw their faces. The freckled Bran and dirt-streaked Arya of his childhood. And the new Sansa, his Sansa, with her private smiles and watchful eyes. They’re the ones who dragged him out of that lake, not him. They’re the ones who gave him the strength to keep fighting.

“There were so many of them. The wights. And I could barely move, I was so cold. And then uncle Benjen rode in. Out of nowhere. He saved me. He sacrificed himself to save me.”

“Uncle Benjen…” Arya shakes her head slowly. “I barely remember him. Just that he had kind eyes
and--” She tilts her head to the side, as though listening for something. “People are coming. Nine-ten of them.”

Jon turns to look behind them. Far back, far enough that he only sees their silhouettes and the torches they carry, walks a group of people that can only be Daenerys and her retinue.

“How did you hear that?”

“Sansa’s not told you? What I am now. A Faceless Man. I trained with them in Braavos. I can be anyone I want. A pretty lady, a sea captain, a tavern wench, a soldier, a cook. Even a gnarly old lord with too many sons and not enough heart who needed to be taught a lesson about guest rights.”

Jon watches her carefully, the light quirk of her mouth, the easy posture. “When we arrived at White Harbor, we heard that winter had come for House Frey. The old lord himself and all his sons and their sons.”

“It did.” Arya’s smile is positively serene. “I learned many things when I was in Braavos. How to fight, how to lie, how to kill. I’m quite good with poisons. In case you ever have problem that’s a bit hard to solve. You’d have two dragons. All to yourself.”

“Aye, two dragons who might not obey me. And two armies that definitely won’t.”

“They could obey me.” She takes in his incredulous face with amusement. “Told you. I can be anyone I want. I kill her, I take her face, I become her. We should stop talking now. They’re close.”

Filling the silence with mundane chatter was never his strength, so instead they stay quiet and watch the dragons. Drogon is still curled up, eyes closed, the snow around it melted to reveal the yellowed grass beneath. But Rhaegal is still awake and peering at them. Not close enough to touch, but close enough that the flames would lick at Jon and Arya’s feet if the dragon were to breathe out fire.

Ghost can sense when something’s wrong, when someone’s wrong, but so far the dragons don’t seem to sense that he’s not entirely honest with their mother.

_Because they know you’re one of them. They’ve always known._

“Lady Arya,” Daenerys says with a smile.

Arya bows gracefully. “Your Grace.”

“How kind of your brother to show you my children. I would’ve done it myself, had you asked.” She shoots Jon a good-natured look. “I’ve named them Drogon, after my late husband, and Rhaegal after my brother. Aren’t they beautiful?”

“They are. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more beautiful. Must’ve been quite a sight when there were three of them.”

Daenerys’ happy face falls, but Arya only gives an innocent smile, another bow, and strolls off with her arms folded behind her back, as though the two enormous fire-breathing monsters behind her were nothing but mountains. Suppressing a smile of his own, Jon takes Daenerys’ hand and gives it a comforting squeeze, bringing her attention back to him.

“She doesn’t like me, does she?”

Jon throws a glance over his shoulder to buy some time and think of something to say. Arya’s already moved passed Daenerys’ retinue, who stayed several paces behind. Missandei, ser Jorah,
Varys, the Dothraki guards, but no Tyrion. Is he still with Sansa?

“I haven’t been here long,” Daenerys says, “and I’ve already heard the way people talk. How they
view my family. My brother. Rhaegar. They say he abducted your aunt Lyanna and raped her, but
it’s not true. My brother loved your aunt. He loved her so much he died for her.”

She gazes up at him with wide eyes, her eyebrows tugged up in sincerity, her hands resting against
his chest, begging him to believe her, and all Jon can do is nod. She gives a misty smile and he
knows she wants him to kiss her, but he can’t make himself do it. All those times he sat in front of
the looking-glass, wondering which features were Stark and which he’d inherited from his
mysterious mother… He had it all wrong.

He scrutinizes Daenerys’ face. The coloring is nothing like his, of course, but perhaps there’s still
something there, in the plush lips, in the slope of her nose, in the shape of her eyes. Is it how his
father looked?

“We would’ve been family,” she murmurs. “Had they lived. Had they married. He would’ve been
your uncle by marriage. Your cousins would’ve been my nieces and nephews. Is that why we’re so
drawn to one another? Rhaegar couldn’t have his Stark girl.” Daenerys reaches up and strokes his
cheek. “But I can have my Stark man.”

She runs her fingers through his beard, reaches up to his neck, and pulls his head down. “I’m late,”
she murmurs and presses a kiss to his lips. Jon’s stomach turns and his body moves on its own,
staggering back, away. The smile blooming on her face should make her beautiful, but she’s never
looked more terrifying. “I think I might be pregnant.”

The world’s spinning around him, all quiet and muted in shades of gray and deepest blue. She can’t
be. “I can’t have children… The dragons are my children. They’re the only children I’ll ever have…
The witch who killed my husband, she stole my child and made me barren.” That’s what she said
and he was foolish enough to believe her.

Sulfur fills his nose. Heat suffuses his cold, trembling body. Something large and hard nudges his
side, pulls him back just a little, enough to hear words flowing past his ears, but not enough to
understand them. The wind picks up, pulling at the torch flames that now flicker over her face so that
it looks fluid, shifting between sinister and sweet.

“I thought you wanted this,” she says, voice low and cool.

“I never wanted to father a bastard. Never.”

Her gaze moves over his face, takes in the horror etched on his features. “Is that all? Fear of fathering
a bastard?”

Jon’s shivering, despite the warmth flowing from Rhaegar. Because of it. “I promised myself I never
would,” he says and Rhaegal buffs at him again.

“He likes you.” Daenerys strokes his arm in a way she must think is soothing, and he forces himself
to accept her touch instead of shrugging it off. “He can feel it. That you’re part of us now.”

“There’s a war coming,” he rasps out.

“Oh, you’re worried.” She smiles now, toying with the hair at his neck. “You don’t have to worry
about me and our baby. Drogon will keep us safe. And we’ll marry. He won’t be a bastard.” She
curves her hands over the flat of her stomach. “It feels like a boy. Hm… Rhaegon, perhaps. Mm, I
like it.”
The dragon is still close, almost pleading for his attention, and Jon reaches out with a trembling hand, stroking it while trying to ignore how Daenerys strokes her own belly.

As they walk back to Winterfell, Daenerys seeks out Missandei’s company and the two move in a brisk pace, close together and whispering, while Jon’s legs move as through water instead of a thin spread of snow. Out here on the plains, the white wind brushes away the snow until it’s piling up against trees and rocks, and filling up ditches and trenches. Varys slows down too until their paces match and they’re trailing a good twenty steps behind the others.

“For how long did you stay at Dragonstone, my lord? Must’ve been months and yet--”

“I’m not a lord.”

“No.” Varys smiles. “And neither am I. I can’t help but notice that the Knights of the Vale are here, but the Lord Protector is not. How odd. My attempts to learn more has sadly lead nowhere. No one’s inclined to talk.”

“I don’t know where he is.”

“In a better place, I hope. He was never a friend of mine. Your father was, though. A friend. I tried to help him, you know.”

“It didn’t work.”

“No, sadly it didn’t. Joffrey was more unpredictable than I had… predicted. They were going to send your father to the Wall—even Cersei saw the sense in that—and then Joffrey had one of his cruel whims. I always did suspect Lord Baelish had a hand in that, but I suppose I’ll never know.”

“What do you want?”

“You’re as fond of smalltalk as your father was, it seems.”

“It’s the word games I don’t like. If you have something to say, just say it.”

Varys hums. “It’s interesting, what our queen said about your aunt Lyanna and Rhaegar Targaryen. You must forgive me, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation. Your honorable father once rode home with a bastard boy in his arms. A bastard boy born in the South, who seems to get on quite well with those dragons. It makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Whose bastard that child really was. Is that forthright enough for you or do I need to speak even more plainly?”

Jon huffs out a laugh and shakes his head. “Ned Stark was my father.”

“Oh, of course he was. But seeing you with those dragons, one can’t help but wonder. And what happens if someone else starts wondering? Someone who might not be as friendly and reasonable as I am.”

Varys holds his gaze for a moment before bowing and taking his leave.
In the narrow space between two squat Wintertown houses, stands the Hound, too tall and imposing to blend in. He keeps an eye on the door to the Smoking Log, the settlement’s inn and alehouse. The very place Jon was headed to, to see whether Sansa had brought Tyrion there.

Jon slinks into a pool of shadow between two torches and waits, watches. The door opens four times, patrons coming or leaving, before he sees a flash of red. Out step Sansa, Brienne, Tyrion, and a beggar man with a tattered cloak, the hood pulled up over his head. As they make their way back to Winterfell, the Hound slips out of his hiding place and follows. And so does Jon.

Once they’ve reached the courtyard, Sansa and Brienne take the beggar man into the Keep while Tyrion seeks out Podrick and Gendry, who are sparring together. The Hound waits by the gate until Sansa’s out of view, then he wanders over to the godswood. They’re almost by the heart-tree when he stops.

“Why are you following me, Snow?”

“Why are you following my sister?”

The Hound turns around with the type of grin that makes Jon’s fist ache with the need to punch. “I was just having a stroll.”

“I see the way you look at her.”

The Hound’s grin grows. “And I see the way you look at her. She’s a pretty little thing. Well, not so little anymore, is she?”

Jon’s lip twitches, hand clenched into a tight fist, and he feels a growl rumbling deep in his throat.

“Stop your snarling, little wolf. I’m just keeping an eye on her. Pretty women attract trouble, and I’m good at getting rid of trouble.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Just ask her. Ask her about King’s Landing. About the cunts who tried to rape her. Ask her what happened to them.”

The Hound turns his back to Jon and walks deeper into the godswood as though Jon were nothing but a hissing kitten. The nonchalance reminds him of Arya. The Hound protected her, he knows, traveling with her for a good while as he tried to bring her back to her family. Gendry, the Hound, and the Brotherhood all shared stories about Arya when they were beyond the Wall. And if Arya trusts him, perhaps Jon should too. He wouldn’t be the first man who likes to hide his softness behind a gruff demeanor.

In the distance, a dragon sings, and Jon’s heart sinks to his stomach. For a blissful moment, he’d forgotten all about Daenerys and her news. Oh, Sansa’s going to kill him. No. Arya is. And if she won’t, the North most definitely will. All their worst fears come true, isn’t that what Sansa said?

With a deep sigh, Jon heads back to the keep.

Sansa’s eyes are dull and vacant, her breathing slow and shallow. She looks hewn from stone, granite and marble polished smooth. He can’t look away, reading every change in her expression however minuscule. A faint tremble in her lip. The flutter of her lashes. The lightest sway of her
body that shows she’s a living, breathing woman after all. Out in the courtyard, people are loud and happy as they lay down their work to sup. Sansa sighs and wipes her fingers over her cheek. Was she crying? Jon moves closer, but by now his office is dim and she stands with her back against the hearth.

“Well,” she says without looking at him, “at least you won’t have to marry me.”

“You think I’d want her over you?”

Sansa’s eyes snap to him. They’re round and shining, her lips slightly parted, and he wishes he could take back the stupid words falling from his mouth. Best not remind his sister that he wants her when he just told her he’s impregnated his own aunt. Jon groans and presses the pad of his thumb against the scar above his eye.

“How far along is she?”

“I don’t know. A few weeks at most.”

“A few weeks…” Sansa frowns. “Then how does she know?”

“She said she’s late.”

“Late?” An airy peal of laughter flows out of Sansa, and with her hand pressed to her chest, she shakes her head at him. “Oh, Jon, you idiot. She’s late? That’s all? I’ve been late a hundred times, when I’ve not eaten well, when I’ve been stressed… Has she even seen the Maester? Has she gotten any confirmation at all? Or any other symptoms? Nausea? Fatigue? Sensitivity to smells?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh, thank the gods.” Sansa sinks down on his desk. “She told you she’s barren. After my talk with Tyrion, although he denies it, I’d say he believes it too. She’s late and hopeful, that’s all. Get her to see the Maester.”

“So you don’t think she’s…”

“No.” Sansa exhales loudly, her hand back at her chest. “Oh, you scared the life out of me.”

Eyes closed, she sits like that for a beat as her breathing returns to normal—and he’s not a good enough man to give her privacy. No, he still can’t look away. She was hurt, wasn’t she? Teary-eyed and shocked. Because she believed he’d gotten another woman—

Jon tightens his hands into fists, his nails digging into his palms. What’s the use of that line of thinking when he knows she doesn’t feel the same? He must stop. Davos was right. The only person who’ll end up hurt is Jon. Especially if he says yes to her plans. And he must, mustn’t he?

“Your plan,” Jon says. “If Daenerys isn’t pregnant after all… It will come out, who I am, one way or another. And she better learn it before that happens or she’ll never trust me again. But you shouldn’t manipulate Tyrion. You should talk to Varys.”

Sansa frowns, shaking her head as though to say she doesn’t understand.

“He knows. He knows who I am. I don’t know how. All I know is that he’s not told her. And I’ve paid attention to him. He’s not like the others. That reverence her followers have for her, it’s not there.”
Sansa leaves his desk and, pacing the room, mulls over his words. She’s so beautiful like this, when she’s focused and clever, and he can’t help but follow her with his eyes. Can’t help but gorge himself after months of starving.

“Littlefinger used to talk about him sometimes,” she says. “He said Varys doesn’t want the throne for himself. All he wants is a good ruler to serve. Perhaps he supported her because he didn’t think he had another choice. But now he does.”

“I don’t want the Iron Throne.”

“Better you than her.” Sansa nods and clasps her hands. “All right. Are you sure? That you want to go through with my plan?”

“I don’t have a better idea.”

“And what if they insist we marry before the war?”

Jon sighs and shrugs. “Then we’ll marry before the war. If you’ll have me.”

Eyes downcast, Sansa breathes out in a faint smile. “You’ll be my kindest husband yet.”

Then she walks up to him, slowly, and he reacts despite himself, despite what he knows, despite the ashes in his heart. She’s right in front of him, the light of the hearth softening her with its golden glow and she doesn’t look like stone at all anymore. She looks like the summer sky at sunset, as vibrant, as captivating, as warm. Sansa’s eyes flicker up to meet his and she licks her lips, opens her mouth, and he holds his breath--

“‘We have a guest,” she says and he nearly sags from disappointment. “A controversial guest. Jaime Lannister is here.”

Chapter End Notes

Re: the pregnancy. I'm not trying to mess with you. I'm only trying to mess with the characters lol. So, because I know this is something that upsets a lot of people, I figured I better reveal to you all that Daenerys is in fact NOT pregnant. Sansa is right. She's just late and hopeful.
While they mind their tongues around Daenerys, her Dothraki guards speak freely in front of Jon. His presence even seems to excite them. And as he waits in the hallway for her to finish her bath so he can escort her to supper, he gets an earful of all the things they’d like to do to his sister. They hurl out something awful, glance at him, and break out laughing, while he does an increasingly poor job at pretending he doesn’t understand. Lhago, the tallest of them, is worst of all. Not because of the things he says, for he says very little, but for the way he always follows Sansa with his gaze. She passed them only moments ago, and the man’s eyes nearly fell out of his head. He’s the only one who seems to truly want her; the only one who might risk the wrath of his Dragon Queen to get a taste of the red girl.

When Daenerys exits the door, her eyes sparkle, her skin looks soft and dewy, and she’s glowing. But then pregnant women glow, don’t they? Whether it’s because of the pregnancy, though, or just because they’re happy, Jon can’t say. He never learned much about pregnant women. Never thought he’d be around them, and Lady Catelyn hardly invited him to stroke her round belly and feel the kicking like she did with Robb whenever she was expecting.

Once they reach the courtyard, Daenerys’ eyes brighten further. A bit farther ahead pads Ghost and, with one hand on her belly, she takes a few steps forward and calls his name. Ghost stops. Watches them. Head lowered and red eyes locked on her, he moves closer only to stop a couple of paces before them. While he neither growls nor bares his teeth, his lip twitches a little, as though it wouldn’t take much to provoke him. Behind them, Missandei makes a small noise, and he hears her clothes rustling as she cuddles closer to Grey Worm.

Daenerys shushes soothingly at the wolf and holds out her hand, inviting him to smell her. Ghost takes another step. The people behind them shift their stances. Hands find hilts of swords and arakhs. She murmurs invitingly to him and while she smiles, there’s desperation in the curve of her brows. A desperation to be accepted by Jon’s wolf, the way her dragons have accepted him.

_Would he? Would Ghost accept her if she carried my child?_

Ghost sniffs at her, but evades her touch when she tries to pet him, and a sigh of disappointment escapes her while Jon suppresses a sigh of his own. One of relief. Ghost moves to Missandei, whose brave posture and firmly sealed lips can’t hide how she trembles with fear. Ghost sniffs at her, ser Jorah, Grey Worm, and then one Dothraki after another. When he reaches Lhago, a growl purrs in his throat, soon drowned out by the sharp scrape of weapons being drawn.

“Down, boy,” Jon says, ignoring his instincts that all scream at him to urge Ghost to rip the man’s throat out. “They’re our friends.”

Ghost gives him an unconvinced look but trots off and the weapons return to their sheaths.

In Dothraki, Daenerys orders her guards to _never_ harm the wolf before turning to Jon. “He’s a wild one, isn’t he? Protective.” With a quick glance at her retinue, she slips her hand into the crook of Jon’s elbow, and moves him farther away. “Don’t be alarmed, my love, but I believe I know why Ghost doesn’t like Lhago. Sometimes, I overhear their talking and he’s taken a liking to your sister. But he won’t do anything. None of them will. They know that if they touch her--or any woman--against her will, I’ll burn them alive.”

The glowing smile returns to her face and stays there throughout supper, which is taken in one of the smaller audience chambers with only a select few of the bannermen. She stays close to his side too,
touching him, shooting him adoring looks, and doing a bad job at hiding their relationship. She
doesn’t care anymore, he supposes, and he’s much too tired by now to do anything about it. Luckily,
word has already gotten out that something’s brewing, and everyone’s too busy speculating amongst
themselves to pay attention to Daenerys.

Well, everyone but Sansa, that is. She arrived late and settled down at one of the two long tables
instead of next to him at the head-table. She shoots him looks too, but there’s nothing adoring about
them, and when her eyes drop to Daenerys’ stomach, they lose what little spark they held.

Not reading anything into her reactions has become quite the struggle. But it’s not jealousy. It’s
worry, perhaps even annoyance over yet another problem for her to solve.

Jon grabs a pitcher, fills his tankard with ale, and empties it in one go.

As people scrape off the last of their plates and empties their tankards, Sansa leaves only to return a
short moment later with the beggar man who’s no beggar at all. Beneath the worn cloak Jon catches
a glimpse of a castle-forged sword and expensive leather boots.

“Ser Jaime arrived earlier today,” Sansa says and Jaime pulls down the hood to reveal himself.
“Before this meeting, we supped together in a private chamber.” She shoots Brienne a quick barely-
there smile. “He’s my guest.”

Ser Jaime thanks her with a bow, and when he straightens again, the movement of his cloak exposes
the armor underneath. Boiled leather. No sigils. Nothing like the fancy Lannister armor he wore at
the Dragon Pit. Jon scans the room to see whether anyone else has noticed, whether anyone else is
suspecting what he suspects. They’re seated at two long tables--his and Sansa’s people on one side,
Daenerys’ people on the other--while he, Daenerys, and Bran sit at the head-table. From what he can
tell, no one seems worried enough to have noticed. No one but Sansa, whose hands are clasped too
tightly and chin is tilted too high.

Beneath the table, Jon takes Daenerys’ hand and pulls it closer to him so that their joined hands rest
on his thigh. She strokes her thumb over his, and when he looks at her through the corner of his eye,
he finds her smiling at her enemy.

“I’m glad to see you made it here safely, ser Jaime. When can we expect your armies?”

“They’re not coming.”

Daenerys’ fingers tighten around Jon’s hand. “Are you telling me your sister lied about the truce?”
Jaime’s stony silence tells her all she needs to know. “Then why are you here?”

“I want to help,” he says, but he looks at Brienne as he does so and there’s a longing in his gaze Jon
knows all too well.

“Help, ser?” Daenerys gives a derisive smile. “Here to kill me, you mean. Did your sister send you?”

Ser Jaime squints at her. “Kill you? Why would I kill you? Without you and your dragons, we’ll
lose.”

“Ser,” Missandei says, “you forget yourself. You are speaking to Daenerys Stormborn, the rightful
queen of the Se--”

“The rightful queen of what? Her family lost their right to the throne. My sister is the crowned
queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Daenerys Targaryen is queen of nothing.”
Daenerys’ nails dig into Jon’s skin. “And what is your sister doing, ser, while you’re here, distracting me? Is she taking back what I’ve conquered? Is she planning an attack on Winterfell?”

“Only a fool would send southern forces north in winter when the dead are marching closer. What could she possibly gain from that? And she won’t send them to take back the land you’ve invaded either. She’ll focus on fortifying the defenses of King’s Landing. She knows you’re coming as soon as this war is won, and then she’ll be ready.”

“You’re being very forthright. I hope you won’t fault me for finding that suspicious.”

Jaime’s eyes wander over to Tyrion, who nods encouragingly.

“My sister is pregnant.” Ser Jaime pauses, surveying the room filled with people listening intently to him. “With my child,” he adds and waits for the appalled gasps and murmurs to die out before continuing, “I was never allowed to be a father to my children, and I failed in protecting them, but I have a chance now. To help in saving the world so that my child can--”

“Grow up to be king?” Daenerys looks coolly at him. “Let’s say we accept your help, let’s say you help us defeat the dead, will I be safe once the war is over or will you thrust your sword into my back and slit my throat like you did to my father?”

“I don’t want my child to be king or queen. All I want is that they’re safe. There’s still wildfire all around the city. If you use your dragons to attack King’s Landing, I’m not sure how much of it will stand once you’re done, and I don’t want to see more people burn.”

His eyes bore into her and Daenerys’ straightens her back, the anger Jon feels in her vice-like grip covered by a mask of indifference.

“I will help you win the throne, Daenerys Targaryen. Peacefully. The only thing I ask in return is that you promise me and my sister safe passage to Essos, where we can live out the rest of our days in peace.”

“Cersei will never agree to that.”

“She will. When the alternative is being burned alive, she will.” Ser Jaime turns to Jon. “I pledged to ride north, so I’ve ridden north. My sword is forged from Valyrian steel. I can lead men into battle or I can fight among them or I can join Lady Brienne in protecting Lady Stark. It would be my honor to protect Lady Stark, but you can put me wherever you need me.”

Daenerys drops Jon’s hand and rises, locking her gaze with Jaime’s. “Your prowess on the battlefield is legendary, ser, and we will accept your help. When you bend the knee.”

Ser Jaime sighs. “I’m not too proud to kneel. If the alternative is burning, I’ll do it. But you’ll have to threaten me or I’ll remain on my feet.”

Every eye in the room rests on Daenerys, and even though her back remains straight, Jon sees her shrinking beneath the weight of their stares. The fire blazing in her eyes fades and when she speaks again, her voice is light and young. “I’m not here to murder. That’s your sister, not me. I’m sure Winterfell has perfectly fine cells to accommodate you.”

“Your Grace,” Tyrion says. “My greatest wish is to see you on the throne with as little bloodshed as possible. And I know that’s what you want too. And with Jaime’s help, we can take the city without harming thousands of innocent lives.”

Her gaze hardens when it lands on him. "That's your greatest wish? Helping your family, you
"Yes, I am helping them, because I'm trying to help all of us. Westeros needs you as its queen, Your Grace, but you don't want to be Queen of the Ashes. Accept my brother's help."

She ponders it for three-four breaths. “I accept your help, ser Jaime. And I’ll spare you and your sister’s lives. And your brother’s.” She glares at Tyrion. “As long as you don’t betray me.”

Tyrion bows his head. “A wise decision, My Queen. You won't regret it.”

“And where should we place ser Jaime?” Daenerys asks Jon in a smooth voice that leaves him uneasy. “He says he wants to protect your sister.”

“I once made a promise to Catelyn Stark to see Sansa Stark safely home,” Jaime says. "I could not fulfill that promise. I’d like to make up for it now, if Lady Stark will have my sword.”

Lord Royce rises. “And why should we trust the word of the Kingslayer? You’ve broken oaths before, quite famously.”

“Yes, I killed the Mad King.” Jaime turns around to address the room. “To save King’s Landing. Who do you think was responsible for the wildfire? It’s everywhere. Under all the houses, stables, and taverns. Even under Flea Bottom and the Red Keep. He was going to burn it all, every man, woman, and child living in King’s Landing. What would you have done, my lords? Would you honorable men have kept your vows and stood by as half a million people burned alive? Hm? Are any of you truly upset I killed Aerys Targaryen?”

Most of the bannermen have enough sense to bow their heads, but Royce remains on his feet, his sharp gaze piercing Jaime. “Then prove that you’re a man of your word, ser Jaime. Pledge your sword to Lady Stark. Swear that you will protect her.”

Jaime pulls the ornate sword from its scabbard and sinks down on one knee, lays the sword at Sansa’s feet and looks up at her. “Lady Sansa, I will shield your back and keep your counsel, and give my life for yours if need be. I swear it by the old gods and the new.”

Lady Stark is all but gone, and the Sansa now standing in the room looks more like the young girl Jon remembers from his childhood than the woman he’s come to know. But when she looks for guidance, it’s not Jon she seeks out but Bran, who nods, and then Arya, who nods too. Even Brienne, who looks proud of hopeful.

Sansa takes a deep breath. “I vow that you shall always have a place by my hearth, and meat and mead at my table. I pledge to ask no service of you that might bring you dishonor. I swear it by the old gods and the new. Stand, ser Jaime.”

Daenerys’ eyes narrow, but now Sansa has slipped back into her armor and meets the Dragon Queen’s scornful, probing look without faltering, while Jon’s stomach tightens into knots. Treason. He can see the word resting on Daenerys’ tongue. Sansa met with the enemy in secret, conspired with the enemy in secret. An enemy who now readily went to his knees before her when he wouldn’t for Daenerys.

Jon takes in the room. Lhago’s staring at Sansa too, that hungry glint in his eyes. As is the Hound, but what burns in his eyes isn’t hunger but jealousy. There are too many dangers here, too many people wanting a piece of her, for too many different reasons. Sansa’s not safe here. Jon’s head is spinning. He shouldn’t have had all that ale. He should’ve slept before supper. Daenerys’ hand is once more a vice around his, while anxiety is a vice around his rib cage. He can’t think, he can’t
“Lady Sansa,” Royce says, “may I suggest that ser Jaime and Lady Brienne escort you either to the Vale or to Riverrun, to your uncle. I’ll send a few of my own men along.”

“You want me to leave Winterfell?”

“The dead are marching closer, my lady.” Royce catches Jon’s eyes. “Soon, this won’t be a safe place to be.”

Jon shoots to his feet. “I agree with Lord Royce. You’ll be safer at Riverrun.”

“Winterfell is my home. You’re asking me to abandon my home and my people in times of war?”

“No,” Jon says, “I’m asking you to stay safe.”

“And how would that look?”

“I don’t care how it looks!” His legs carry him across the floor as he talks. “I care that you’re safe. When the war is over, the North will need someone to lead them and you and I both know it won’t be me. Nor Arya or Bran. Only you can lead the North, but you can’t lead them if you’re dead!”

“I’m not leaving! This is the safest place for me!”

“No it’s not! If you pack now, you can leave tomorrow morning. And once it’s safe to come back home, we’ll send a raven.”

“You can’t just send me away. I’m not a child.”

“Then stop being obstinate! Why do you always have to argue with me! For once, why can’t you just do as you’re told!”

“You can’t tell me what to do! You’re not my king. You’re not my father. You’re certainly not my husband. You’re not even my brother!”

The word flows out in the quiet room, soaked up by a thirsty audience. Eyes round with shock, Sansa sucks in a shuddering breath. Her chest is heaving, and so is his, and they’re standing so close he can feel the heat of her breaths against his face. Smell the herbs and honey of the mulled wine she had. Her lips whisper something, an apology, an excuse he’s too tired to understand. He should be upset about what she let slip, but all he wants is to sink into her arms and bury his face in her hair and rest. All he wants is to kiss that whispered apology from her lips and show the world how true her words really were.

“A raven, my lady.”

Jon inhales sharply and blinks up at Maester Wolkan, who’s appeared right next to them, scroll in hand. As Sansa reads it, Jon steps back, averting his gaze. It lands on ser Jaime, who’s watching him with a smirk on his face. Jon’s own face feels as if it’s on fire and he drops his gaze to the floor because he can’t stand seeing that knowing look on anyone else.

Sansa rolls up the scroll. “White Harbor is under attack.” She moves across the floor and hands the scroll to Daenerys. “By your Dothraki hordes. Your Grace.”
As the last person leaves the room, Jon slumps down in his chair with a deep sigh and refills his tankard. While Daenerys has left to change into something better suited for the flight to White Harbor, Sansa has stayed behind. But she still won’t take her seat next to him, instead standing in the middle of the floor.

“Are you angry with me?” she asks.

“Of course I’m angry! Angry, disappointed, frustrated, worried! Take your pick. What were you thinking? You should’ve told me. You should’ve turned him away! The moment she’s dealt with the Dothraki, she’ll fly south and attack King’s Landing.”

“She won’t. He told everyone in here about the wildfire and--”

“And what if she doesn’t believe him? What if she doesn’t want to believe him?”

“We’re the only people in Westeros who’ve bent the knee to her without being threatened. You might not care how things look, but she does. And do you honestly think that a woman who imagines herself a savior and protector would abandon her people when they need her the most? She’ll stay. When you bent the knee, you made sure of that. When we bent, we made sure of that. We are all she has. If she fails us, who would want her? No, a broken truce is not enough for her to leave. Especially not now.” Sansa pauses, licks her lips, and gives him a look that tells him he won’t like the things she has to say. “She thinks she’s pregnant. She’s not leaving the father of her child. You should go to her, before she leaves. You should say goodbye. Tenderly.”

Jon leans back, staring at her. “You want me to use this pregnancy to manipulate her?”

“You’re worried it’s true?”

“You’re not?”

She sighs and takes the seat next to him, her blue eyes soft. “I’m sorry, Jon. You don’t deserve this. When this is all over, I hope you’ll…” She shakes her head as she searches for words. “You’ll find someone to love. Someone kind and good. You deserve to be happy.”

“After all I’ve done? No. You’re the one who deserves to be happy.”

“I have everything I need.”

“You do? When you were a girl, all you wanted was to--”

“I know what I wanted back then, but I’m not a little girl anymore. I don’t want those things anymore.” Eyes downcast, she shakes her head, rubbing her thumb against her palm. “I’m through with love. It makes you stupid, and I have more important things to do than indulging in naïve fantasies that belong in the worlds of songs and stories. The real world is so much dirtier than that, and I’m happy I finally see it.”

Her voice is bitter, her lips tight with held back emotions, and he can’t help but murmur her name and reach out for her, but Sansa pulls away and folds her arms around her body.

“You should go.”

In hopes that she’ll soften again, meet his eyes, and allow him to comfort her, Jon lingers for a moment, but Sansa stares resolutely at the table.
She doesn’t even look up when he leaves.

The dragons already wait outside the walls of Winterfell when Jon comes out. Rhaegal wastes no time approaching him, and Jon can feel it in his bones, that this creature would accept him if he were to climb up its wing and settle down on its back. He slips off his glove and reaches out, strokes the warm, dry scales of the dragon’s snout. But when he hears footsteps approaching, he slips the glove back on and steps away.

Daenerys stalks through the gates, her mouth forming a thin pale line, with ser Jorah and Grey Worm walking behind her. They’ll be joining her to round up the unruly Dothraki—and protect her from any Northerners getting ideas. When she sees him waiting for her by the dragons, the anger leaves her step and uncertainty creeps in. But when he holds out his arms in invitation, that leaves too, and as she lets him envelope her in his embrace, she once more glows with happiness.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” he whispers into hair that smells all wrong. “I want you to come back, safe and sound, as soon as possible.”

Daenerys pulls back a little, but keeps her hands on his shoulders while he keeps his hand on her waist. “Are you worried about me, my wolf?”

“Promise me. I need you here.” He moves his right hand to her abdomen. “I need you both here. With me.”

Daenerys beams up at him and, for once, he’s happy there are no seven hells waiting for him when death finally reclaims him.

“When I was in Meereen,” she murmurs, brushing her fingers through his beard, “I had to lock up my children because the people feared them so. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I did it. For the good of the people. To show them I cared.”

Jon lets go of her. “You want me to lock up Ghost.”

“At least until I return. My people fear him, Missandei fears him, and if I’m not here to protect her…” She closes the distance between them and bats her lashes at him. “Please, my dark wolf, promise me? It won’t be for very long. I’ll come right back. I promise.”

He nods and lets her kiss him until she’s had her fill.

“What did Lady Sansa say? Will she leave after all? I’m sure ser Jaime will keep her safe.”

"I'll talk to her."

"I'm glad to hear it. We don't need her here. I always did suspect she's never viewed you as a true brother. And now I know. Now we know." She presses a kiss to his lips. "Be careful, my wolf."

All he wants is to wipe those kisses off his lips, but instead he forms his mouth into something resembling a smile and waits until the dragons have taken to the skies. Then he turns around and drags a hand over his mouth with a shudder.

Up on the ramparts, movement catches his eye and he cranes his neck to see the billowing of Sansa's
grey cloak as she walks away. He catches up with her at the stairs to the Keep, and in silence, they walk together to Arya’s room. It’s quiet, dark, and empty, only the smallest flames flickering in the hearth. He throws in a couple of logs while Sansa pulls off her gloves.

“How did it go?” she says with her back to him. "Does she suspect anything? About who you are."

“No. And you were right. She’ll return."

“Good.” Sansa starts unhooking her cloak. “I’ve given your suggestion some thought. If I’m here, I’m a liability. Bran has seen flashes of ser Jaime. Of him and Brienne fighting together. Their swords, they’re made from Ice. Did you know? They should be here, with you, not guarding me. If Daenerys isn’t pregnant, we’ll go through with the plan and I’ll let Lord Royce and a few of his men escort me to Riverrun. Before anyone can suggest we marry before the war.”

She hangs up the cloak in the armoire, and he stares at her back, at the light of the fire dancing in her red hair as she moves.

“Right,” he says and his voice sounds as hollow as he feels. “You have a solution for everything, it seems.”

“Not everything.” She picks up her brush and sits down by the looking-glass. “I’d like to go to bed now. I’m tired.”

From where he stands, he can’t make out her features in the reflection. The surface is too mottled, the room too dark. She lifts a length of hair over her shoulder and starts brushing the ends. After three strokes, she pauses her movements and turns her head as if she’s listening for him to leave.

When she draws in a breath as if to speak, he walks out the door before a word has left her lips. He doesn’t want to hear her bidding him goodnight in a voice that really asks him to take his horrible feelings with him and leave her alone.

As though he senses Jon’s state of mind, Ghost waits for him in the courtyard, and it only makes Jon feel that much worse. Mumbling apologies to the wolf, he takes him to the kennels and gives his ears a good scratch before locking him up. Then he heads out to the fields, to the large soggy spot where the dragons rested only moments ago. It’s still warm and he pulls off his glove and reaches down to touch that warmth out of instinct. Perhaps this is who he must be: Aegon Targaryen. Perhaps he must prepare himself to marry Daenerys and be a father to their child.

Sansa doesn’t want him anyway, so what does it matter?

“Are you all right?” Behind him stands Sam with a kind smile on his worried face. “You look a bit brooding.”

“Daenerys thinks she might be pregnant.”

“Oh. Oh, my. That’s… unfortunate.”

Jon breathes out a chuckle. “Aye, that’s a word for it.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Sam asks and Jon shakes his head. “Do you want to be alone?”
Jon shakes his head at that too, and then they just stand out there for a long moment, watching the stars and listening to the absence of dragon song. After months spent in their presence, the world seems eerily quiet without it.

“I don’t understand her,” he hears himself say.

“Well, she’s a complicated woman. I think. Truth be told, I’ve avoided her.”

“No. Sansa. I don’t understand Sansa.”

“Ah. Well, I suppose she’s complicated too. Most women are, aren’t they?”

“I don’t think she…” Jon swallows down the lump trying its best to form in his throat. “I don’t think she loves me. She only cares for me because Father would’ve wanted it.”

“She talked about you all the time when you were away.”

“She did?”

“Oh, all the time. It was Jon this and Jon that. ‘We need to prepare for Jon coming home. We need to make sure Jon’s armies are loyal. Everything will be easier when Jon comes home. No, we can’t do that because Jon wouldn’t like it.’”

“Oh.” Jon hangs his head nodding. “Not really about me, then.”

“Of course she loves you, Jon. She’s your sister.”

“Yeah.” Jon heaves a sigh. “For so long I’ve wondered, asked myself why… Suppose I understand why now.”

“Understand what?”

“The way I feel about Sansa. Why I feel that way.”

Sam’s eyebrows rise and he nods quietly a few times too many, but it feels good, to say it out loud, finally. Jon feels a little lighter, a little calmer, as though it’s the first step to forgive himself for falling headfirst the moment he and Sansa reunited. To forgive himself for wondering whether it started even long before then, whether that contempt he used to feel for her ladylike manners was a subconscious way of hiding something horrible.

“I just want the dead to come so we can fight this bleeding war and be done, and instead I have to deal with Daenerys and Sansa and now Jaime Lannister? And who I am. The pregnancy. It’s too much!”

Sam’s hand lands on his shoulder, gives him a squeeze, but he doesn’t say anything. But then, what is there to say? What could one possibly say to make any of this feel better? Part of him wants to turn into Sam’s embrace, but then exhaustion will take out its right and he’ll end up crying like a little boy.

“I think you need some sleep, Jon. You look like you’ve not slept in ages. Get some sleep and then… Why don’t you talk to her? Tell her how you feel.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“Why not? We all might die soon. There’s no better time than now.”
Even though Jon knows he never will tell her, he nods and gives his old friend a grateful smile. Sam’s right about one thing, at least: Jon’s mind and body both ache for bed, and standing out here in the dark and the cold, feeling sorry for himself, won’t help matters in the least. And so they start trudging back to Winterfell in companionable silence. All he needs is a good night’s sleep, and everything will seem a little easier.
When they’re halfway to Winterfell, Sam must’ve grown tired of the silence Jon found rather comfortable, for he turns to Jon with a friendly smile and says, “She’s pretty, Sansa. Red hair. You like that.”

“Suppose I do.”

“Ygritte had red hair, you said. And that Wintertown whore. Red hair.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I don’t know,” Sam says in a tone that tells Jon Sam knows exactly what he’s asking. “Did you two ever…” He lifts one shoulder while he tugs down the corners of his mouth, eyes sparkling with a desire to hear something scandalous. “When you were younger.”

“What? No!”

“Well, sometimes children growing up together experiment. Or so I’m told.”

“Not brothers and sisters.”

“Tell Jaime Lannister that.” Sam grins at Jon, but Jon only glares at him and walks faster. “Wait! Jon, don’t be mad. You just told me you might’ve put a babe in your aunt’s belly, while lusting after your sister. You have to let me tease you a little. I don’t get the chance very often.”

“I fail to see how this is funny. Jaime Lannister took one look at me--one look--and he knew. Soon they’ll all know. Maybe they already do! Maybe they already realize what I am. Sansa even said I’m not her brother.”

“I don’t think they noticed. All they talked about was Daenerys and the Dothraki. You were lucky that raven arrived, because if it comes out, who you really are… It’s tenuous as it is, Jon.”

Jon nods and chews at Sansa’s plan for a moment, would rather not talk about it all or answer any questions that topic would spark, but then Sam’s advice could be helpful. So Jon briefly explains what she suggested while Sam’s eyes grow wider and wider as he listens.

“But you said she doesn’t love you. Now she wants to marry you?”

“It’s a ruse, Sam. Marrying me is the last thing she wants. Trust me.”

“An odd thing to suggest, though, isn’t it? If it’s the last thing she wants. It’s not as if she’s your only sister.”
Jon stops, grabs Sam’s arm and pulls him to a stop too. “You think marrying Arya is smarter?”

“Well, it would prove your dedication to the North, but still keep the Lady of Winterfell available for marriage alliances with other houses. She has suitors. There are quite a few of them hoping she’ll marry their sons or their grandsons. And considering the looks Daenerys gives Sansa, Arya would really be the best option, wouldn’t she? Because that would look like a marriage of convenience, instead of two people in love who finally can be together.”

Jon’s chest convulses with too rough breaths. “What?”

“The days before you came home, Sansa was happy. Excited, even. And now she’s not. She looks miserable, really. I didn’t think much of it, but now that I know that you two… Well, whatever is going on between you.”

“She told me she wasn’t in love with me. She told me to my face, Sam!”

“And what was she supposed to say? She doesn’t know how you feel, does she?”

Jon starts walking again, kicking up snow with his boots. “She knows.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

“Then what’s the harm in telling her?”

Jon only shakes his head and plows on, straining against the sharp winter wind, while Sam scurries behind him, nattering on about the war being here, and what if they die, and does Jon really want to die without having at least tried to be happy. As if that’s an easy thing to do. As if he wouldn’t feel even more miserable if he tried and failed. Fed up, he whirls around to bark at Sam to shut it already, only to find his old friend standing still, quiet.

“Do you hear that?” Sam whispers. “Is that…”

Jon turns his attention to Winterfell, which stands solid and tall and glowing with the light of torches and braziers against the murky sky. Frowning with concentration, Jon listens. And there, muffled by the walls and the wind and the distance: screams of pain. Shouted commands. Metal clashing against metal.

Jon pulls Longsword from its sheath and runs.

---

A sword swings toward him. Jon ducks, rolls, shoots to his feet. Slams his elbow into the attacker’s chin. Presses him into the snowy ground with a knee between his shoulder blades. They’re alive. Their breaths freeze in the air. They shout commands to one another. They bleed.

Jon thrusts Longclaw into the back of the man’s neck and blood gushes out. As his breeches soak it up, Jon feels the warmth of it against his cold skin. Another man charges toward him and they engage in a dance Jon’s tired body shouldn’t be able to perform, but adrenaline surges through him, fills him with endless energy, and he fights one man after another. It feels as if they’re sparring, as if he’s back at Castle Black training with his brothers.
It feels as if each combatant is toying with him, trying to tire him out.

As he pulls his sword from the bowels of a man, he feels someone behind him. Spins around. Stumbles into a broad chest covered with boiled leather. He looks up at the grim, blood-spattered face of Jaime Lannister.

Jon tightens his hand around the hilt of his sword. “And whose side are you fighting on?”

“Yours.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Jaime shoves him aside. A blade cleaves the air between them. “You’re welcome, bastard,” he shouts as he stops another swing of that sword with his golden hand.

The attacker, a huge hulking beast of a man with a bald head and bulging muscles, stills. Stares at the hand. Then the sparring begins. Now that Jon has a chance to observe someone else fighting, it’s clear to him: they’re stalling.

*Or they don’t want Jaime Lannister to die.*

Jaime fights with all he’s got, though. But why wouldn't he? The Kingslayer hardly cares about the life of one soldier.

Someone bumps into Jon’s shoulder, and he turns around, sword ready. But it’s Arya. She’s darting across the courtyard, weaving between fighters, ducking, kicking, jumping over a knocked-over brazier, using both Needle and dagger to cut her way through the throng. She’s moving toward the kennels and now he hears what Arya must’ve heard: beneath the clamor of people fighting, there’s been a constant rattling of an iron cage, but now it’s stopped and the silence is so much louder.

Jon chases after her, guilt pushing his heart up in his throat. He should never have locked him up.

When he reaches the kennels, Arya stands at Ghost’s cage. By her feet, in a pool of blood, lies an archer, bow and arrow dropped on the floor. Jon darts forward—and breathes out his relief when he finds Ghost unharmed in his cell.

“Why did you lock him up?”

“Daenerys said that—”


“Daenerys didn’t do this.”

“No? She leaves and suddenly we’re attacked by men from Essos? A bit of a coincidence, isn’t—”

A shriek of pain cuts her off, and a Winterfell guard staggers backwards into the kennels, falls, gurgles out his final breath. The gate fills with the black silhouette of a tall, broad-shouldered man, blood dripping from his sword. A gold tooth gleams in his wicked grin.

Arya shoots him a grin of her own and charges the much larger man. So Jon follows, for what else can he do, and soon they’re both sucked into the writhing pit of combatants the courtyard has become. Some part of him should enjoy this, fighting with his little sister by his side, taking pride in how good she is with the sword he gifted her, but all Jon feels is worry. Worry for Sam, of whom he
lost track ages ago. Worry for his friends, family, and people. Worry for what this fight means, what consequences it’ll bring. Not that he can do anything about it. He can only keep fighting.

In the distance, a horn sounds. Once, twice. The soldier Jon’s fighting sends him tumbling back with a hard kick to the chest. When Jon lands on his arse, the air rushes out of his lungs and paralyzing pain shoots up his spine, and he thinks it’s over. That he’ll once more feel cold steel piercing his heart. But instead of finishing him off, the attacker merely gives him a smirk before retreating. Another follows, then another, and another, and another until the courtyard lies still, the once-pure snow now a mess of dirt and blood and guts and bodies.

Bodies they must burn lest the Night King gets even more soldiers for his armies.

With a groan, Jon rolls over on his knees and pushes himself to stand.

The sun peers through heavy clouds, fat and pale and yellow. Jon and Gendry lay the last body on the pyre, and Jon steps away, stretching his aching back. It feels wrong, burning them all together like this--Northmen, Unsullied, and enemies alike--and without much ceremony or respect, but they don’t have the time or resources to build separate pyres. They don’t have time for proper goodbyes. The Night King could be here tomorrow, or next week, and they can't afford to take chances.

Davos steps forward with a torch and so the dead burn in the misty winter morning, filling the air with the pungent stench of burning blood, flesh, hair, and innards. Jon can’t remember the last time he ate, but he’s never been less hungry. Fighting a yawn, he rubs at his dry eyes. It feels as if someone rolled them in dirt. And now that the rush of fighting has long since left him, only his clothes, stiff with other people’s blood, are keeping him upright. If he doesn’t get to bed soon, he’ll fall asleep where he stands.

Through the fire, he sees Jaime Lannister standing on the other side of the pyre. The flames stretch from his head toward the sky like twisting spires. Like the golden spikes of a crown perched atop his head.

A king, that’s what Jaime Lannister looked like to Jon, once. Now he looks like an enemy.

“Lock him up,” Jon tells Brienne. When she opens her mouth to protest, he shuts her up with a tired look. “Lock him up. I’ll deal with him later.”

“Your Grace,” she says with a bow and he wonders how much Sansa has told her. How much Brienne knows. Whether she and Jaime have discussed his and Sansa’s argument and what accidentally was revealed.

He wants to speak to her, to Sansa, but she’s kept her distance all morning. So he’s stayed away too. He’s only ever seen a flash of copper hair here and there as she and the other ladies have helped Sam and Maester Wolkan with the injured.
Not one attacker survived, though. And that has to be by design, hasn’t it? Because now they have no one to interrogate. No one but the Kingslayer. Arya might suspect Daenerys is behind all this, but Jon isn’t convinced. What possible reason could she have for doing this? He can’t think of a single one. Not that he’s thinking very clearly at the moment.

“You should get some sleep.” Davos stands next to him with a concerned frown on his friendly face. “And that’s not a suggestion. I’ll look over things. And get a bath too, while you’re at it.”

He nearly falls asleep in the tub.

A wail wakes him. Jon slides out of bed, grabs Longclaw, and opens the shutters to his window to assess the situation. Then he lets Longclaw sink to the floor. Two men are carrying a body, an older woman walking beside them, howling out her grief. But there’s no fighting. The sickening stench of the pyre reaches him even up here. Some of the injured must’ve passed during the night or day or whatever time it is. It’s dark out now, but he can’t tell whether it’s evening, night, or early morning, or for how long he’s slept. While his body aches from the battle, he does feel lighter, as though sleep lifted some of the burden that seems to have taken permanent residence on his shoulders. He must’ve gotten a solid amount of hours of sleep.

Hair shining like copper in the torchlight draws his attention. She’s wearing it simple today, strands pulled back from her temples and secured at the back of her head. Along with a few other ladies, she’s walking into the godswood, ostensibly to pray for the injured.

He dreamed of her. But then he often does.

He should talk to her, not about how he feels but about Arya. Perhaps Sam is right about her being a better choice. Perhaps Sansa’s reaction when he tells her will tell him something about how she truly feels. Perhaps then he can talk about how he feels.

As if I’ve ever been good at that.

Even though she’s out of view, he still stares at the gate to the godswood, a dull ache of longing filling his chest. If only things could go back to how they were before he left, when they spent their evenings together. He’d come to find peace in the clacking of her knitting needles and the rustle of fabric as she sewed. He’d come to find peace in her humming. He always did love it when she sang. Sometimes she’d brush Ghost’s coat until it gleamed, while Jon polished Longclaw or oiled his leather armor and pretended to not listen. It’s what he missed the most when he was away, what he longed to come back to, and now everything’s different. Wrong.

After a deep sigh, he tears himself from the window and his memories, dresses, and makes his way outside. Usually, the people working and training in the courtyard laugh, chat, and sing. Today they’re all ashen-faced and subdued. Even the beat of the blacksmith’s hammer is muted. The steel barely hums. When the screeches of dragons pierce the air, everyone stop what they’re doing and cowers while gaping at the black sky. Arya and Gendry stumble out of the guesthouse together, looking skyward too, but when nothing happens, she nods at Gendry and heads toward the Keep
while Gendry and his hammer find Podrick and they begin to spar.

On the other side of Winterfell’s walls, Missandei and the Dothraki bloodriders already wait, summoned by the dragonsong just like Jon. Well, all of them except Lhago. Did he fall last night? The four standing there have scrapes and bruises but seem in good condition. From what Jon noticed of their fighting, they were formidable. But then so were their attackers. He didn’t notice Lhago among the fallen, though.

He turns to Missandei to ask her, when Daenerys and the rest come up to them, and he plasters a smile on his face and gives her his full attention instead. She always lights up when she sees him, but now her serious face looks as if it’s about to crumble before it smooths into a blank mask. He holds out his arms in invitation, but she only takes his hands, holding on so tightly it’s as if she siphons his strength.

“Jon,” she whispers, but then something behind him catches her eye. Another body, carried by two guards. When she looks back at him, confused, he quickly tells her what happened last night, and her blank mask hardens. “Where’s Jaime Lannister?”

“We locked him up.”

“Good. Gather your bannermen. Ser Davos. We’re holding a meeting in your office. Now.”

The Northern lords do nothing to hide their distrust, their disdain, when Daenerys positions herself in front of them to speak. However, she doesn’t get further than, “My lords,” before the door to his office flings open to reveal Arya. She’s out of breath, her cheeks pale as snow, and when she sees Jon, she looks like a little girl scared of being scolded.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs as she walks closer. “I fell asleep. Gendry and I were talking and I fell asleep.”

“Arya, I don’t care that you fell asleep with Gendry. We have--”

“Shut up,” she says but there’s nothing teasing in her voice, nothing teasing in her wide glassy eyes. “When I came back to my chambers, they were empty. I can’t find her. I’ve looked everywhere. I can’t find her. No one’s seen her.”

“I’ve seen her. She’s been working with the injured. She was praying with the ladies in the godswood.”

“Lady Stark was not with us, Your Grace.” Alys Karstark has risen from her seat, her red hair gleaming like copper in the light of the hearth. The locks at her temples are pulled back in a simple style and Jon’s stomach turns. His knees wobble. “Neither when we helped Maester Wolkan nor when we prayed.”

Jon feels the hard desk against his backside. He must’ve sat down. He lays his palm against the smooth wood and steadies himself.

“Her cloak is still in my room,” Arya says. “Why would she leave her cloak?”

The four Dothraki are lined up against the wall, by the window, the absence of Lhago glaring. A primal rage fills Jon, flows into his arms, his hands, and one moment he’s seated, the next he’s squeezing one of them by the throat while his own throat thunders out a growl.
“Where is he? Where’s Lhago.” Through the fog of fury, he hears Daenerys calling his name but it’s not enough to pull him out. He squeezes harder, uses both hands as the man tries to pry off his fingers. “I’ve heard you. The way you talk about her. He took her. He took my--he took my sister.”

Strong hands close around his upper arms and yank him back, hold him still as the Dothraki sags to the floor, coughing and clutching his throat.

Eyes narrowed, Daenerys stalks up to him “You speak Dothraki?”

“I don’t have to to know what they’re saying.”

“That they find her beautiful? That they’d like her in their beds? That’s how men talk. My bloodriders haven’t touched your sister. Hurt them again and you’ll regret it.” She turns toward the window and breathes in deeply, exhales with a thoughtful hum. “You can smell it, even in here, burning flesh. Such a distinct scent, isn’t it? There’s nothing quite like it. Did you check all bodies before--”

Jon’s already through the door, tearing through the courtyard, not stopping until he’s at the pyre. The air tastes like ashes, like something acrid, like iron. His legs won’t carry him anymore and he sinks to his knees, the fire a blur before him. Someone’s whispering his name, touching his shoulder, tugging at him to stand but the ground has too firm a grip on his body. He’s never felt heavier. He turns his face toward the sky, toward his little sister looming over him. She’s beautiful in the firelight, so soft when this new version of her always looks so hard.

“Snap out of it. We don’t have time for you to fall apart. We have to find Sansa.”

“Arya, I love her.”

“I know. I love her too but--”

“No.” He blinks, feels tears slip from his lashes. “I love her.”

She’s never looked like her lady mother, but now all he sees is Catelyn Stark staring down at him with contempt, with icy silence. He can’t even hear her breathing. Jon looks away. A grouse swoops down from the sky and lands by the trees, where the snow has piled up against the trunks. It burrows itself into the banks until the snow has concealed it completely. Jon can’t help but envy it.

“She’s not dead, you idiot,” Arya says, in a tone more gentle than her words. “If they’d thrown Lady Stark on the pyre, someone would’ve noticed. We should talk to Bran.”

She proffers her hand and even smiles when Jon lets her help him stand. And even though they run to the godswood in silence, he knows his wonderful little sister has already forgiven him for his horrible nature. That she loves him nonetheless.

Beneath the heart-tree, sits Bran dappled dark blue by the shadows of leaves, and Jon allows himself to hope. If anyone can tell them where Sansa is, it’s Bran. However, once he’s listened to their request, he looks at them with blank, brown eyes and shakes his head.

“I promised her I never would,” he says and no matter how much both Jon and Arya plead, no matter how firmly they assure him that Sansa wouldn’t mind this time, does Bran budge.

Jon is filled with the urge to grab this creature who wears his brother’s skin and shake him by the shoulders until sense returns to him—until Bran does. But before Jon can do something he’ll regret, cries for help come from the other side of the wall separating the godswood from the kennels, and he and Arya are running again.
At the hunter’s gate stands a horse, a man slumped forward in the saddle. Blood has soaked through the wildling coat he still wears, and a nasty bruise covers the good side of his face.

“They took her,” the Hound mumbles. “We chased after them but…” He wheezes out a breath, coughs. “They took her.”

Seated in one of Bran’s rolling chairs, wineskin in hand, a patched up Clegane shares his story with everyone gathered in Jon’s office.

“I’ve kept seeing her in the flames. An empty bird cage. Feathers filling it. Thought she might be in danger, so I’ve kept an eye on her. And on that Dothraki cunt who kept staring at her. The night of the attack, no one was protecting her. Not even those idiots who stood on their fucking knees and swore to protect her. And I thought, this is his chance. It’s what I would’ve--” He shuts his mouth, glances at Jon, and takes a swig of wine. “So I looked for him. Saw him riding through the gate. The western one and--”

“The hunter’s gate,” Sam helpfully supplies.

The Hound gives him a look that says he doesn’t give a shit what the gates are called. “When I caught up with him, he was alone but the ground was filled with tracks leading into the woods. Nineteen horses. He said her name, gestured at the tracks.” The Hound takes such a long pull of wine Jon nearly slaps the wineskin from his hand just to get him to keep talking. “So we rode together. Took us hours to catch up with them, but when we did, five of them stayed behind to fight us off, while the rest kept riding. They died. I didn’t.”

“And Sansa? Did you see her?”

“Saw a bundle of furs, red hair sticking out. But it was her, all right. I’d know that hair anywhere. They weren’t riding west, though. They’d rounded the castle and were riding east. They were a motley bunch. Some Dothraki. But it wasn’t that lot”--he nods at Daenerys’ bloodriders--“I’d never seen them before. Don’t think he had either.”

Daenerys, who’s been standing by Jon at the desk where he’s seated, leaves his side and addresses the room: “When I arrived at White Harbor, the Dothraki had left. While searching for them, I found my khalasar. South of White Harbor. They won’t reach Winterfell yet for many days. They’re struggling in this weather.” She shoots Jon a cold look. “Whoever attacked White Harbor, it wasn’t my khalasar.”

“It was a diversion,” ser Jorah says. “To draw Her Grace away from Winterfell so that they could take Lady Sansa.”

“Cersei,” Arya bites out. “It has to be.”

“Lady Brienne, bring us…” Jon trails off, staring at the large woman who’s refrained from sitting and stands by the door with her hand on the hilt of her sword. He’s not paid her much attention this evening, but now he sees the tension in her shoulders, the lack of color in her cheeks, and he remembers the Hound’s words. Knows the truth in them.

“Where were you?” Jon puts his palms on the table and pushes himself to stand. “You, who’ve sworn to protect her, where were you when she was taken?”
“Fighting, Your-- My lord.”

“And when you were done fighting? What did you do then? You never even noticed she was gone. Where were you all day? Coddling Jaime Lannister?”

Brienne blinks and averts her eyes, pale cheeks now flushed pink. “I guarded his cell, yes. I was worried someone would hurt him.”

“Aye, we wouldn’t want Jaime Lannister to get hurt, would we?”

Arya catches his eye. “No, we wouldn’t. Not as long as she has Sansa.”

Jon sighs and slumps back in his chair. “You’re right.” He rubs at the scar over his eye. “Bring Jaime Lannister here.”

Brienne must’ve filled Jaime in along the way, because when he enters the room, that usual smirk has been replaced with an appropriately somber expression. While swearing up and down that he had no idea what Cersei was planning, his eyes wander across the room, as though he’s trying to convince each and everyone of them, until he trails off and turns to Daenerys with knitted brow and Jon realizes he was scanning the room for another reason entirely.

“Where’s Tyrion?” he asks but no one has an answer to give him. “You’ve not noticed he’s gone. Wonderful.”

“It’s been an eventful day,” Daenerys says.

“And he’s so easy to miss.”

Daenerys purses her lips, tilts her chin up. “Perhaps he helped them. Did you ever consider that? I’m not the only one who’s spent time in Essos.”

“No.” Jaime shakes his head. “This was all Cersei. Euron didn’t abandon her. He went to Essos to hire the Golden Company. Sansa and Tyrion are most likely aboard one of Euron’s ships by now. As captives.”

Jon sweeps everything off his desk, quill, ink, scrolls flying, and slaps a map over the surface. “Clegane said they rode east. If they moored around here”--he points at where the Weeping Water flows into the Shivering Sea--“they can’t have gotten far. If we fly to White Harbor and take a ship, we could cut them off at the Fingers.”

“And do what?” Arya says. “They could slit her throat before we’re even aboard. If you think Cersei hasn’t told Euron he should sooner kill Sansa before letting her get away, you don’t know Cersei. We have to be smart about this. We can’t rush in head first because Sansa might die.”

He can’t call the look Arya gives him pointed, and yet it makes him think of Rickon. Of how he risked thousand of lives, Sansa’s life, by falling into Ramsay’s trap to save someone who couldn't be saved. And so he nods at Arya, and asks his little brother to at least locate the Greyjoy ship.

While they wait for Bran, Jon studies the map, thoughts racing around in his head without reaching a goal. He feels people’s eyes on him, knows they’re all taking in every one of his reactions and seeing what Davos had already figured out. But what does it matter? All that matters is that he can bring back Sansa home safely.

When Bran finally speaks, it’s so quiet in the room, everyone jolts. “I’ve found the ship. It’s already passed the Fingers.”
“That’s not possible,” Davos says. “No ship is that fast.”

“This one is. There was magic coming off it. Dark magic.”

“But that means they’ll reach King’s Landing in days, not a couple of weeks. Which means that even if we got on a ship today, she’d still be there for weeks before we could save her.”

With her hands folded behind her back, Arya saunters closer to Ser Jaime and looks up at him with a nonchalant air, as if she was the one towering over him. “What does Cersei want? Why did she take her?”

“She thinks Sansa helped Olenna Tyrell kill Joffrey. I assume she wants her dead.”

“No. Then Sansa would’ve been dead already and Euron would ship nothing but her decapitated head to King’s Landing as proof. Unless she wants to do it herself, I suppose. Is that what she wants?”

Jon can’t breathe. He leans over the desk, the map scrunching up between his fingers while the most awful images flood his mind. Sansa’s lifeless body collapsing on the floor, blood flowing out over the flagstones. Her head dangling by the hair from Euron’s blood-drenched fist. Everything that makes her beautiful, makes her her, gone.

Jon squeezes his eyes shut and tries to block it all out before he drowns, but then Arya’s small hand closes around his, pulls him back to the present. After searching Jon’s eyes, as though to make sure he’s focused, she indicates Bran by tilting her head, and Jon looks at his little brother who’s coming out from another vision.

“I watched Cersei. She’s writing a scroll to you, Jon. She doesn’t want to hurt Sansa.” Arya interrupts him with a loud scoff; Bran looks at her blankly until she’s done showing her disbelief. “She wants you to come down to King’s Landing alone and bend the knee to her. She won’t give back Sansa until you do.”

“That’s all I have to do? Bend the knee to her?”

“You’ve already bent the knee to me,” Daenerys says but Jon ignores her.

“But the war. It’ll take too long. I’ll be gone for weeks.”

“Not necessarily.” Sam is bouncing on his feet, eyes shining. “We have dragons! You could be there and home again in a few days.”

“I have dragons.” Daenerys arches a brow at him. “And I’m not leaving my people to fend for themselves when the dead are coming.”

“Jon could go alone,” Bran says.

“Yes!” Sam nods. “You can go on Rhaegal. Daenerys and Drogon will stay here, in case the dead come, and you’ll go save Sansa.”

“And how is Jon supposed to ride Rhaegal?” Daenerys scrutinizes Sam as she waits for his answers, and he looks two feet tall beneath her gaze. “Answer me.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sam stammers. “I thought, well, it likes him? Maybe he could try it. There’s no harm in trying.” He attempts a smile but it slips much too quickly. “Unless, uh, it eats him, I suppose?”
Daenerys shifts her glower to Bran. “Is that what you thought too, my lord? That he could try it?”

“I’m not a lord; I’m the Three-Eyed Raven.”

Daenerys exhales her disdain through her nose and places herself in front of Jon. “Leave us,” she commands their company without looking at them. Without taking her burning eyes off Jon.

The impulse to rise strikes him, to show her he’s not afraid of her, that she has no power over him, but he knows her too well by now, knows how she always needs to be the most powerful person in the room. And so he ignores his impulses and remains seated.

Once they’re alone, Daenerys rounds the desk so that she can stare directly down at him.

“My moonblood came while I was away. I’m not pregnant.”

The relief sweeping through him is so strong, Jon can’t help but sag forward with a loud exhale as the worry and tension he’s carried dissipate.

“Yes, that’s the reaction I suspected I’d get.”

There’s nothing of the woman who loves him in her now. She’s no longer Dany but the Dragon Queen who bared her talons in the throne room when they first met and he wouldn’t bend. She’s the Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea. The Mother of Dragons. The Unburnt.

“It’s time you started being honest with me, Jon Snow.”

Chapter End Notes

SPOILER for people who are worried about Sansa getting raped or assaulted by Euron and his men: not happening. It’s not that type of story. Sansa won’t get raped by anyone ever.
Note: I know I said to some that this chapter would be Sansa; however, this Dany chapter had to come first. (Next one will definitely be Sansa PoV, though.) And this chapter starts during the previous chapter, right where Dany insinuates that they might've burned Sansa's body and Jon rushes out the door.

“You can smell it, even in here, burning flesh. Such a distinct scent, isn’t it? There’s nothing quite like it. Did you check all bodies before you lit the pyre?”

When Dany turns around with an innocent smile on her face, Jon has already bolted out the door. The bannermen stare at the floor in silence, but they don’t need to whisper amongst themselves to share their thoughts. It’s written plainly on their features, in their passiveness, that they suspect what she herself suspects.

She orders Qhono to get Marago to the Maester to see to his throat, then pulls the shutters open to watch the courtyard. The smell that so bothers the others only makes her feel strong, victorious. It stokes the fury ignited within her, a fury she needs to keep her mind calm and shrewd in the chaos. Unlike Jon, she’s no hot-headed idiot whose impulses lead to bad decisions. Fire and heat bring out the best in her.

Out in the courtyard, Brienne’s squire and Jon’s bastard friend are sparring. Gendry’s eyes are piercing blue, his hair black as jet, and in his hand he holds a mighty warhammer. A heavy looking thing that could crush a man in one blow and yet he wields it with ease. Rubbing her mother’s ring, Dany closes her eyes and sees that hammer crash into black armor, rubies scattering over water. Sees it crash into black scales, blood splattering over snow.

Suppressing a shudder, she waves at Varys to join her by the window and nods at the man outside. “Who is that?”

“I believe his name is Gendry, Your Grace.”

“He’s Robert Baratheon’s bastard son, isn’t he?”

Varys leans closer to observe the man, while she observes him to see whether he’s lying. “Mm, he has the look. He very well might be.”

“I thought you knew these things.”

“King Robert had countless bastards, Your Grace. One couldn’t possibly know them all.”

Varys bows and returns to his spot, hands tucked into his sleeves, and she returns to looking out the window. Jon knows, she doesn’t doubt that, but did he keep Gendry’s identity to himself out of worry, or because he’s scheming?

The scent of coconut oil fills her nose. Missandei stands behind her, whispers softly in her ear that people must be hungry by now and waiting for her to either dismiss them or speak about White Harbor. Another glance out the window shows Arya and Jon helping an injured man into the Keep,
and so Daenerys takes care of her people. She has supper served in the smaller audience chamber Sansa seems to favor. In here, smalltalk finally builds, but no one says a word about Sansa--or about Jon’s extreme reaction to her absence--and they either pick at the food or eat it like a cow chews grass.

Once their bellies are full, she leads them back to Jon’s office, and soon Maester Wolkan wheels in Sandor Clegane, with Arya, Bran, Samwell Tarly, and Jon in tow.

Dany's never seen Jon like this, so desperate, eyes wild and hands twitching. He’s barely aware of anyone but Clegane. He doesn’t notice her ordering Verro to ride out and find Lhago’s body and burn it so that his spirit can ascend to the skies, and ride with his ancestors in the Great Stallion’s khalasar. He doesn’t notice how everyone gathered there are unusually quiet while watching him with a dawning realization that their horrifying suspicions are true. He doesn’t even notice how two scrolls fall into a brazier when he clears the desk to spread out the map.

Shaking her head, Dany fishes the scrolls out of the flames, puts them back at the corner of the desk--and soaks up the awed gasps and whispers coming from the bannermen. Their eyes flit between her unscathed hands and her face, and she stands tall and lets them admire their queen--how strong she is--while the man they call king showcases his weakness.

He’s never been less attractive to her. And as she stands back and watches him, pieces all his lies and half-truths together as he falls apart before her very eyes, she can barely remember how it feels to love him. All she feels is that comfortable fury that burns so hot it leaves her cool. Even as his strange little brother and callow best friend reveal a little too much and help her piece together that too.

And when they’re finally alone, when she walks up to Jon and traps him beneath the strength of her gaze and tells him it’s time to start being honest, it’s still calm she feels. Certainty. For now she knows and all the little insecurities that plagued her during their relationship have become inconsequential.

His hands rest on the desk, lax and still. That wild desperation has left his eyes. But he doesn’t look calm. He looks passive. Broken. Pitiful.

“Who is your friend. The blue-eyed man. The blacksmith.”

“Gendry.”

“You know what I’m asking.”

“He’s Robert Baratheon’s bastard.”

“Why haven’t you told me?”

“What does it matter whose bastard he is? He’s not going to take the throne from you.”

“You clearly seem to think it matters, since you’ve kept this from me.”

Jon’s jaw tightens. “I was worried about your reaction.”

“My reaction. Is that why you didn’t tell me you’re in love with your sister? Because you were afraid of my reaction.”

He averts his eyes and cloaks himself in a silence she once found enigmatic and intriguing but now sees as the insolence it is. She runs her fingers along the desk until they reach his hands. The right
one bears a burn mark. She grabs it and ghosts her fingers over the scar.

“How did you get this?” she asks. He looks up at her, then, face furrowed in confusion. “For how long have you known, Jon? Who you are.”

Once more, he looks away and gives her nothing but silence. She should have known. She can feel it, what they share, their Targaryen blood, as though it calls to her, pulls her in, and she mistook it for love.

“You’re no true dragon. Fire cannot hurt a dragon.” She drops his hand. “Did you know when you sailed to Dragonstone? Were you hoping you could steal my dragons?”

“I just found out, Dany. I swear. I didn’t know.”

He looks up at her with wide brown eyes and her heart clenches. He was so warm and sweet in her bed. Her most gentle lover yet. Her last lover—or so she thought. He’d never linger in her bed, wanting to be discreet, he claimed. But one night he fell asleep with her still in his arms. That night she didn’t sleep at all, couldn’t stop looking at him. At his many battle scars proving how strong and worthy he was. At how sleep had smoothed out his so-often worried features and left him looking young and innocent. At the lock of hair that had escaped his bun and curled down his cheek.

Did he ever love her? Or was she just a distraction? Did he want to brag about bedding the Dragon Queen? It can’t all have been a lie. Perhaps he loved them both, both her and Sansa.

“You and her? You’ll never be rivals for my affections. Never.”

Her eyes fill with tears and she tries so hard to force them down and Jon reaches for her hand, still with that dumb sweet look on his face, and she wants to slap him, kiss him, throw him to the floor and take him so he remembers to whom he truly belongs.

If I look back, I’m lost.

“The next time you touch me is the last time you have hands.”

Jon lays his hands in his lap, looks away.

“I thought you were a man of your word. But you’re just like all the rest. You lie and you betray and—”

His head snaps back to her. “I’ve not lied!” Then his temper softens with a sigh. “You’re beautiful, Dany. You’re beautiful and strong and you wanted me. What man would say no to that? But I never promised you anything.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Jon scrubs a hand over his face. “It’s to make me feel better, I suppose.”

“Mm, the honorable Jon Snow would never swear an oath he couldn’t uphold, isn’t that so? But lying by omission, mm, I think you’ve mastered that art. Do your bannermen know? Do they know upon whose head they’ve placed a crown? A Targaryen bastard who wants to fuck his own sister. Shall we tell them, hm? I think we shall.”

“No, Dany!” He scrambles to his feet and grabs her wrist. “Please. Let me tell them. Alone.”

“Do I need to call for Qhono and his arakh?” she asks coolly, looking down at his fingers wrapped
around her wrist.

Jon blanches, backing away from her.

“You can keep your hand. For now. Until the Night King is dealt with. But if you think I’m letting
you out of my sight, you’re an even bigger fool than I thought. I will have Grey Worm and a couple
of Unsullied follow you everywhere you go. I will post Unsullied outside your bedroom door when
you sleep. And I will be part of every moment of planning this rescue mission. You won’t have a
private conversation again for as long as Sansa Stark remains missing. Do you understand?”

Jon bows his head. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Your days of deceiving me are over.”

By the time Jon’s office is full of people again, he sits hunched over in his chair, ashen and shining
with sweat. Would he be this distraught if she were the one missing and Sansa stood in his way?
Would he even care?

If I look back, I’m lost.

She sweeps her eyes over the crowd comprised of people too worried and nervous to know where to
look. No matter. She knows how to command a room, and she steps forward and speaks with a
voice that might be firm but never harsh.

“My lords and ladies. Friends. Cersei Lannister has abducted Lady Stark. The woman I will name
Wardenness of the North once I take the throne. The woman who will be your liege lady. We should
all be part of planning this rescue mission. Because it needs planning, if we want to save Lady Stark-
-and if we want the defense of the North to remain strong while doing so.”

She narrows her eyes at Jon and indicates him with a graceful hand. “The man you’ve called king
wanted to take my dragon and leave us—leave you—to deal with the dead on your own. Your general
values the life of one girl over the lives of everyone he’s sworn to protect. Over you and your
families. That’s the man you’ve chosen as your leader.”

Jaime Lannister rolls his eyes. “And how was he supposed to sneak off with a dragon? You make it
sound as if anyone could. It’s not a real threat and you’re using it to scare people into supporting you
instead of him.”

“Your brother once shared an ancient wisdom with me: you should never believe a thing simply
because you want to believe it. And you believe Jon Snow is Ned Stark’s bastard—you all do. But is
he?” She turns to Jon with a smile dripping of the sweetest honey. “Would you care to enlighten
your people? Would you like to tell them who you truly are?”

Pale of face, save the shame burning red on his cheeks, Jon sits frozen in his chair, staring at the map
still draped across the desk. All the lords and ladies watch her, though, as though they assume no
word will come from their king’s lips. Only Varys gives her a discreet shake of the head, but the
eunuch has never been concerned with what’s best for her. His disapproval only spurs her on.

“Now, go on, Jon. Tell them.”
“I wouldn’t take Rhaegal,” Jon says through gritted teeth. “It’s too dangerous. The dragons shouldn’t go near King’s Landing.”

“But you’d still leave us. When we need you here.”

“We do need you here,” the little lady, the Mormont girl, says. “We need you more than ever. Are you truly leaving us again, Your Grace?”

“I don’t know! I want to save my sister and—”

Dany scoffs. “Sister? Your lover, you mean.”

Her accusation fills the room with the bannermen’s horrified outcries.

Jon shoots to his feet. “Sansa and I have never. I haven’t— I’ve never touched her.”

“But you want to, don’t you?”

Jon’s eyes move between her and his bannermen. “Your Grace, please, this isn’t—”

“Tell them who you are, Jon. Tell your bannermen the truth. They deserve to know the truth.”

“His name is Aegon Targaryen.”

Silence settles instantly in the room. All heads turn to Bran Stark, while Dany’s triumphant smile dies. Aghast, she hears Jon’s little brother tell them about her own brother annulling his marriage to Elia Martell and marrying Lyanna Stark, about Jon being the rightful heir to the Iron Throne, and soon the room fills with chaos again and she’s all forgotten. She’s a five year old little girl struggling to get control over the situation while everyone shouts at one another, demands to see proof, shoving each other aside as Samwell Tarly procures a fat book he stole from the Citadel until they, one by one, return to the end of the room where they stand huddled together and staring at Jon as if he’s grown wings and talons and scales.

“Why haven’t we been told,” the Mormont girl asks.

“We were going to tell you. Sansa and I were… But then the attack—and now she’s gone.”

“Sansa and you,” Daenerys hears herself say.

“Aye. We…” Jon’s lashes flutter and he looks helplessly at his family, as though he’s lost without that awful woman by his side. “We had a plan. A solution. She’s the one who should’ve explained, not me.”

Samwell clears his throat and steps forward. “Jon and lady Sansa decided they should marry. Then, once Jon’s aunt takes the throne— he flashes Dany a quick smile—” Jon and Sansa’s children would be her heirs. Because with a child of the North on the throne—one with Stark blood—the North can accept a Targaryen ruler. Isn’t that right, Jon? Wasn’t that the solution?”

Tears well up in Daenerys’ eyes, and she turns her back to the room, hand pressed against her stomach—against her empty womb—as Samwell rambles on about her living a long happy life as queen and how she could retire at an old age knowing her dragons would be well looked after by trueborn Targaryen children.

Jon and Sansa’s children. Jon and Sansa’s children sitting on her throne, riding her dragons, carrying on her legacy. Oh, if she could, she would burn Mirri Maz Duur all over again for taking everything
she held dear and cursing her womb. She would burn her a thousand times. Her and Sansa both.

Memories of Jon in her bed return to her. Memories of his arm around her back and his soft breaths as he slept. Of that curl resting on his cheek. She’d felt so lucky, then. Lucky and hopeful for the future. When her moonblood didn’t come, she dreamt of children with silver hair and brown eyes, with black hair and violet eyes. She dreamt of Jon standing by her side as she sat on the throne, with Ghost lying by their feet. She dreamt of one black-and-gold hatchling on her shoulder and one blue-and-silver on Jon’s, as Drogon and Rhaegal circled the Red Keep to protect their family. And for a beautiful, too-brief moment, she thought she saw her future—for she is no ordinary woman and her dreams come true.

And wouldn’t it have been perfect? To finally raise House Targaryen back from the ashes with her brother’s son—with Rhaegar’s son—by her side, as her husband.

*If I look back, I’m lost. If I look back, I’m lost. If I look back, I’m lost.*

She wipes the evidence of her weakness from her cheek and lets her righteous fury burn those thoughts away before the weeping misery of it all quenches her fire. Jon Snow has never been more than a subject. A few days spent between her legs is not enough to change that. His blood is not enough to change that. He is no Rhaegar. He is no Targaryen. He is no dragon.

Out of habit, she searches for Tyrion and his guidance only to remember he was taken too. The only people looking at her now are Ser Jorah and Missandei, whose eyes are filled with kindness. With pity. She doesn’t need them or their pity, nor does she need Tyrion. She finally sees things clearly all on her own.

Jon’s child on the throne. *Jon* on the throne. That’s what this is, isn’t it? A coup. Tyrion and Sansa and Jaime Lannister and their secret meeting. They’ve planned this, all of this, so that Jon will steal Rhaegal and fly south—and then they’ll convince him to steal the throne too while Dany has to stay up North and save the world. Unless Jon already knows...

She glances at Jon through the corner of her eye. No, Jon is not clever enough to lie properly and that’s not an act. He’s beside himself with worry—and so in love with his sister, such a fool for her, that he’ll gladly take the throne if she asks. That’s what they’re counting on. A Targaryen puppet through which to rule because Daenerys is too strong. Because she’s the true dragon, the last dragon, with skin as thick as scales and nails as sharp as talons and voice as fervent as fire.

“And what is your plan now, *nephew*?” Her tone pierces the din, smothers all other conversations until all eyes are on her. “Are you going to beg for one of my dragons and fly south? Are you going to steal *my* throne?”

“I don’t care about the Iron Throne! And I’m not going to steal a dragon! Those things shouldn’t go near King’s Landing. Didn’t you hear him?” Jon points at Jaime Lannister with his whole hand. “Didn’t you hear about the wildfire?”

“I heard him. I heard him speak of a substance used by my father—the Mad King, as you so kindly refer to him—to scare me into not attacking the city. Lies, all of it. To keep me here.” She steps closer to Jaime Lannister. “Isn’t that so, ser?”

“The city is full of wildfire. I swear it.”

“You swear it,” she echoes but all she sees is him on his knees, swearing a solemn vow to protect Sansa Stark.
All she sees is Daario on his knees. My sword is yours. My life is yours. My heart is yours. Ser Jorah. Barristan Selmy. Even Tyrion bent and vowed and promised.

“I’d bend the knee but…”

Jon has taken her for a fool for far too long.

“Can’t this wait until after the war?” ser Jorah says. “Cersei Lannister won’t harm lady Sansa, isn’t that what Bran Stark said? So why not fight this battle first and then we can all go to King’s Landing.”

Bran turns his impassive eyes to him. “Cersei will kill Sansa in two weeks.”

“What?” Shaking with anger, Jon stalks up to his brother. “Why didn’t you say so before?”

“You didn’t ask.”

Jon presses his fingers to his forehead with a groan.

“Once Cersei’s raven arrives,” Bran says with as much passion as a farmer giving a traveler directions to the closest inn, “you have two weeks to get to King’s Landing and bend the knee or Sansa will die.”

“Two weeks. How am I to make it in two weeks?”

His gaze drifts to the window. From here, they can’t see her children, but she knows it’s to them his thoughts wander. Perhaps the threat of wildfire doesn’t seem so frightening when time is running out. Perhaps he’d do just about anything to get to King’s Landing in time.

Daenerys schools her features into something resembling kindness. “Your fear for your cousin’s life is understandable—and so is my fear of you betraying me.”

Jon tears his eyes off the window and gives her a wary look.

“People still call you king, have you noticed? Rumors say they doubt you bent the knee at all, because they were not there to see it. So let them see, Jon Snow. Bend the knee to me, in front of your people, and I will stay here and protect the North while you sail south. Bend the knee, surrender the North to me, and I know you’re not trying to deceive me. Because, if you’re trying to deceive me…”

Letting the threat hang between them unsaid, she gestures at the empty spot in front of her and waits. He’s a man of his word, they all say, and that she believes. Because if he had no problem lying, if he had no problem swearing oaths he had no intention of keeping, he would’ve bent the knee to her long ago. In front of witnesses.

He would’ve told me he loves me.

“I can go,” Arya tells her brother. “Me and Gendry. We’ll go. We’ll save her. I can do it. I promise, Jon. You’re needed here.”

Lady Brienne lays her hand on the pommel of her sword. “And I will come. As will ser Jaime.”

“No,” Jon says, “if Cersei suspects something’s wrong, she’ll kill Sansa. We can’t risk it.”

“What’s to say she won’t regardless,” one of the bannermen says, a tall fellow with thin hair and a gray beard. “It sounds like a trap and you’re walking right into it.”
“I doubt it,” Varys says. “Cersei knows she can never hold the North. She knows she needs the Starks. Subjugated, yes, but alive. She never wanted Ned Stark to be beheaded.”

“She wanted him to be sent to the Wall,” Jaime continues. “It was Joffrey. She didn’t know until it was too late.”

Varys nods. “This is a desperate act of a woman who wants to tear apart the alliance between the North and the Dragon Queen. She’s making Jon choose between his queen and his family—and it’s working. We can’t let Cersei win.”

“No, we can’t,” Daenerys says. “Nor can we trust she won’t hurt lady Sansa. So bend the knee, nephew. Prove to me that you are my family, my blood, and that Cersei Lannister cannot tear us apart. Bend the knee and I’ll fly you to White Harbor myself and give you my fastest ship. If you leave now, you’ll have a head start. The raven won’t be here yet for days.”

“If I bend the knee to you, I can’t bend the knee to Cersei. And if I can’t bend the knee to Cersei, she’ll kill Sansa.”

“Then lie to her. She kidnapped the woman you love. She doesn’t deserve your honor.”

Face dejected, shoulders slumping Jon looks at his people, whose eyes flit around as though they don’t know what to make of this. They didn’t know, then, how he’s fooled her. They thought he bent the knee—and they accepted it, welcomed her, knelt before her. Dany stands taller, while Jon remains quiet, brooding, but she knows she’ll win. Oh, he’ll never climb aboard Drogon with her—she’s too scared she’ll throw him off—but he can’t say no to her fastest ship. He can’t say no to her promise to stay here and protect his beloved North.

When he walks up to her, pulls Longclaw from its sheath, and stares at the light from the hearth rippling along the blade, she can’t hold back a satisfied smile, can’t stop the sweet joy of victory from shining in her eyes.

Jon reaches behind his head, pulls loose the string keeping his hair in a bun, and cards his fingers through his hair. She’s never seen him with his hair out before, all wild and curly, and she hates how her body still responds to him. He’s far too handsome and the memories of her dreams return to her, whisper in the back of her mind that she can still have it all, that he does have a fondness for her, that all he needs is time. For if anyone could bless her womb with a babe, it would be him. They’d have a pure Targaryen heir.

Jon holds her gaze, while she holds her breath, waiting for those wonderful words to come, for his knees to bend.

“I serve the North.”

Daenerys sucks in a harsh breath, glaring at him with all the fury that has built within her this day, but Jon doesn’t waver.

“I should never have been named king. The North isn’t mine to give away. It belongs to my cousin Sansa. She should’ve ruled the North all along, not me.” He holds her gaze for a beat longer, then hands Longclaw to ser Jorah. “Take this. It belongs to you and I don’t want Cersei to get her hands on it. Protect your queen so I can save mine.”

“Seize him!” Dany barks in Dothraki. But when her bloodriders move forward, so do Arya, lady Brienne, and ser Jaime.

With her thin little sword drawn, Arya locks her gaze with Dany’s. “If you’re going to burn Jon,
you’ll have to burn me too.”

“And me,” lady Brienne says.

They all look at ser Jaime, expecting him to stand up for Jon too, but he only shakes his head. Brienne bores her eyes into him; Jaime gives a little shrug and backs away. Instead the Mormont girl steps forward with her head held high.

“And you’ll have to burn me.”

Then ser Davos joins them. Bran Stark. Samwell Tarly. Alys Karstark. Yohn Royce. More lords whose names Dany doesn’t know. One by one, they all form a protective line between her bloodriders and Jon, until even Clegane mutters out a curse and maneuvers the rolling chair to join them.

“Well, Your Grace.” Arya simpers. “Are you going to burn the whole North or are you letting my brother go.”

“You think I’d burn Jon? My own blood. My kin.” Daenerys gestures at her bloodriders to stand down. “I was going to throw him in a cell so that he could calm down and think about the mistakes he’s about to make. He’s needed here. And he’s abandoning us. We need him to fight the Night King. Perhaps a night in a cell can make him remember his responsibilities.”

“You don’t need me.” Jon moves out from behind them so he can talk to her. “Sam and Bran know more about the White Walkers than I do. We have all the weapons we need. And I’ve lost more battles than I’ve won. Sansa needs me.”

Jon turns around and addresses his people instead. “I’m sorry. I’m abandoning you at the worst possible time, I know that. But she’s spent her whole life as a prisoner, and I can’t let her sit there, all alone, wondering why no one’s coming for her. Thinking no one cares for her, that no one loves her enough to save her. Not again. I failed Robb. I failed Rickon. But I’m not failing her.”

Lord Royce clears his throat and takes a proud step forward, chest puffed out. “I am more than capable of leading our armies. If you need a general, Your Grace, you have one in me. Let your nephew save Lady Stark, and I have no doubt that the North and the Vale and the Riverlands will show you their gratitude.”

Fidgeting with her ring, Daenerys scrutinizes the man while thinking over his offer.

“You think I want to fight you,” Jon says, voice hoarse. “You think I want to take what’s yours, but I don’t. I don’t care about the throne. And I won’t marry Sansa. She doesn’t love me. When this is all over, I’ll return to the Wall. It’s where I belong. I swear it.” He reaches out his hands and waits until she tentatively lays hers in his. “I swear to you, Daenerys Targaryen, I will never take up arms against you. I will never take what’s yours. You say I’m your blood, your kin. Your family. And I am. And nothing means more than family to me. Nothing. It’s why I have to save Sansa. It’s why I’ll never harm you. So be my family. Please. Let me go.”

Daenerys glances at her advisers. Ser Jorah gives her nothing, but both Missandei and Varys nod. With a watery smile, Dany squeezes Jon’s hands and nods her consent.

A breath of relief rushes out of him. “Give me your word. Give me your word that you’ll stay here and fight the dead.”

“I give you my word.” She releases his hands and speaks to all of them. “I vow to you all that I will not leave the North, that I will not abandon my people, until the Night King is defeated.”
“Thank you, Dany,” Jon whispers and then he’s out the door.

The moon bathes her in its silvery light, and as Dany stands on the ramparts while Jon rides into the night, coat and hair whipping in the wind, she thinks about the sun kissing the moon egg and birthing dragons beyond counting. What a sight it must have been. If she closes her eyes, she can almost imagine that the roar of the wind is the sound of a thousand dragons singing.

Snow crunches to her right and she knows from the gait, and the clink of metal and squeak of leather that it is her gruff old bear.

“Was that wise, My Queen?”

“You question my decision?”

“I question his loyalty. His honor.”

Ser Jorah looks at her with concern wrinkling his weathered face, but Dany only smiles. Men. *Idiots.* All of them.

Let Jon sail south. Let him show his people how little he cares for them. Let him kill Cersei for her, and once he sits on the throne with that conniving woman Sansa by his side, Daenerys Stormborn and her dragons will come for him with all the North rallying behind her. For whom will they choose: the secret prince who abandoned them in their hour of need for a woman, or the Dragon Queen who risked her own life to save them all?

“I lied when I said my khalasar wouldn’t be here yet for many days. They won’t be here at all. I told them to ride south again. For their own good, of course. They don’t fare well in this weather. But now I can’t help but think that I knew, deep down, that this was coming.” She turns to ser Jorah and takes his hand, strokes the coarse skin. “Ride south, dear friend. Lead my armies to King’s Landing and wait for me there.”

“Your Grace, I won’t leave you.”

“I have Grey Worm and my bloodriders and the Unsullied. I have my dragons. What harm could come to me? Only you can lead my khalasar, ser Jorah. Lead them to King’s Landing, and as soon as the Night King is defeated, I will join you to take what is mine. With fire and blood.”

She smiles up at the moon and thinks about how there once were two. Unimaginable. The sky was only ever meant for one.
Sansa

Chapter Notes

TW: Sansa talks about what Ramsay did to her, but not in detail.

Sansa wakes to the creaking of ropes, cold light stinging her eyes, and strangely familiar snores. Snores that bring back the stench of red wine and manure filled streets, the congested feeling of crying too hard, for too long, and always thinking through every word, every gesture, every reaction lest she provokes the wrong person.

With a moan, she shakes herself free of the furs wrapped around her body and sits up. Her back aches, her head too, and rope chafes against her wrists. Using the wall for purchase, she pushes herself to her feet. Beside her on the floor lies a bundle of furs, a tuft of curly hair sticking out. Careful not to wake him, she steps over Tyrion and looks out the window. Pale sky, pale sea, no land in sight. The familiar weight of resignation settles in her stomach like a stone. Deep down, she knew this would happen eventually, that Cersei wouldn’t rest until Sansa was back in her claws.

She can’t remember being taken. After Jon left her chambers, she dropped the brush, slipped into a nightgown, crawled into bed, and pulled the furs over her head. Then she woke up here. How did they know where to find her? She glances at Tyrion over her shoulder. Did he lead them to Arya’s chambers?

So what if he did? If someone held a knife to your throat, wouldn’t you have lead them to him?

It could’ve been him or a maid. It could’ve been anyone.

There’s no furniture in the cabin save a round wooden stool upon which two bowls of oat porridge and two spoons sit. Her stomach rumbles. She should eat. Who knows when she’ll be offered food again. But before she’s moved, the door opens and in walks a man wearing dark clothes, a dark smile, and a dark glint in eyes that look like Theon’s. Around his neck hangs a horn, from his hips hang a sword and a dagger, and she thinks she can see another dagger hidden in the shaft of his boot too. Arya’s taught her that, how to look for concealed weapons.

Something about him reminds her of Joffrey, of Ramsay, that impervious confidence, that perpetual smile that lacks any kind of warmth. Sansa lifts her chin and gives him a look colder than winter.

“Good morning, my lady. Welcome aboard the Silence.” He pulls the dagger from its sheath and nods at the ropes tying her hands together. “You’re going to be a good girl, yeah? I only like being scratched when I fuck. And you? Not my type. I’d freeze my cock off.”

His smirk and the way his gaze lingers on her body tell her he wouldn’t mind fucking her at all, but she promises she’ll be good and holds out her hands.

“And how’s your husband?” he asks once he’s freed her. He kicks the bundle of fur and Tyrion starts awake with a snort. The man drops to his haunches with a grin. “Are you going to be a good little boy?”

“Euron,” Tyrion mutters as he sits up. “What a wonderful surprise.”
He doesn’t sound surprised, though. Nor does he look disoriented while looking around the cabin, and Sansa can’t help but once more wonder whether he was awake when their captors snuck into Winterfell, whether he helped them find her, and didn’t fall asleep until they were thrown in here. But did they have to force it out of him or did he offer the information freely to protect himself?

_Does it matter? He’ll never tell you the truth either way._

Euron cuts off Tyrion’s ropes too before sliding the dagger back into the sheath and leaving the cabin without a word. The lock clicks. It must be for their safety rather than stopping them from escaping. What could she and Tyrion do? Even if they escaped the cabin, even if they managed to kill every person on board--which they wouldn’t--they’d be adrift.

A warm hand closes around her own. “I know I’m little, and that my Hand pin doesn't carry much clout around here, but I still have my wits. I'll do whatever I can to protect you, Sansa.”

“She’s going to kill us, isn’t she?”

“You? No. You’re far too valuable. Even she knows that. But me?” Tyrion gives her a mirthless smile. “Oh, I won’t be long for this world once she gets her hands on me.”

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Oat porridge is served morning and evening. It’s always cold, always runny, but at least it’s food. Sometimes they get boiled fish too. And water. Once, Tyrion asked for wine or ale, but Euron only laughed at that. He’s the only person they’ve seen in days, except the eunuch who empties their chamber pots. He never says a word and barely looks at them. Considering the way Tyrion looks and smells by now, she must be in a similar state and seem more of a beggar woman than a lady. Not that Tyrion seems to mind much.

His eyes are always warm when he looks at her--and he looks at her often--and they spend their days talking about everything and nothing. He teaches her bawdy songs and they make a poor man’s Cyvasse game out of a couple of buttons that fell off his doublet, his Hand pin and rings, her necklace and rings, a candle stump, and a handful of pebbles they keep forgetting what piece they’ve assigned to. The board, he’s carved into the floorboards with the sharp end of his Hand pin, and whenever they hear someone outside, they cover it up with one of their furs.

She’s been a prisoner many times in her life. Oddly enough, this isn’t the worst of them.

It would be even better if he stopped staring, though.

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“Perhaps she wants to marry you off to the younger son of some Southern lord,” Tyrion says one evening after searching his mouth for a fish bone and plucking it from his tongue. “Someone she controls. Then she’d finally get a proper foothold in the North.”

The thought has occurred to Sansa as well, but she’s kept it to herself in fear of making it come true if she voices it. Hearing it out loud now twists her stomach into knots.
“I didn’t know how good I had it,” she murmurs, picking at her fish. “When I was married to you.”

Tyrion keeps his face impassive but can’t hide how his eyes light up, how his posture straightens. He doesn’t understand. Men never do.

*Jon would understand.*

Her eyes feel wet, her throat tight, and she wraps her arms around her body. Their last moment together she was cold to him, and her last memory of him will be that defeated tone of his voice when she wouldn’t even be kind enough, brave enough, to look him in the eye. And now she’ll never see him again. A tear falls from her lashes and, sniffling, she brushes it away.

Tyrion wipes his hands on his breeches and moves closer to her, takes her hand. “Your marriage to Ramsay… I can’t even imagine. The things I’ve heard about him… I pray they’re not true.”

She laughs wetly. “Whatever you’ve heard, it’s most likely true.”

“I’ve been told by a woman or two that I’m a good listener. That I have a good shoulder to cry on. Two in fact.” Smiling, he wiggles his shoulders until she smiles too. “If you’d like to unburden yourself. Perhaps you need it.”

His eyes, his smile, his voice, they’re all tender. He likes her like this, she thinks, small and broken. It dulls his wits better than wine, and he forgets to play the game. So she feeds him, with a small and broken voice: “He raped me. Sometimes several times per day. He beat me. Kicked me. Bit me. Choked me. But the thing he liked the most, even more than raping me, was cutting me. Mostly on my back and my legs. Places where no one could see. I can’t even see most of them. The cuts. But I can feel them. Even after all this time. I still feel them.”

Tyrion’s eyes glide over her body, horror etched on his features. “Have you”—he clears his throat—"shown them to anyone? Your scars.”

“The Maester. My sister. She helps me dress sometimes.”

“Ah. Well, I suppose that explains the lack of handmaidens.”

“I don’t like it when people touch me.”

“No, why would you?” he says, and yet he keeps his hand over hers. He even strokes her with his thumb, as though he’s the exception. “I suppose this explains your sudden fondness for our marriage too. I must seem a knight in shining armor compared to that monster.”

“It’s not sudden. I quite enjoyed our time together. And I enjoy it now. I’m not happy you were taken too, Tyrion, but I’m glad I’m not alone.”

A small smile blooms on his face, one he ostensibly tries to hold back. “Well,” he says, “if we survive Cersei, perhaps we’ll get a second chance, you and I.”

His tone suggests he said it in jest, but the sparkle in his eyes reveals he wouldn’t mind it at all. He’s a fool. Yes, she did enjoy her time with him and Shae, and he’s still far better company than most men who’ve wanted her, but Sansa’s not a little girl anymore. She knows it wouldn’t be like it once was, when he respected her no and kept to his mistress. She knows she couldn’t keep the mistress as her handmaiden and that they would sup together, stroll together, laugh together, all three of them, without any conflict. That is more of a fairytale than any song she’s ever heard.

Now she’s a woman, and she knows he wants her. She knows because of the way he looks at her,
because of how he keeps finding excuses to touch her, because of how he finds encouragement in
every little thing she does or says when she’s only being polite and kind. How long before he would
implore her to take pity on him, to do her duty, to open herself up and let him in? How long before
he would wear her down, not with fists and knives, but with pleading eyes, manipulative words, and
touches that start out innocent only to grow bolder and bolder as time goes on?

He’s not her friend and he never was. He’s the man who married her against her will, whose family
killed hers, who brought the Dragon Queen to their shores, to her home, so that she could rain fire
and blood down on Westeros. He’s the man who lured Jon into a trap and helped Daenerys keep him
prisoner for months. He’s the man who, only a few days ago, spied on her in the godsdrome before
trying to lure information out of her. No matter how many games of cyvasse they play, no matter
how much they laugh when they sing together, can Sansa afford to forget that.

But she can’t afford alienating him either.

“Perhaps we will,” she says with a demure smile.

Tyrion swallows audibly and turns a little bit away from her, but not quickly enough to hide how his
eyes well up, and now she feels like the monster. When night falls and she curls up in her heap of
furs, the echoes of their conversation and the hope in his eyes torment her, chase away sleep. He’s
kind to her, always kind to her, but she can’t trust him. She can’t let her bleeding heart win over her
mind.

She dreads tomorrow, when she’ll have to look at him in daylight and own her words. But long
before the sun rises, while it’s still dark as tar outside, Euron barges into the cabin and tells them to
get up on deck.

King’s Landing rises against the dark sky, all stone and snow. Sansa takes in the sight of it, the
thousand upon thousand lanterns and candles shining in the windows. Impossible. According to her
counting, they’ve barely been asea for a week.

The skiff glides into the pebbled beach and she feels Tyrion’s eyes on her, knows he wears a
sympathetic smile to comfort her. And when he takes her hand, she gives it a grateful squeeze before
letting go. She doesn’t need to lean on him. When her feet leave the boat and once more stand on
southern soil, her legs are strong and steady and her breathing calm. This time, everything will be
different. This time, her feathers won’t hide a scared little girl but a wolf.

Armed guards escort them to the Keep, but once they’re inside, they separate them and soon Tyrion
and his guards are gone. Sansa’s knees buckle for the first time and she doesn’t feel like a wolf at all.
Perhaps she’s still a scared little girl, then, a scared little bird who’ll sit prettily in her cage and sing
for those who demand it rather than bite and snarl.

Rough hands close around her arms and she’s pulled down familiar hallways until they reach her old
chamber. It looks just the same. The same bed, the same looking-glass inside its ornate frame, the
same round table full of knick-knacks where she and Shae often chatted over a treat as evening
settled over King’s Landing. But there’s a tub of hot water too, and a flock of maids in dark dresses
and short-cropped hair. And the moment the guards leave, the maids start undressing her and Sansa
flees the present, finds that place inside her to which she learned to retreat whenever Ramsay entered
her room. And there she stays as they strip her bare and help her into the tub. There she stays as they
scrub her body clean and wash her hair. There she stays as they maneuver her in front of the hearth and rub her body and hair dry. She barely even returns to herself once she’s dressed in a nightgown, bedrobe, and silk slippers.

Seated on a padded bench in front of the vanity, she stares into her reflection without seeing while the maids fuss over her. The cabin was better than this. Even a dungeon cell would’ve been better than this. At least she’d be alone.

“Leave us.”

The softness of Cersei’s voice sends a shiver down Sansa’s spine. She didn’t even notice her coming into the chamber—was she in there all along? Sansa tightens the robe around her. Did Cersei see the scars?

Eyes closed, Sansa listens to the pitter-patter of the handmaidens rushing out of the chamber. Then she takes a steeling breath through her nose, stands up, and turns around. Cersei’s hair is short now and she’s wearing all black, but otherwise little has changed about her. Pregnant, ser Jaime said, but her stomach is as flat as always. And behind her stands ser Gregor, as enormous and imposing as his epithet, his eyes red beneath a big black helmet.

“I’d forgotten how tall you are.” A smile curves Cersei’s mouth. “I’m so happy to have you back, little dove. You should never have left me. But you’re here now. I have a welcome gift for you. Well, I have two gifts, but this one first.” She holds out a silk-wrapped parcel, looking at her in a way Sansa once would’ve described as kind. But that was before she learned just how sharp the claws of a lion are, and she eyes the gift warily. "Go on, take it, unwrap it.”

And so Sansa does, carefully untying the ribbon and folding the silk cloth open. And its contents nearly break her. In her hands lies the doll Father gave her. The same golden hair and pink dress and blue vest. The same painted smile.

"You were so ungrateful, do you remember? Oh, don't think anything happens in my castle without my knowing it." Cersei’s smile is wide, cruel. “But I thought there might come a time when you'd appreciate the effort a parent makes to bring a smile to their child's face, so I saved it for you. I’ve saved many things for you. I knew you’d come back to me one day.”

“I didn’t come back.” Sansa wraps the silk gently back around the doll and places it on the vanity. “You took me.”

Cersei shakes her head at Sansa, as if she’s being a silly little girl saying silly little things. “Come, Sansa. Let me brush your hair.”

With a glance at ser Gregor, Sansa sits down and Cersei grabs a length of hair and starts brushing the ends.

“Mycella had such wonderful hair. Golden and curly. Lustrous.” She nicks a strand from Sansa’s head and holds it up to the light of the candelabra standing on the vanity. “You’re not eating well. I suppose there’s not much left to eat in the North but tree bark. But you don’t have to worry about that anymore. I’ll feed you well. Lemon cakes, wasn’t it? Your favorites. I’ll have the kitchens make you lemon cakes tomorrow.”

“You’re too kind, Your Grace.”

“Yes, I am. Even though you don’t deserve my kindness. But we’re family. Are we not? You’re my sister by marriage.”
“Where did you take Tyrion?”

“Do you miss him? He’s in the dungeons. Unlike you, he’s not my guest.” Cersei brushes the hair back from Sansa’s face and looks carefully at her reflection in the looking glass. “You look hopelessly outdated--but then Northern ladies always do. Don’t worry, dear. I wouldn’t expect you to know that fashionable ladies wear their hair short now. Would you like me to cut your hair?”

“If it please Your Grace.”

With a firm grip on Sansa’s chin, Cersei tilts her head this way and that while staring at her face. “No. Best not. You’d look all wrong. Mm, I think it’s time for your second gift. I do hope you’ll love it. I searched for a good while to find one that was just perfect.”

Cersei opens the door, gives someone a command, and soon a knight leads a woman inside. Sansa’s breath catches in her throat. Lithe, dark of hair, brown of eyes, and when the maid curtsies and murmurs m’lady, even the accent is the same. But as the Lorathi woman comes closer, steps into the light of the hearth, Sansa sees it’s not Shae after all. They only look similar, down to the same hairstyle, the same dress--one much too cold now that winter has come. And now that she’s close enough, Sansa can see the gooseflesh on the woman’s arms.

“A good likeness, don’t you think? Her name is…”

“Tisiph, Your Grace.”

“Ah, yes. Tisiph. But I’m sure you can call her whatever you want, Sansa.” Cersei indicates the knight with a nod of her head. “That’s ser Nyles. He’ll protect you during your stay. Won’t you, ser? We can’t risk anything spooking our little dove so that she flies away.”

Ser Nyles is tall and slender with broad shoulders, a generous mouth, and an elegant nose. As a young girl, Sansa would’ve fallen hopelessly in love with him and dreamed about their wedding day, when he’d wrap her in his cloak, kiss her on the cheek, and carry her to their chambers himself, too protective of her to allow a bedding ceremony. But this Sansa sees strong arms and doesn’t think of being lifted but being hit. This Sansa sees a beautiful mouth and doesn’t think about being kissed but being bit.

“Pray tell me, dear.” Cersei moves closer to her, so that they stand face to face. “I’ve heard contradicting rumors. Some say you’ve been named Queen in the North, others that you’re merely considered queen. What is the truth?”

“My brother is king, Your Grace. Or at least he was, until he bent the knee.”

“Did he?” Cersei adjusts the bow at the neckline of Sansa’s nightgown. “You hurt my feelings, you know. I invited you to the Dragonpit and you sent that beast of a woman in your stead. Did your bastard brother tell you about the meeting? Did he tell you I had a chat with my little brother? A very illuminating chat. He seems to question whether Jon has bent the knee at all. He told me it happened in private. That the Dragon Queen has taken a liking to the bastard. And it sounds to me as if your brother knows how the weapon between our legs is just as powerful as any sword. Perhaps even more so.”

“That’s why I’m here? You want Jon to bend the knee to you.” Laughing at her, Sansa shakes her head. “If you think Jon will abandon the war for me, you’re an idiot. Your Grace.”

Cersei lets out an amused sound. “If Jon comes and bends the knee, the North is mine. I’ll make you Wardenness, Sansa, and I know you’ll remember how good I was to you when I didn’t need to be.
And if he doesn’t come? Well…” The gentle smile returns to Cersei’s face and she strokes her knuckles over Sansa’s cheek. “I get to kill you. Either way, I win.”

After ending her tender caress with a firm pat, Cersei tilts her head to the side and says, “Sleep well, little dove. I expect you bright-eyed and conversational tomorrow. We’ll break fast together. I want to hear everything that happened after you fled my son’s wedding. And everything that happened before.”

As Tisiph folds down the coverlet and fluffs up the pillows, Sansa sits on the padded bench and sneaks glances at the handmaid. She does look like Shae, quite a great deal, but unlike Shae, she knows exactly what’s expected of her. And unlike Shae, she’s loyal to Cersei. As is ser Nyles. Cersei wouldn’t let them near her otherwise. But does Tisiph know why she was chosen out of all the women in the city? Does she know what kind of cruel games Cersei is planning? Is she as cruel herself? Or is gold the motivator? Is it the hope of one day becoming a handmaid to the Queen herself? Or is it simply the comfort of a roof over her head and going to sleep with her belly full each night?

“You’re from Lorath.”

“Yes, m’lady.”

“What brought you to King’s Landing?”

Tisiph shrugs. “When I was a little girl, I grew up along the Zuriph canals. My father was a fishmonger and my mother sewed clothes for the rich. I used to run down the cobblestone streets to find something exciting to do, but there was nothing but fish and clams and brackish water. Lorath is a small place, m’lady. Small and cold and windy. Then, one day, my father wanted me to marry the son of another fishmonger, but I wanted more. I wanted to see birds singing in the trees. I wanted to see fields of grass. I wanted something other than fish. So I left for Braavos, and there I snuck aboard a ship that took me here.”

“And did you? Did you see the birds singing in the trees? Did you see fields of grass.”

“Yes, m’lady. When I arrived, it was still warm and sunny.” Tisiph gestures at the bed with a smile. “Would you like me to sleep in here? It gets cold at night. Many ladies share beds with their handmaidens in winter.”

“I’m of the North, Tisiph. I don’t mind the cold. You may leave.”

Another smile, a graceful curtsy, and Sansa is finally alone. A headache is creeping up from her neck and she longs for cool air. The door to the balcony has been shuttered, though, so Sansa moves a chair to the window and sits there for a spell with the doll in her lap, watching the quiet sea and the stars twinkling above it. Years ago, she stood in this very spot and contemplating ending it all. She wouldn’t be a pawn then. She couldn’t be used to hurt her family. But if Jon has already left…

Jon wouldn’t, though. He’d never abandon the war.

*What if he’s taken a dragon? He could save you and fly back again in the blink of an eye. If he loves you, wouldn’t he do just that? Wouldn’t he steal that dragon the moment he realized you were gone?*
Sansa looks out over the empty sky. If Jon had stolen a dragon, he’d be here already. But they need those dragons to defend the North, and she’s not sure she could forgive Jon for risking the fate of the world to save one girl. And if Daenerys truly is pregnant… Sansa brings the doll to her nose to breathe it in, to find some comfort in that, but it only smells stale now, like dust and the faintest trace of herbs used to stave off moths. Perhaps they’re even married by now, Jon and Daenerys. Perhaps a Maester confirmed the pregnancy and Jon did what honor demands.

When Sansa pictures the three of them together, Jon, Daenerys, and their silver-haired baby, numbness spreads in her tired body until she’s as cold and blank as the window glass. A son is always more important than a sister. A sister is rarely important at all.

Hopefully, he’ll find some joy in his child, though. Hopefully, that joy, that love, will prevent his feeling trapped. It’s not a feeling she would wish on him. She knows that pain all too well. It’s her fate, it seems, to always find herself ensnared. To always be the pawn. But Brienne and Arya, they might be coming for her. Cersei is on Arya’s list, after all.

When Sansa lies down in bed and glides into a fitful sleep, it’s of Arya she dreams. But not the Faceless assassin with Needle at her hip, but little Arya Underfoot with her bird’s nest hair, dirt-streaked cheeks, and rumpled clothing. A little girl who touches Sansa’s hair and whispers questions in her ear: are you Sansa Stark of Winterfell? Are you a wolf or a dove?

“A wolf,” she murmurs in her sleep. Not a bird in a gilded cage, waiting for someone to set her free, but a wolf. And then it’s of Theon she dreams, of his gloved hand closing around her own, of the world rushing past them as they fall and fall and fall, and she knows she can’t wait for someone to hold her hand and guide her to freedom. She can't wait for someone to come. This time she must rescue herself.
Warning: there are some threats of sexual violence, but nothing happens (and nothing will), and some brief physical violence. No torture or anything, though (nor will there be).

Thanks to Tisiph’s skilled fingers and Cersei’s hoarding, Sansa transforms into her younger self. Her hair is piled up on top, secured by braids, two of which snake down her neck and hang over her shoulders, and her dress is palest robin egg blue with dragonfly embroidery and enormous trumpet sleeves. It doesn’t fit her anymore, too tight in some places, too loose in others, and while she once coveted southern fashion, she now longs for her northern gray. Feels stronger in gray. In wool and leather. As a finishing touch, Tisiph hangs a golden necklace around Sansa’s throat, and the lion pendant burns against her breast like a brand.

“You look beautiful, m’lady.”

Sansa stares at her own reflection and sees only death. “You wouldn’t say that if you knew,” she mutters. Then she shifts her gaze and meets Tisiph’s kind eyes through the looking glass. “Unless you do?”

“Know what, m’lady?”

“Nothing.”

Either the handmaid is the sweetest, most innocent creature in all the Seven Kingdoms, or she’s Cersei’s spy who hides her true nature behind wide eyes and shy smiles. Whichever the truth, she’s untrustworthy. Whichever the truth, she’ll report dutifully to her queen.

Ser Nyles escorts them to a private chamber where Sansa is to break her fast with Cersei. Winter mornings are quite dark, even in the South, and the room is illuminated by floor candelabras, chandeliers, and sconces on the wall that bathe the breakfast table in golden light. Herb-crusted fish, poached eggs on thick slices of toasted bread, grilled tomatoes, and honey-glazed ham—a rich spread compared to what Sansa’s become used to, to what her people have become used to, but nothing compared to how the tables used to look.

Still, she’d rather be locked in that cabin, watching watery porridge drip from the spoon back into the bowl, than sitting here. No matter how fine the food. She’d rather sit in the dungeons.

Cersei is still in black, but today cloth-of-gold and red velvet line the insides of her wide sleeves and peek out between the folds of her heavy skirts. She wears no jewelry except an onyx ring, one Joffrey used to wear, and she strokes it as she asks Sansa question after question: where did she flee after the wedding? Where did she stay? Who held her hand throughout it all? And Sansa answers and answers as truthfully as she dares until they’ve reached Ramsay, where she hesitates. While stories about how Littlefinger fooled and killed aunt Lysa entertained Cersei, Sansa isn’t certain how she’d react to tales about Ramsay and his knives. Will she rejoice in Sansa’s pain—or will she be annoyed and think Sansa is begging for sympathy and pity? Neither option appeals to her and she keeps her answers brief and vague.
“And then you fled him too. You even waged war against him. He must’ve been an awful husband.” Cersei’s mouth twists into a wry smile. “But then, aren’t they all? Life is better without men.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Did you kill him?”

“Not with my own hands, Your Grace.”

“No, of course not. A true lady doesn’t dirty her own lily-white hands--and you, Sansa, are a true lady. Hounds, wasn’t it? Ravenous beasts.” Cersei lets out an amused hum when Sansa doesn’t mask her surprised reaction well enough. “Do you honestly believe I don’t know everything that happens in my kingdoms? I’m the Queen.”

A knock on the door interrupts their conversation, and a familiar-looking man in robes adorned with a Hand pin enters. He hands Cersei a scroll, and after reading it, she dabs the corners of her mouth with a napkin and calls ser Nyles into the room.

“Ser Nyles, let lady Sansa finish her breakfast. We can’t have our little dove going hungry, can we?” Cersei leans closer and pinches Sansa’s cheek between forefinger and thumb. “You’re much too skinny. I wouldn’t want the King in the North to think you’ve not been taken well care of once he comes.”

_He won’t come_, Sansa thinks, staring out the window. _The war is the only thing that matters. As it should._

When she returns to her chambers, a single lemon cake waits for her on the round table. It stands right at center of a small plate, not a crumb nor a dusting of powdered sugar marring the clean porcelain. A perfect plating. The need to smash that plate into the wall fills her so violently, Sansa has to clench her hands into fists to stop the urge. Then she crams the lemon cake into her mouth, chews twice, just enough to get the damned thing down without choking, and swallows. The taste of lemon and sugar linger on her tongue. She washes it down with a large glass of water.

Tisiph stands by the door, her hands clasped before her, looking at the floor. She’s so quiet, so polite, so subdued. So eager to please everyone around her. She might look like Shae, yes, but she’s nothing like her.

Sansa’s free to go anywhere she pleases, so long as she doesn’t leave the Red Keep and its gardens or go near the dungeons, and so Sansa spends her days walking. Tisiph always walks a step behind her, and ser Nyles a step behind Tisiph. He does leave her side when Sansa’s in her chambers, and Tisiph does leave her side when Sansa sleeps--and neither stays when she sups with the Queen-- but otherwise, they’re her constant shadows. Craving solitude, Sansa sometimes wakes in the middle of the night and curls up on the bench by the window and stares at the dark sky. Habitually, her hand moves to the hidden pocket that’s no longer on her dress to pull out and find comfort in the letter she’s already burned, as though her body still hasn’t accepted that she’s once more trapped in King’s Landing, in the dresses of a girl who died long ago.

Well, she never died, Sansa supposes, she lived on in the memories of people who look at her now
and still see the Traitor’s Daughter. Someone they wouldn’t help then and won’t help now. No one in King’s Landing is her friend, no one even speaks to her, but everyone—be it a lord or a lady or a servant—keeps their eyes on her. And the few times per day she sees Cersei—who’s rather busy now that she’s queen—every sycophant in the vicinity giggles at Cersei’s sharp jabs. It pains Sansa to admit it, but the only person in the whole city she can consider a friend is Tyrion—and Tyrion is most likely shackled in a cell in the dungeons forbidden to her. Tisiph is too deep in Cersei’s pocket to be good company and ser Nyles finds his task tedious. He’s always staring longingly after his friends as they spar or guard the Queen or do something else more interesting than following the ‘Traitor’s Daughter around. Once, when they passed his friends sparring and one of the younger knights, a tall pimply fellow who moves as gracefully as Arya, bested one knight after another and ser Nyles sighed and sighed with envy, Sansa encouraged him to join them. Said she’d love watching him spar, but he only sighed some more and motioned for her to keep walking without a word.

No, no one in King’s Landing is her friend, but they can all be her pawns if only she learns how to move them. And so Sansa walks on, and she observes.

Most afternoons, when Sansa returns from her midday meal, a single lemon cake waits for her on the round table in her chambers. Today, Sansa cuts it in two and invites her handmaiden to share the treat with her.

“M’lady is too generous. I couldn’t possibly.”

“The only person in the whole Keep who talks to me is Cersei and I’m bored out of my mind. Please”—Sansa gestures at one of the available chairs—“sit down and talk to me.”

Fidgeting with the ends of her hair, Tisiph eyes the chair before nodding and taking her seat while making herself as small as possible.

“I miss my sister. I’m glad she’s not here, but…” Sansa smiles sadly. “We were apart for so long and when we reunited, we often sat like you and I sit now, sharing a treat. Never lemon cakes. Not in the North, not in winter. But honey cakes or oatcakes.”

“And what did you used to talk about, m’lady?”

“Childhood memories. Do you have siblings?”

“A brother, m’lady.”

“You must miss him,” Sansa says. “My sister and I didn’t get along as children. We wanted such different things in life. But I adored my older brother. Were you and your brother close growing up?”

“We were.”

Sansa nudges the still untouched lemon cake closer to Tisiph. “And how did you spend your days?”

Tisiph eyes the treat and then, quick as a fox, she breaks off a morsel and pops it into her mouth. “There’s not much to do in Lorath,” she says around the bite. “We don’t have fields and meadows. Very few trees. But we do have reeds, and from reeds we weaved little boats that we sent down the canals. We used to race them. I was never very good but my brother was. He always won when he was playing with others, but when he was playing with me, he let me win.”
“A good brother.”

“Yes, m’lady. There’s no one better.” Tisiph breaks off another piece and this time she chews it carefully, eyes fluttering closed as she enjoys the flavors. She even hums a little. “I wouldn’t be here, if not for him. When I told him I wanted to see the world, instead of scolding me and telling me to marry and have children like Mother and Father wanted, he helped me get work.”

Tisiph licks her lips and shoves the rest of her lemon cake into her mouth.

“Would you like my half as well?”

“M’lady, no, it’s yours.”

Sansa pushes the plate to the handmaiden’s side of the table. “Take it. I get one every day, while you get nothing. It’s not fair, is it?”

This time, Tisiph barely hesitates before she devours the treat.

“What kind of work did you do?”

“I ran errands for Lady Zuriph. Not a lady for true, m’lady. Her name is Asta, so lowborn she has no other name, and she’s the uncrowned ruler of the canals and so everyone calls her Lady Zuriph. She knows everything about everyone, and the merchants pay her well for her knowledge and her skills. If you do a good job running errands for her, she even lets you work as her handmaiden until she grows tired of you. And that means food, a roof over your head, pretty clothes, and coin every week.” Tisiph’s face lights up with a proud smile. “It’s how I got enough coin to get all the way to King’s Landing.”

“And what did you do once you came to King’s Landing?”

Tisiph’s smile slips, and her eyes lose the warmth they had until they look like those of a doe finding itself opposite a hunter with an arrow nocked.

“Brothel?” Sansa asks and Tisiph pales, her small shoulders rising to her ears. “I don’t mind. My last handmaiden used to work in one too.”

Tisiph watches her for a beat and then she asks, in a quiet voice, “What was she like? If m’lady don’t mind my asking.”

“Shae was a bad handmaiden,” Sansa says and Tisiph leans closer, eager to hear the gossip. “But a very good friend. I liked having a friend.”

The handmaiden leans back into her chair, exhaling, but instead of looking disappointed, her lips curl into a barely there smile and when she looks up at Sansa through her lashes, there’s a spark in her eyes that reminds Sansa more of Shae than anything else about the woman. A fierceness and shrewdness not found in the type of girl Tisiph pretends to be.

A chill trickles down Sansa’s spine; she suddenly feels more the pawn than the player.

“I’ve neglected you. You won’t blame me, I hope.” Cersei smiles at her across the dinner table. “A queen has little leisure time.” She looks at Tisiph, then, and motions at her to join them. “Please,
child, join us for supper tonight.”

Tisiph doesn’t know quite how to react to the invitation—or at least, that’s what she wants Sansa to believe as she twists and turns and fidgets with the ends of her hair. But Sansa knows better now.

“We’re having another guest, and I won’t have an uneven number at my table.” Cersei stares at Tisiph until she sits, and then turns back to Sansa. “A guest I think you’ll enjoy. Someone I think you’ve missed.”

Sansa knows it’s not Jon, that it can’t be Jon, and yet she imagines him throwing himself on that dragon after all, flying all the way to King’s Landing to save her. She imagines that’s what the note said, the one Qyburn gave Cersei, and that she’s kept Jon locked up just to torment Sansa. It’s can’t be, and yet Sansa’s heart races in her chest, her palms grow damp with sweat, and her eyes find no place to rest. The door opens. She holds her breath. Ser Nyles steps through and she hears steps behind him and she cranes her neck and...

Exhaling her disappointment, Sansa makes her mouth smile. Tyrion has gotten a bath, a clean set of plain clothes, but his skin is dry and cracked, his head hangs as he walks, and when he finally lifts it in greeting, his gaze is dull and tired--and she feels rather spoiled after all with her clean clothes, warm bed, and belly full of good food.

“My lady,” Tyrion says and then he sees Tisiph.

Pale as a sheet, he grabs the backrest of a chair to steady himself and then he stands there, frozen, gawking at her while she squirms in her seat. Shae’s name leaves his lips in a whisper, and it takes him a good two, three breaths to collect himself and force a grin on his face.

“I see you have a new friend, sister.”

“Not at all. That is Tisiph, lady Sansa’s handmaiden.”

“Of course it is,” Tyrion says and sits down on the empty chair next to Sansa.

His eyes land on the lion pendant on her chest, travel up to take in her elaborate hair, and move back down again to notice her dress—pale pink this time with a golden belt—and he shares a tired look with her before shaking his head discreetly to himself.

Cersei motions to ser Nyles to stay, and he finds a good spot by the wall, while Tyrion wolves down food and stumbles through awkward smalltalk that Cersei watches with so much enjoyment one wouldn’t be faulted for thinking she was watching her enemies being engulfed by wildfire.

“You seem flustered, little brother. Have you missed your love that much?”

Tyrion directs a burning glare at Cersei, the bread slice in his tight fist crumbling between his fingers.

“The lady Sansa, I mean. Euron told me you got on quite well during the journey here. Singing, laughing, playing Cyvasse and I--”

“And where is Euron?” Tyrion drops the bread, wipes his hand on a napkin, and pours himself a glass of wine. “I would’ve loved to properly meet the man who’s wooing my sister. Someone must ask him about his intentions now that Father is dead and Jaime has left you. I know you’re far from a blushing maid, but as your brother, it’s still my duty to protect whatever’s left of your virtue.”

Cersei smiles. “And I thought to myself: perhaps I should let lady Sansa and her husband rekindle their relationship. You never did consummate your marriage, did you?”
Slowly, Sansa lays down her fork and brings her hands beneath the table so that she can rub her thumb soothingly against her palm without anyone noticing. Tyrion empties his glass in one go, a thin stream of wine trickling down his chin and disappearing into his wild beard.

“I asked you a question, Tyrion.”

“No, we did not.”

“Not even on the boat? To keep yourselves warm or pass the time.”

Tyrion’s jaw clenches. “No.”

“Your marriage was never annulled. Isn’t that interesting?”

Sansa’s hands are shaking. She feels ice-cold fingers against her back, tearing her dress open, grabbing her hips so hard they leave bruises. She feels hot breaths in her ear, grunting out threats, drowning out Theon’s whimpers. *Would Cersei watch too?* No, not again. She can’t. She’d rather die. A hand finds hers beneath the table. A coarse, warm hand with short fingers and a familiar touch. Sansa glances to her left and finds Tyrion looking up at her with such kind eyes she wants to scream at him to stop touching her, to stop staring at her, to stop wanting her.

“Don’t worry, little dove,” Cersei says in her sweetest voice. “I won’t have Tyrion rape you. He’d enjoy it too much. And he’s not here to enjoy himself.”

Tyrion lets go of Sansa and refills his glass. “Why *am* I here? Hm?”

“You’re here to die. For all the horrible things you’ve done to our family. You’re here to be put on trial for murdering our father. And this time, you won’t be able to escape.”

Tyrion lifts his cup with a smile. “Can’t wait,” he says and drains the wine.

“Did you tell her yet? During all your little chats. What you did to your whore before murdering our father.”

He places the cup back down, carefully. “Cersei, don’t.”

“Doesn’t lady Sansa deserve to know?”

“Not like thi—”

“He strangled her. The woman he loved. Your very good friend. He strangled Shae with—”

Tyrion bangs his fist into the table. “It was self-defense!”

“Self-defense?” Cersei’s so amused the word comes out like a song. “That twig of a girl posed a threat to you?”

“She tried to kill me. She betrayed me.” Tyrion grabs Sansa’s hands, but she snatches them away. “She betrayed you too, Sansa. She betrayed the both of us. She said we killed Joffrey. She said we planned it together. That it was all your idea. Because she was jealous of you.”

Cersei’s smile has grown so wide laugh lines fan out from the corners of her eyes, while Tyrion looks like an abandoned puppy, begging for attention and empathy, and Sansa forces herself to soften and accept his touch.

“That’s why she lied,” Tyrion says and now he’s soft too, thumbs rubbing soothing circles into her
skin that aren’t soothing at all. “She wanted us dead. I know you cared for her, but she was never your friend. And she never loved me. She was a whore. The only love she knew was the one that earned her coin.”

Sansa glances at Tisiph, who’s staring into her plate, cheeks red and lips pale.

“Did she lie, though? About Sansa.” Cersei tilts her head to the side, watching Sansa through narrowed eyes. “You still haven’t told me what happened before the wedding. You were always spending time with the Tyrells. Tea and cakes with the old cunt. Whispering in her ear like a good little bird.”

“I never asked her to kill Joffrey.”

“You must’ve said something.”

“She wanted to know what Joffrey was like. So I told her.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That he was a monster. Even you have to admit he was.”

Cersei hums against the lip of her wine glass, takes a sip, rubs the fingertips of her free hand together, another sip. “He liked beating you, didn’t he?”

“He had his men beat me, Your Grace.”

“Yes. That’s the sign of true power. When men do whatever you order them to do, without questioning, without hesitating. Even beating a defenseless little girl.” She puts down the wine glass. “Ser Nyles, hit Sansa across the face.”

The words have barely left Cersei’s lips before pain explodes against Sansa’s cheekbone and she sags forward against the table, hand cupped over her cheek. Her skin feels wet. Tears or blood, she can’t tell. All she knows is the mind-numbing pain that sears through her head. Ramsay never hit her face. She’d forgotten that pain, how it makes your ears ring and your skin sting and your bones ache.

“Never call my son a monster again.”

“I won’t,” she mumbles.

“Ser Nyles,” Cersei says and Sansa grabs the table, steels herself for the next blow. “Escort lady Sansa to Qyburn. It seems your ring tore up her beautiful skin. She needs stitches.”

Napkin pressed to her cheek, ser Nyles’ arm looped around her own, Sansa stumbles down the hallways. Ser Nyles says nothing, refuses to look at her, and burns through the Keep with hard eyes and a red face. They round a corner and nearly bumps into one of his friends, that younger knight who fights so well, and even he notices something’s wrong.

“Not now, Finn,” ser Nyles grinds out and moves even faster, tugging Sansa along.

Once they reach Qyburn’s lair, Nyles opens the door and throws her inside. She always assumed he was a cruel man, that it was Cersei’s reason for choosing him, but no, ser Nyles is ashamed. Perhaps
he’s still young enough to believe knights should be chivalrous and now he’s having all his illusions shattered like she once had.

Quiet as a ghost, Qyburn sweeps around her, assesses the damage, cleans the wound, and sews it shut with a delicate hand. She takes each bite of the needle without wincing, and he pulls away with an admiring smile and compliments her for taking the pain so well.

“You’re braver than most men I’ve healed,” he says and she wonders whether he would’ve said the same had he seen her collapse at the dinner table. “These can’t be your first stitches.”

He watches her with such curiosity, Sansa replies by shrugging down her dress and showing him her back, and then lifting her skirts, rolling down her stockings, and showing him her legs too, and he rewards her with a breathy oooh.

“You were married to Ramsay, yes, that is clear.” Qyburn's cold fingers prod at the scars by her shoulder blades. “These haven’t healed as beautifully as the ones on your thighs.”

“Maester Wolkan taught me how to sew shut wounds. The ones on my thighs, I sewed myself.”

Humming to himself, Qyburn peers at the scars above her knees, gently prises her legs apart and peers at the ones on the insides of her thighs as well. “You have a talented hand, my lady. Very fine stitches. You can get dressed.”

He turns his back to her without letting his gaze linger, and while many things about him makes her skin crawl, she’s at least grateful for his complete lack of interest in her body. He only cares about her wound and her scars. From a cabinet full of bottles of different sizes holding liquids of different colors, he procures some dreamwine--enough to ease the pain and help her sleep, but not enough for her to never wake up again--and sends her on her way.

Ser Nyles, who’s waiting for her outside, has turned back to his regular color, and once they reach her chambers, just as she slips inside, he murmurs an apology so quietly she’s not certain whether she imagined it. She did notice, though, that he’s removed his ring.

Inside her chamber stands a tub of hot water, and Sansa’s mind flees to Winterfell and Jon and quiet evenings in front of the hearth, while her body allows itself to be cleaned and pampered by Tisiph. She only returns when the handmaiden pours her a glass of dreamwine and sweetens it with honey.

“Drink.”

Tisiph puts the cup to Sansa’s lips and her stomach twists. There were poisons galore in Qyburn’s cabinet. He could’ve put anything in there.

“Drink, m’lady.”

But if Cersei wanted to poison her, why do it now? Unless she does it slowly. But then she could poison every meal, every lemon cake, and Sansa’s head is throbbing with pain, the right side of her face swollen and hot, so she drinks it all up and lets Tisiph tuck her into bed. The mattress shifts as Tisiph sits down on the edge and then something cold touches Sansa’s cheek and she leans into that blissful cold. Ice wrapped in linen. Sansa closes her eyes and revels in the feeling of ice slaking the burning heat. The dreamwine is already pulling her into a fog, winding the softest cotton around her mind, and sleep is nosing at the edge of her consciousness. A soft hand caresses her forehead, tucks her hair behind her ear. A mother’s touch.

“That woman is a monster,” her lady mother says, but her voice is Shae’s and when Sansa blinks her eyes open, she looks like Shae too. “Just like her son.”
“He was worse,” Sansa mumbles. “I’m so tired.”

“I’ll let you sleep, m’lady.”

The bed tilts as Shae moves to her feet, and Sansa fumbles after her hand, pulling her to a stop before she leaves. “Shae, please stay.”

“You want me to stay after what I did?”

“I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t trust anyone.”

“You always say that.”

“I didn’t betray you. They made me.”

“I know.” Sansa pats Shae’s hand. “I know what women have to do to survive, Shae. I know the lies we have to tell, the things we have to do. I know it better than anyone. Stay, for a little while. I don’t want to be alone. I’m so tired of being alone.”

The bed dips under Shae’s weight, her fingers once more brush Sansa’s forehead, and Sansa closes her eyes and gives in to the dreamwine.

That night Arya returns to Sansa’s dreams, whispering questions in her ear, and when Sansa forces her eyes open, little Arya Underfoot stands by her bed. She’s only six or so and even through the sleepy haze that leaves the world blurry, Sansa can tell how skinny she is, all elbows and knees and dirt.

“You need to eat something, Arya,” she mumbles, struggling against the tug of dreamwine that wants her to sleep, sleep, sleep.

“I like your doll,” Arya Underfoot whispers.

“Father gave it to me.”

“Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell.”

“I can make you a doll, if you like.” Sansa struggles to focus her eyes on her sister. The faint light of the moon casts strange shadows in the room and all she sees are monsters, some squat, others lanky, all of them hungry. Ravenous beasts. “Will you protect me from the monsters?”

“I don’t know how. I’m just a little bird.”

“No, you’re a wolf. Like me,” Sansa murmurs, and then dreamwine pulls her under again.

The next time she opens her eyes it feels as if no time has passed at all, and yet it must be hours later for her head no longer feels like cotton. The faint light of the moon still casts strange shadows in the room, but now her eyes work with her mind and she has no trouble seeing things for what they are: the floor candelabra by the window; the tall vase on the table; the robe draped over the back of a chair; Arya Underfoot sitting at the footside of the bed.
Sansa sucks in a breath and scrambles back against the headboard. “Who are you?”

The girl is all skin and bones and a raggedy shift, and she’s clutching Sansa’s doll in her arms.

“How did you get in here?”

“I’m not allowed to say,” the child whispers, holding the doll closer.

Sansa smiles at the girl, speaking to her softly. “Do you like the doll, sweetling?”

The girl nods.

“Would you like to build a castle with me? That doll is a princess, you see, and she needs a castle, doesn’t she? Perhaps I can tell you a story, about the princess and an evil witch?”

The girl says nothing, but Sansa recognizes that look in her eyes, a starry-eyed look that says yes please even though her mouth’s too shy to voice it. So Sansa slips out of bed, lines up the chairs and drapes blankets over them to create a cozy castle the way she and Jeyne sometimes did as children. Then she takes the doll and crawls inside and starts playing all on her own, acting out a story about a trapped princess, an evil witch, and a poisoned chalice. It was the only way she could ever get Rickon to do anything, by ignoring him and doing it herself until he got so curious he joined her. And sure enough, soon the blankets rustle and the child crawls inside too. Mouth hanging open, eyes round like moons, the girl listens as though she’s starved for stories. She gasps and smiles and even holds Sansa’s hand once when it gets a little scary.

When the witch is dead and the princess is sailing off toward the horizon and a better life, Sansa hands the doll back to the child. “You can play with it, if you want. If you ever visit again. But you can’t take this out of my chambers, because the evil witch will notice. Do you understand?”

The child nods emphatically. “Can you make me one like you said?”

“Oh, sweetling. I’d love to, but I don’t have needle or thread or even a pair of scissors.”

The child chews on that for a moment, her little forehead scrunched up as she thinks. Then she shuffles a tad closer and asks quietly: “Are you Sansa Stark of Winterfell?”

“Yes, I am. Who are you?”

“I’m one of Qyburn’s little birds.”

“What does that mean?”

“My uncle left. Then my mother died. A man beat her to death but I got away and now it’s just me. Qyburn gives me food. Me and all the other little birds. They’re my brothers and sisters now.”

“And what does a little bird do?”

The girl leans closer. “We whisper secrets in his ears.”

“Secrets? That’s very exciting. But it sounds dangerous. Is it dangerous?”

“I’m not supposed to be here. You won’t tell, will you? Please, m’lady, don’t tell.”

“I won’t. I keep all my secrets to myself. Have you been in here before?”

The girl bites her lip and hugs her knees close to her chest.
“I won’t be angry. I promise.”

“A few times,” the girl whispers. “But you’re always asleep. Is your sister Arya Stark of Winterfell?”

“Yes, she is. What’s your name, sweetling?”

“Linette.”

“Linette. That’s a very pretty name.”

“My uncle calls me Nettie.”

“That’s very pretty too.”

Linette looks up at her through the swath of hair hanging over her wide brown eyes. “Did you see him? My uncle. Did he make it?”

“Who’s your uncle?”

“He used to tell me stories before bed. About the wolves and the stags and the lions. And you’re a wolf. You’re Arya Stark’s sister. She’s a wolf too.”

“Gendry,” Sansa whispers and a smile blooms on Nettie’s face. “You’re Gendry’s niece.”
Warning: there’s some more physical abuse in this, on a few occasions, but I’m not going into gory detail. It’s brief, but it’s there.

Beneath Sansa’s bed is a hidden entrance leading to a tunnel far too narrow for a grown woman. Sansa tries imagining those tunnels, how they wind beneath the Red Keep. Even if she did fit, how far would she be able to go? Not through any of the gates. Not on board any ship. Not even if she stole poison from Qyburn’s lair and killed Cersei first, for then the Queensguard would kill her. The world would be rid of Cersei, granted, and she would no longer be able to hurt Sansa’s family. But what would happen to the little girl who’s been sneaking into Sansa’s room at night because she’s worried about her uncle? No, Sansa must make it out of King’s Landing alive—and she must take Linette with her. She must protect her the way Gendry once protected Arya, when she was all alone in the world.

“Who else knows about the tunnels, Nettie?”

“Qyburn and the Queen. But they don’t know where they all go. Only the little birds know.”

“Did they send you to spy on me?”

Linette shakes her head. “Will m’lady escape? Like the princess in the story who sailed away? I can help, I can. Mother always said I was such a good helper. I even know my letters.”

“That’s very impressive. You’re a clever girl.”

Nettie lifts her chin with a proud smile. “I can spy on anyone you want. I can nick things.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s what I do anyway, m’lady. It’s all I do.”

“I’ll figure something out, all right? And if I do—when I do—will you come with me? Would you like that?”

“To Winterfell? To Gendry? Yes. I want to. I want to, m’lady, I want to. Do you promise? You have to promise.”

“All right,” Sansa says and she looks seriously into Nettie’s eyes. “If I escape, I’ll take you with me. I swear it on the old gods and the new. Now, run along. You can’t be in here when the maid comes to feed the fire.”

Morning brings with it Qyburn and a pungent salve he smears on Sansa’s cheek while smiling to
himself as though healing even a bagatelle like this brings him great joy. The pain dreamwine chased away during the night crept back at dawn, and now her whole cheek is throbbing. So, even though his touch is light, she focuses on her breathing, focuses on the peculiar smell to block out the pain. It’s new to her, that smell, like nothing Maester Wolkan or Grand Maester Pycelle ever used on her injuries.

“This salve,” she says through barely moving lips, as each tug of her facial muscles smart when she speaks, “is it your recipe, Grand Maester Qyburn? I don’t recognize it.”

He touches the empty space where his chains would hang had he truly been the Grand Maester—or even a Maester—but doesn’t correct her. “You know your salves, my lady?”

She indicates her thighs with a nod of her head. “I have some experience.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” He wipes his hands on a rag. “It is my recipe. One I’ve perfected over the years. I’m quite pleased with it. As are my patients.”

“It feels wonderful. Could do without the smell but…” She catches his gaze and gives a barely-there smile she makes sure reaches her eyes. “It does feel wonderful and I’m very grateful. Is it only for the pain?”

“No, it makes the swelling go down too, and helps you heal faster. I’ll leave a jar here, in your room.”

Smiling, he bows his head as though he’s about to leave, but Sansa keeps him in her chambers by asking more questions. Questions he seems more than happy to answer. And so she learns about the herbs and roots in the salve and how one absorbs it very well through the skin. How it won’t help one sleep the way dreamwine does. That she should stick to one during the day and the other during the night until the pain eases. And that he thinks they’ll be able to remove the stitches within three-four days. Nothing much of interest, nothing truly useful, but she does notice that talking about his craft loosens Qyburn’s usually quiet lips.

Once he’s left, Tisiph washes her, massages perfumed oils into her skin, and braids her hair before slipping Sansa into yet another girlhood dress. It doesn’t feel as bad anymore, looking like the echo of the girl she once was, but she can’t tell whether she’s adapted or become too numb.

Then comes a knock on the door and a maid carries into the room a breakfast tray she places on the table. “Her Grace thought you might want to break your fast alone today, m’lady.”

The maid curtsies and leaves, and Sansa glances down at the tray, but instead of finding soft-boiled eggs or bacon or bread, there’s nothing but lemon cakes. Twelve of them, in fact, standing on a platter in a perfect circle around a decoration of lemon leaves laid out to form the Stark sigil.

“Should I consider this an apology?” Sansa asks Tisiph. “Is this her way of kissing it better?”

“M’lady asks as if I know.”

“Don’t you?”

Tisiph watches her with none of her usual timid innocence. She’s calculating—she’s Shae—and it sends a shiver down Sansa’s spine.

“I can throw them out, if m’lady wants.”

“Our Queen has been kind enough to give me twelve lemon cakes in winter. I could never throw
Sansa shoves one of them into her mouth, barely chews it before shoving in another, and she knows that once she’s finished that platter, she’ll never want another damn lemon cake for as long as she lives. And in that moment, as the sweetness of her last shred of innocence turns to bitterness in her mouth, she’s never hated Cersei more.

Give her time, she thinks, forcing down the cake. This is only the beginning.

Tisiph sighs, shaking her head at Sansa. “Stop it. You’ll tear open your wound, chewing like that. I’ll eat them.”

Tisiph crams one cake after another into her mouth in such haste, it takes a beat for Sansa to react and grab the platter.

“I’m saving them for later,” she says, looking at the two remaining treats. “I am grateful to her. Lemon cakes are my favorites and the Queen is very kind to remember.”

“Then I’ll make sure m’lady get soft foods today.” As though the cakes sugar-coated her throat, Tisiph’s tone is once more sweet. “To spare m’lady’s jaw.”

No one comes for her all day, so Sansa stays in her room while Tisiph fusses over her. She lets out Sansa’s hair and takes her time brushing it through with slow strokes. She finds a book and reads aloud while Sansa rests in bed. At noon, when Tipish re-applies the salve, she even chills her fingers against the window glass before dipping them into the jar, and her touch leaves a comfortable cool behind. And she does procure soft foods for the midday meal and for supper: creamy soup with white fish that melts in Sansa’s mouth. Porridge dotted with applesauce. Scrambled eggs. Iced milk sweetened with honey.

She’s deceptive, that woman. Cut from the same cloth as Cersei. Shame still burns through Sansa when she remembers how Cersei once had her fooled. She’ll never fall into this trap. Not again. Not after everything she’s been through. She knows better now.

Linette sits on Sansa’s bed with her skinny little legs criss-cross, drowning in a tattered robe meant for someone much older. Soot dusts her cheeks, strings of cobweb cling to her hair, and dirt is caked beneath her finger-nails. Oh, if only Sansa could give the girl a bath, comb the lice from her hair, dress her in something warm and pretty, and fill her belly with good food. But all Sansa has is two leftover lemon cakes that have grown stale by now.

“What do I have to do?” Linette whispers, staring at the lemon cakes as if they were a grand feast.

“Oh, sweetling.” Instinctively, Sansa reaches for the child, but before actually touching her, Sansa pulls back her hands and folds them in her lap. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“I can tell m’lady things I’ve heard around the castle. Things the Queen says.”

“I want you to have them, Nettie. I saved them for you. Not because I want something, but because I thought you’d like them.”

Linette’s brown eyes flit between hers, drops to the platter, returns to Sansa’s face. Yesterday, she
was merely a bit red around the wound, but today her cheek is the color of a mashed plum.

“Did the Queen do that?”

“She did.”

“Hear her talking sometimes. She don’t know I’m in the walls.”

The child chews her lip, picks at the dirt under her nails. Then she sticks her hands into her deep pockets and fishes out a sewing needle, a darning needle, several skeins of thread in black, blue, gold, green, and red, and a small pair of scissors, and lays them down in a neat row in front of Sansa.

“If you make me a doll, I’ll tell you everything the Queen says, I will. If you please, m’lady. A pretty one. With red hair. Like m’lady.”

“I’d love to make you a doll, regardless.”

“Make me a doll”, Linette says and holds out her little hand, “and I’ll tell you everything I hear.”

Sansa’s heart breaks for the child who’s already learned that no gifts come for free in life, but she does take the proffered hand and shakes on the deal. Then Sansa scours the chamber for fabric. When she arrived, her nightgown was dirty, but by now it’s been washed and lies forgotten in a trunk at the foot of the bed. She’s only allowed to wear the garments saved for her by Cersei; no one will notice that it’s gone. Then she compares the threads to various fabrics in the room: the curtains, the coverlet, the throw pillows. Anything from which she can steal a strip and tack it back together. From the throw pillows she gets stuffing too, and prays no one will realize they’ve become slightly smaller. Soon she has enough fabric and stuffing for body and clothes, and she settles down next to Linette and starts working.

A lifetime has passed since Sansa last made a patchwork doll, but at least it’s not her first. She used to beg for fabric scraps from Mother for her own sewing projects, and once made patchwork dolls for herself, for Jeyne, for Beth, and even for Arya (even though that one was used for target practice before drowning in the hot springs). The memory brings a smile to her face, and as Sansa cuts pieces of fabric, as the needle weaves scrap together with scrap, she feels her pulse slowing and her shoulders dropping. It calms her to the point of forgetting everything around her: the pain in her cheek; the guards constantly posted outside her door; the terrible day waiting for her once dawn breaks, filled with new torments designed by Cersei especially for her.

When Linette whispers a wish to hear another story, Sansa tells her about a trapped princess, an evil step-father intent on marrying her, and a living tree who knew everybody’s secrets. Linette listens intently, mouth open and eyes wide, and every so often she pinches off a morsel of cake and sticks it into her mouth. Once only the details on the doll remain--sewing eyes with the blue thread, lashes with the black thread, and a small mouth and a full head of hair with the red thread--the lemon cake platter is empty. Crumbs are sprinkled over Linette’s lap and there’s powdered sugar in the corners of her blissfully smiling mouth.

“Did you like them?” Sansa asks and the child nods eagerly. “If I ever get more, I’ll save them for you, all right?” With a soft, low groan, Sansa stretches out her stiff back and rolls her shoulders and neck. “Almost done,” she says, picking up the blue thread. “Would you like me to tell you another story? Or I can tell you the one with the poisoned chalice again.”

“I know a story,” Linette whispers. “Don’t know if it was a story for true, but it sounded like a story. Like the stories m’lady tells.”
Qyburn must choose his little birds with care, for once Linette starts talking—even though it’s clear she seldom fully understands the things she repeats—Sansa realizes the girl has an excellent memory. She echoes a conversation between the Queen and Qyburn what must be almost word for word, and once she’s done, the doll is done too. Sansa tucks away everything she just learned to examine it once she’s alone again, and presents Linette with the doll. Her beaming smile sends a pang to Sansa’s heart. It must’ve been the expression Father expected when he gave her the doll. It pains her to admit it, but sometimes she thinks Father didn’t know her very well at all.

But he loved me, she thinks, hugging her body. At least he loved me.

Once Linette has crept back into the tunnels, Sansa gathers the needles, scissors, and thread, bundles them together with a thin strip of fabric, makes a cut on the underside of the mattress, and hides the sewing kit there in case she’ll need them again. Then she settles down by the window and, cheek leaned against the cool glass, watches the world outside. It’s been still for days, but now the black sky is heaving down snow, and the roaring sea crashes against the cliffs over and over as though it’s trying to punch its way into the heart of the city.

Is the weather the same at Winterfell? Are they fighting the dead now? Is Jon fighting the Night King—or is he on a ship, braving the stormy sea to get to her?

At night she often dreams about him climbing atop Rhaegal, flying to King’s Landing, and saving her. She dreams about him helping her climb atop the dragon, settling in behind her, wrapping his arm around her waist, and holding her close as the dragon takes to the skies—all with such a fervency she always wakes up sweaty and panting and needing him in a way she's never needed anyone.

It’s useless thinking about him. It’s useless dreaming about him. She mustn’t be sad and yearning. It only distracts her when she must be strong and brave and clever, and find a way home for her and Linette. And thanks to the secrets Linette shared, secrets Sansa now can examine in peace as dawn inches closer, the foundation of a plan forms in her mind.

By the time the Keep is waking up, hours before Sansa will be woken by Tisiph’s gentle voice, she curls up in bed and pulls the coverlet up to her chin. It’s dangerous, her plan, and far from foolproof, but it’s a start. It’s something to do, instead of sitting around like a bird in a cage and waiting for someone else to open the door.

Singing softly on a Lorathi song, Tisiph tidies up the room while Sansa does her best to drag herself from the warm cocoon of her bed. Eyes closed, she stretches out her body with a long yawn, and when she opens her eyes again, she sees something that yanks the sleepiness right out of her.

Tisiph’s standing in the middle of the room, holding a scrap of fabric between her fingers. A scrap of fabric Sansa must’ve missed when she hid the evidence of the dollmaking last night. Rubbing her thumb over the gold brocade, Tisiph shifts her gaze between the fabric and the throw pillows with a puzzled frown on her face.

Sansa can’t breathe. It can’t be over this soon, can it? Could the gods truly be that cruel?

But then the handmaiden tosses the fabric into the hearth without a comment and resumes her cleaning. All day, Sansa waits for someone to barge into her chamber and turn it upside down in search for her needles and scissors, but nothing happens. Nor does Tisiph ask her even once about
Sansa promised she wouldn’t call Joffrey a monster, it’s true, but she never said anything about vile creature. Not that the excuse does anything to temper Cersei’s anger. Glaring at Sansa, she leaves the dinner table and gives one of her guards an order, and soon after, ser Nyles enters the room. In his hand he holds a whip. Sansa expected it, not a whip per se, but a punishment—and yet her stomach flips unpleasantly. But she dutifully pulls down her dress to bare her back and waits for the pain. She bears the first two lashes without a sound, but on the third she lets out a whimper that grows into a strangled sob. The fourth lash doesn’t come. She hears ser Nyles labored breathing. Cersei’s bored sigh.

“Two more, ser,” Cersei says. “Get on with it.”

Afterwards, as ser Nyles leads Sansa through the Red Keep, he looks as if he’s about to cry, as if she was the one whipping him. As if every step made his back burn with pain. They run into ser Finn today too, and when he touches Nyles’ arm and asks him what’s wrong, Nyles pushes past his friend with such force he shoulders Finn into the wall. Expecting the knight to act the boy he is and retaliate, Sansa glances over her shoulder as Nyles drags her down the hallway. But Finn stands still and gazes after them with a troubled expression on his face. He even gives her a sad, sympathetic look, and then Sansa’s pulled around a corner and turns her attention to where she’s going lest she trips.

Once they’ve reached the stairs leading down to Qyburn’s lair, ser Nyles slows down, wipes his face, sniffles, and Sansa gives him a kind smile.

“I’m sorry that she’s making you hurt me. It’s not fair.”

“I don’t see why I have to do it,” he mutters. “Can’t she get ser Gregor to do it?”

Sansa’s blood runs cold at the wish, but she forces the smile to remain on her lips, to remain warm. “She picked you because you’re everything a lady would want in a knight. She knows that hurts me more than ser Gregor ever could.”

In ser Nyles eyes, she sees skepticism warring with a need for validation, and she wonders what Cersei has told him about her. That she’s a liar, perhaps, that she manipulates men into helping her. That there’ll come a time when she’ll try to use the weapon between her legs, and that ser Nyles must stay strong then and not fall for Sansa’s womanly viles.

It’s what many think of her, she knows. Even Littlefinger believed it came naturally to her, but it never did. She was innocent, that was all, and men are drawn to it because it makes them feel strong and manly and chivalrous. They’re drawn to it because they want to be the one who steals that innocence away.

Hers is long gone, now, torn to shreds by too many hands, and the little dove act is becoming increasingly hard to sell. Finally, skepticism wins. Ser Nyles brushes off her compliment with a huffed breath and nods at her to get into the lair.
Leaning her good cheek against her arms folded under her head, Sansa lies on her stomach while Qyburn tends to her back. The skin has torn, but at least she needs no stitches. As he smears that salve on her back and wraps her in bandages, she ponders how to best wrap him around her finger. Talk about his craft must be the only way. Testing the waters, she asks him questions about what he’s doing, pretending she needs chitchat to distract her from the pain, and he’s more than happy to oblige.

The next day, she calls Joffrey a worm-lipped bastard and earns herself more flogging (this time to the back of her thighs) and another trip to Qyburn. There she plays the inquisitive girl and asks him all about the different bundles of herbs hung up to dry around the lair. Once he’s done, he even shows her around a little, ostensibly eager to have an audience for once, and she prays her memory is even half as good as Linette’s.

As though he was lurking around in the hallways, waiting for their return, Sansa and ser Nyles run into Finn again on their way back to her chambers. His kind hazel eyes take in the tense ser Nyles, and there’s something hidden behind his friendly gaze. An intimate tenderness. A longing. And now she finally understands why Cersei chose ser Nyles as a watchdog: he’d never be tempted by the murdering whore Sansa Stark. He’d never be tempted by any woman.

“Everyone wants something,” Littlefinger whispers in her mind. “And when you know what a man wants you know how to move him. So move him, Sansa. Move them both before time runs out and you lose this little game.”

“Ser Finn,” she says with her sweetest smile. “Would you be so kind as to walk me to my chamber? I’m in terrible pain and need two strong men to lean on.”

The knights exchange looks but comply—glad to be in each other’s company, she gathers—and when she invites them both into her room so she can thank them properly, they agree to that too. She has nothing to offer them, and won’t send for a maid or Tisiph just yet, but she asks them to sit down at the round table while she remains on her feet. The reason why doesn’t escape them, and Nyles look suitably ashamed.

“I want to apologize to you, ser Nyles. You’re the one truly suffering for my bad behavior. But I’m happy to see that you have such a good friend in ser Finn. Swordplay always makes men the best of friends, doesn’t it? Did you spar often before my arrival?”

The men exchange another look, but this time it’s the intimate look of lovers sharing a secret joke they think she doesn’t understand. Hadn’t she been a lady, she would’ve rolled her eyes.

“It must be difficult for you, ser, now that ser Nyles has to follow me around all day. I know I would’ve missed my friend a great deal. You know,” she says, slowly, as though it occurs to her as she’s saying it, “whenever I sup with the Queen, I’m easily gone for two hours and my chamber is empty. No one ever comes here.”

She pauses and waits for her suggestion to register, but the men only watches her with confusion. Sansa clears her throat and steps a little closer.

“You’re not the first men I’ve met who prefer a… sword over a sheath. Perhaps it would be nice to have a private place where you can discuss those preferences without the risk of being interrupted?”

“My lady”—ser Nyles shoots to his feet, cheeks red and eyes dark—“whatever filth you’re insinuating, you are quite mistaken. If my father hears even a word of this—”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, ser. You must forgive me. My days here have been long and uneventful, and I
fear my imagination has run wild. You’re both very fond of… sheaths. I see that now. Yes, I was quite mistaken.”

Ser Nyles exhales harshly and stomps out of the room, but ser Finn stays for a beat, regarding her. Even in his armor, he looks innocent and sweet with a boy’s roundness to his cheeks and pimples underneath his downy beard. Hadn’t she already seen him sparring, she never would’ve guessed that he’s a formidable fighter.

“I don’t think you remember me, my lady,” he says. “I’m a few years younger than you. I sometimes played with prince Tommen.”

Sansa searches her memories of King’s Landing, but can’t place ser Finn’s face. “I’m sorry, ser.”

“It’s all right. I didn’t expect you to. You didn’t have it easy. No one would blame you for trying to make your visit here a little more bearable. But if you go to the Queen with these baseless accusations in hopes of earning yourself—”

“I won’t. I wouldn’t.” She takes another step closer. “Nor would I go to her if I came back to my chambers and found my sheets rumpled.”

“But your maid might.” He gives her a tired smile that makes him look fifty rather than seventeen. “You didn’t think of that, did you?”

“Well, you don’t have to use the bed. Do you? I don’t…” She drops her gaze to her hands, realizes she’s massaging them, and lowers them to her sides. “I’m not experienced. I only wanted to help.”

“I appreciate the gesture. And… My lady. Please. He doesn’t like it, punishing you. Will you try? To behave.”

“I will.”

She won’t, not yet. She still needs Qyburn to teach her things and unless he invites her to his lair, she won’t have any excuse to talk to him. Soon it will be clear that Jon isn’t coming, and Cersei will bring this mummer’s farce to its climax, and then Sansa must be ready. Insulting Joffrey’s memory can’t be helped.

At breakfast the following day, the words incestuous spawn leave her mouth. Cersei rises calmly and rounds the table. Her sweeping red skirts fall from the black bodice like a river of blood and the smile that spreads on her face is so cold it chills Sansa to the bone. She’s gone too far. The lack of time made her careless, and as Cersei stalks closer to her, she knows that this time the punishment won’t be as easy to bear.

“I’ve always been kind to you,” Cersei says, calmly, softly. “I’ve always treated you well. I even invited you into my family, let you sup with my children, and how do you repay me? By scheming with Olenna Tyrell to murder my son. By sitting here, at my table, and insulting me to my face. I could’ve thrown you in a cell. I could’ve had Tyrion rape you. But I wanted to treat you well, to treat you like a lady, and all I get is insolence. I’ve punished you the wrong way, I realize that now. You’re used to punishment. I believe you even like it. The attention you get. The sympathy. Even Qyburn dotes on you, pretty little girl that you are. Pretty little dove. Do you remember what I did whenever Tommen was naughty? It’s rather effective.”

Sansa gawks at Cersei in horror. She does remember how Tommen was punished. His skin was never bruised or torn, no, never the little prince. Instead they found a poor child who had done nothing wrong. A whipping boy, they called him. If they’ve found out that Linette visits her every
night, that they play with the dolls and Sansa tells her stories and Linette tells her whispers, if they
beat little Nettie…

Sansa draws in a shuddering breath. “Please don’t. Your Grace. I’m sorry. I am. I’ll never say
another word about Joffrey. I swear it. Punish me and I’ll be good. I’ll take the punishment.”

“Yes, you will. You’ll have to watch.”

“No. Please don’t. Please.”

“It’s too late for that. I hope this will make you learn, Sansa.”

Ser Gregor ensures she’s seated on a chair, and she can do nothing but wait. An eternity passes
before the door opens, but it’s not Linette who’s ushered inside but Tisiph. Then comes Tyrion and
from his hands spills a fat golden chain. Tisiph’s eyes move from Sansa’s tear-streaked cheeks to
Cersei’s cold smirk to Tyrion’s ashen face to the chain. It sways lightly, reflecting the light of a
hundred candles.

Something in Tisiph changes. A tremor travels across her features and Sansa knows that look, has
worn it herself too many times. Tyrion standing there with the golden chain terrifies Tisiph so badly
she’s paralyzed.

“Five should suffice,” Cersei says. “Across her back.”

Cersei’s voice pulls Tisiph back, and as easily as stepping into silk slippers, she slips back into her
meek persona and with wide, tearfilled eyes, she pleads at Tyrion no and please and m’lord.

Tyrion is trembling. He’s dirty and scruffy and tears run down his dust-covered cheeks, leaving pale
trails behind. The chain jangles in his hand.

Cersei smiles, wide and bright, and her eyes shine like wildfire. “Now, Tyrion.”

Tyrion glances at ser Gregor, who’s looming over him with a hand on the hilt of his sword.

“I’m sorry,” Tyrion whispers and raises his hand.

Tisiph sobs through all five lashes, sobs all the way to Qyburn’s lair, sobs herself through his
examination--something that leaves Qyburn unperturbed while each sob burrows its claws into
Sansa’s heart and tears it apart. Even if it’s an act, this exaggerated sobbing, the pain is real. Sansa
still feels every lash she took to her body and now she’s inflicted that pain on someone else and it
doesn’t matter that Tisiph might be Cersei’s spy. It doesn’t matter at all.

Standing by the head side of the examining table, she takes Tisiph’s hand and holds it as Qyburn
tends to her back. I’m sorry, she says with her tear-filled eyes, I’m so sorry, and she thinks she sees
forgiveness in Tisiph’s. This won’t change her loyalties, not if she values her life and whatever gold
Cersei’s giving her, but in some odd way, it feels as if they’re in this together.

“You can get dressed,” Qyburn says. “Lady Sansa, would you mind staying for a moment? I’d like
to take a look at your lacerations. And I believe it’s time to remove those stitches.”

Tisiph looks at Sansa with red-rimmed eyes. “Do you want me to stay, m’lady?”

“No, you should rest. Send ser Nyles back here once he’s helped you to your room.”

“Ser Gregor can walk you to your room, my lady.” Smiling, Qyburn gestures at the examining table.
“Now, let’s take care of those stitches.”

Once he’s finished with her face, Sansa steps out of her dress and lies down on her stomach. And while he smears more salve over her lacerations she chews on what to say. She has to give him something or he’ll grow suspicious, and the only thing he values is knowledge. There’s only one thing she can think of that would fascinate him that she’d feel comfortable sharing. Not Arya, who could be on a ship right now, wearing someone else’s face. Best not tell them about the things she can do. Not Bran, whose knowledge makes him too valuable. They would either steal him or kill him. But Jon... Could she tell him about Jon? Perhaps Qyburn already knows. They seem to know an awful lot about what’s happened in the North. Thanks to Littlefinger, she thinks, or even Tyrion. Probably both.

Sansa slips back into her dress and glances at Qyburn through her lashes, doing her best to look nervous and shy without overselling it.

“Yes, my lady? Does something else ail you? Women’s troubles?”

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “Was he always like this, Grand Maester Qyburn? Ser Gregor, I mean. He’s so… different. He never says a word. Has he forgotten the common tongue?”

“You have no reason to be frightened, my lady. I created him this way. To be the perfect servant for the Queen, and the Queen doesn’t want you harmed.” His gaze glides to her still-bruised cheek. “Well…” He gives her an almost fatherly kind of smile. “So long as the Queen or I don’t order him to hurt you, he won’t. You’ll be safe.”

_Ten?_ she wants to ask. _Why does he obey you? Why does he obey Cersei?_ But it’s too soon for that kind of question and instead she asks, “So he hasn’t deteriorated? Since you created him.”

“Not at all. Why do you ask?”

“Well…” Sansa rubs her palm with her thumb, guilt twisting her stomach. She can't. She'll have to find another way. "I was just wondering. Thank you, Grand Maester.”

"Is it your brother who worries you? Jon Snow. Tyrion Lannister told us. A red priestess, wasn't it? Who resurrected your brother."

Sansa blinks and it takes her a beat to gather herself, to decide how forthright she can be without hurting Jon. But they already know. They know all the things Tyrion has managed to find out ever since Jon set foot on Dragonstone--and that must be a great deal.

_They might even know how I feel,_ she thinks and Linette’s story echoes in her mind and it feels like she’s drowning. _Oh, they know._

“My lady?”

Sansa clenches her hands into fists and snaps herself out of it. She can’t go weak now. She must stick to the plan.

“Yes, Grand Maester Qyburn. It’s Jon. I worry he’s going to end up like ser Gregor. That he’ll forget who he is. That he’ll be little more than a wight.”

Eyes glittering with intrigue, Qyburn gestures at her to follow him to his desk, where he grabs quill, ink, and a fat tome which he flips open to a blank page. “I’ll do anything I can to assuage your fears, my lady, if you answer a few of my questions. Do you mind my taking notes?”
She shakes her head and he asks her about Melisandre, the ritual, and Jon, whether he bleeds, feels pain and hunger and thirst, moves his bowels, sleeps, and even if he can get an erection. She blushes so hard on the last question, Qyburn pauses his note-taking to watch her with amusement.

“I wouldn’t know, Grand Maester.”

“Aren’t Jon and the Dragon Queen lovers?”

“My brother and I don’t discuss… that.”

“Well, if he bruises and bleeds and his heart beats, I trust everything works as it should.” Qyburn hums thoughtfully. “I think I have a few books on the subject. It’s always fascinated me. I’ll give them a read.”

“Will you tell me what you find?” Sansa asks in such an eager voice, he gives her a proper once-over, and she stammers out an answer to the question in his eyes, “I must admit, as worried as I am about my brother, I also find this subject fascinating. Is that wrong of me?”

“Wrong? No, not at all. You have a curious mind. Never feel ashamed about that. You’re welcome to visit my laboratory any time. I do my best work when I explain my process to an eager listener. In fact, I’m doing a fascinating procedure tomorrow, if you’d like to watch.”

A smile blooms on Sansa’s face. “Yes, Grand Maester. I’d love to.”

On her way back to her chamber, her heart races in her chest and she keeps glancing at the Mountain through the corner of her eye, but he lumbers on without as much as looking at her and her mind is free to wander. To think of Jon. They already knew, and nothing she revealed can hurt him, yet that guilt lingers in her gut. Guilt and worry. Two useless emotions. Jon won’t come. She comforts herself with that. Jon won’t come and she has a game to play.
“How worried should I be about him?”

From the ramparts, Dany watches the Baratheon bastard swing his hammer. He’s augmented it with dragonglass, and is now testing its weight with Arya and lady Brienne’s squire as an audience.

“He has no connections,” Varys says, “and while all the North chose Ned Stark’s bastard for their king, they did so because Ned Stark was one of the most respected men in Westeros. The same can’t be said for the king who drank himself through his reign. The southern houses will never support his bastard so long as he remains a bastard. And the only person who could legitimize him never would."

Inching closer to her, he adds in a lower tone, “It’s the she-wolf on whom you should focus your attention, Your Grace.”

“How so? I postponed my war to help the North. I let her brother go after he betrayed me. She should be grateful.”

“And I’m certain she is. But Jon Snow is sailing himself right into a trap. If I know Cersei at all, she’s going to kill him and lady Sansa. Bran Stark isn’t truly a Stark anymore. So who is left standing? Who will warden the North for you, once you’ve killed Cersei and taken the throne?”

“If I were to pardon ser Jorah for his crimes and reinstate him as head of his house—”

“Then you’d offend the North. Your Grace, I’m afraid it has to be a Stark. You and lady Arya were off to a good start, were you not? A few bumps have appeared along the way, granted, but perhaps it’s time to smooth them out before they become hinders?”

“Yes,” she says, slowly, following Arya’s graceful movements as she dances around Gendry and shows off with her little sword. “I need to get to know her. But if she’s anything like her brother…”

“I’ve always found little birds more than helpful in this type of situation.”

“Little birds?”

“Children, Your Grace. No one ever suspects children. Pay them well in food and treats and they’ll whisper secrets in your ear.”

“And where would I find one of these little birds?”

“You don’t, My Queen.” Varys simpers. “I do.”
Varys finds her a ratty Wintertown girl of eight or nine with long hair the color of hay. Her tattered clothes hang around a skinny body, her lips are dry and cracked, and when she stands before Daenerys, she’s too intimidated to look the Mother of Dragons in the eye.

“Your Grace,” she says with a trembling voice and attempts a curtsy.

Dany settles down in one of the two armchairs by the hearth. “I hear you have whispers for me?”

The girl nods absentmindedly, gaze locked on the plate standing on the table. A plate of oat cakes full of nuts and dried berries. Her little mouth hangs open and her eyes are as large as dragon eggs.

“Sit down, child, have an oatcake, and tell me what you’ve heard.”

After a glance at Varys, who encourages the girl with a nod, she sits down at the edge of the seat, as though she’s afraid she’ll soil the wood with her dirty clothes. Then, so quickly Dany doesn’t notice until she hears a crunch, the girl nicks an oatcake. She’s almost finished it before the secrets spill from her crumb-covered lips, and Daenerys learns that Arya and Gendry did travel together. That she once posed as a stonemason’s child, as a boy, as the Hound’s daughter. She’s starved and worked and fought for her life, tooth and nail and Needle, and that she knows better than any of the highborns in the castle--except for Daenerys herself--the plight of the smallfolk. That it concerns her more than whatever ails the rich. A girl after Dany’s own heart, it seems.

Once the child is finished, Dany encourages her to take another oatcake, and the girl slips one into the pockets of her skirts.

“What’s your name, child?”

“Sally,” she whispers.

“Sally.” Dany touches the child’s pallid cheek with a gentle smile. “Do you have hungry brothers and sisters as well?”

The girl shakes her head. “Cousins, Your Grace. My mother and father are dead. Died in the war of the five kings. My uncle’s letting me stay with him as long as I cook and clean. Quite good at it, I am. I make an excellent rabbit’s stew. At least that’s what Father always said. Getting hard to find rabbits now, though.”

“Well, if you hear anything else, even if it seems unimportant, tell me and you’ll have more oatcakes or rabbits or whatever else you need.”

The girl nods, eyes shining, and scurries out of the room. It’s not until then Dany realizes that the girl nicked three cakes--not one--but it only makes her laugh. Sleight of hand is a valuable trait in a spy.

Arya eats more with her fingers than her knife and fork, and after washing down the food with ale, she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Her sister would’ve been appalled by this behavior, but Dany is more well-traveled and knows how much etiquette differs from culture to culture. And she always was very good at adapting. Smiling to herself, she lays down her cutlery, breaks off a
piece of kidney pie crust, scoops up filling, and takes a bite.

They’re in a smaller chamber, just the two of them with Grey Worm, Missandei, Varys, and two bloodriders. So far, Arya has eaten in a silence Dany wouldn’t call companionable, but when she notices Dany eating pie her way, she does shoot her a quick, encouraging smile. Time to break the ice, then. Time to make her understand how good Daenerys will be for the North and all the other kingdoms.

With Missandei’s help, Dany tells the Stark girl about her time in Essos, and as Dany speaks of freeing slaves and helping those less fortunate, how she’d like to do the same in Westeros, Arya’s attention shifts slowly from pie to queen, and by the end, admiration shines in her eyes.

Encouraged, Dany insists on supping with Arya every evening, and it doesn’t take long until Arya is so enamored by her she suggests they spend their days together as well. Now that her siblings are gone, she’s the Stark in Winterfell everyone turns to for advice and help, and by staying by her side, Daenerys gets a good look at how Arya would do as a wardeness. She leads meetings, talks to the bannermen, oversees the work in the courtyard, and confers with ser Davos and Maester Wolkan about the minutiae of everyday life at Winterfell. She makes certain Dany is always comfortable and protected, and that Samwell Tarly and his wife are seated far from her. She even insisted on throwing Jaime Lannister back into the cell where he belongs so that he can’t hurt Dany and her children.

And while Daenerys never sees as much as a hint of discord among her new people, she learns from Sally that dissidence sometimes exposes its tender spring-green leaves, but that Arya to pulls it out every time, root and all, before it grows strong.

Yes, leadership suits Arya Stark. That much is clear. And Sally has proven herself invaluable. She sneaks into Daenerys’ chambers most nights and she always has something important to share, something that helps Dany in strengthening her friendship with Arya. A friendship that affects the lords as well. Now the lords and ladies treat her with the respect and reverence she deserves. But then she always knew this would happen. The Northerners are a stubborn lot. Stubborn and foolish like sheep. Too afraid of the dragon to see the savior behind the scales. They needed their leader to show them the way—a true leader—and Jon was never that.

What leader would leave their people to fight a war on their own?

“You never told me how you learned how to fight?” Daenerys asks over supper even though she knows the answer.

She amuses herself this way, tests Arya this way. But Arya must know better than to lie to her queen, for her answers always match whatever Sally has already told Daenerys.

Arya finishes chewing her mouthful of pie—game and onions, this time—before replying, “I learned it at King’s Landing. My father arranged for me to have sword lessons. I lost my teacher, but I never stopped practicing. Then I traveled with the Hound for a while, he taught me more. Brienne’s helped me too.”

“I heard Jon gave you that sword. He hasn’t taught you anything?”

“There was never any time for that.”
“You must be worried about him and your sister. Do you trust Cersei will honor the agreement?”

“Cersei is the least trustworthy person I’ve ever met. But she’s not stupid. So long as she wants power more than she wants revenge, Jon and Sansa will be all right.”

“And what if she doesn’t? You’ll be the head of your house. How do you feel about that?”

“I love my siblings, Your Grace.”

“Of course you do. But your brother abandoned you, abandoned all of us, for a hopeless cause.”

“Jon does that.”

“Mm, he does. But a leader shouldn’t.”

“He’s not their leader anymore. Sansa is.”

Dany sips her wine. “I hear that your father’s friendship with Robert Baratheon greatly benefited the North—and the peace. I hoped Sansa and I would become good friends as well, but I fear she’ll never love me.”

“Sansa is friends with duty, Your Grace. If you make her wardeness, she’ll do her duty. You don’t need to worry about her.”

“And with what are you friends, Arya? Duty? Loyalty? ...Opportunity?”

Dany pauses to let the worm dangle between them, but Arya doesn’t take the bait. She only shoves another forkful of pie into her mouth. But there’s no doubt in Daenerys’ mind that Arya thinks about that opportunity, how much good she could do as a wardeness unlike her traditional sister. Loyalty to her family holds her back, that is all. But time is running out, and with a little luck, Cersei will execute Jon and Sansa for Daenerys, and Arya will never have to make a difficult choice.

Unless they’re working with Cersei, Dany thinks. But if they are, even Arya’s loyalty would wane.

“Your Grace?” Arya says with a soft voice. “The Dothraki. They should’ve been here by now.”

Daenerys watches her carefully. Her tone is casual, but her lip-biting betrays her nerves. She must know, then. Perhaps Bran saw it in one of those visions of his.

“They’re not coming. I sent them back south with ser Jorah.”

Nodding, Arya takes another bite and chews it while she thinks over the news. “I think that was wise, Your Grace. They’re not built for winter. They’d only make more soldiers for the Night King and my bannermen never wanted them here in the first place.” Her eyes widen. “Sansa’s bannermen, I mean!”

With a smirk, Dany lays her hand over Arya’s and gives it a pat. “We’ll see about that.”

Arya ducks her head, bites her lip again, and when she looks back at Daenerys, stars shine in her eyes. “When I was little, I worshiped Visenya Targaryen. She was a great warrior with a mighty dragon. I never thought I’d meet someone like her. But here you are, Your Grace. I don’t care about the Dothraki. We don’t need them or the Unsullied or even my brother. It’s you we need.”

“And I’m not going anywhere.”

Dany holds Arya’s gaze for a moment, lets her smirk grow into an intimate smile, and she feels it,
deep in her chest, how their bond grows even stronger. Given time, they’ll be as close as her and Missandei.

“She was talking to Gendry about being a wardeness,” Sally says with her mouth full of cheese. “She said she’s tempted, she did. That she could do a lot of good and all.”

“And Gendry?”

Sally shrugs. “He just wants to be a blacksmith. That’s all he wants.”

“He doesn’t want to marry her? They seem close.”

“Thought he was a bastard, though? Arya’s a lady. Don’t look it, but she is.”

“Yes.” Dany smiles. “But--”

A courier interrupts them by delivering a letter to Dany. She reads it quickly before handing it to Varys, while Sally watches them. Almost as if she’s trying to figure out what the note says, but then her agile fingers steal a whole block of cheese from the plate and slips it into a bag tied around her delicate frame. Dany lets it slide. The girl can have all the cheese in Winterfell if she wants.

“Do you know your letters, Sally?” she asks and the girl shakes her head. “Hm, perhaps we should teach you. It could become useful. Wouldn’t you say, Varys?”

“Indeed.” He gives the child an oily smile and lays the letter on the table. “That will be all, Sally. Fill your pockets, now, and be on your way.”

Once the child’s gone, Dany turns to Varys. “What do you think? Should I meet with him?”

“It sounds dangerous, Your Grace. I’d advise against it.”

“He wants me.”

She catches her reflection in the looking-glass and adjusts the curly wisps of hair framing her face. *He wouldn’t be the first man to switch sides because he wants me.*

“If Tyrion were here, I think he would--”

“But he’s not here. He left us,” she says but Varys doesn’t comment. ”You disagree.”

Varys tucks his hands into his sleeves and lowers his gaze.

“Well,” Dany says, ”I have little doubt he helped Cersei abduct Lady Stark. In times of war, you learn a man’s true character, and he’s a Lannister, through and through. His advice only ever hindered me. Sometimes I think he was sabotaging me from the start. Isn’t it strange how things are going my way now that he’s gone? He's the one who convinced me Jon was in love with me, when all Jon did was lie. I’m closer to Arya Stark than I ever was with him. The lords love me. Sally says the smallfolk love me as well. That they drink toast to my health at the Smoking Log.”

Dany turns to the looking glass more fully, and inspects her simple gray dress. A drab thing like that might fit the conservative lords she spends her days with, but for this she needs something bolder.
And she needs to listen to her own gut instead of her advisers. Varys might’ve been helpful lately, but she’ll never forget what he told her on Dragonstone. He’s only loyal to her as long as it serves him. She’d be a fool to trust him blindly.

“Send in my handmaidens,” she says. “I’m going.”

Bundled up in Northern clothing that hides their brown skin, Grey Worm and Sharp Spear lead Daenerys through a bustling Wintertown. Tradesmen are packing up their wares and rickety stalls. Women chase after children who should be in bed by now. Whores with painted lips and pocked skin slink out on the street to entice the lonely. No one pays attention to the woman wearing a gray cloak. No one knows that generous hood conceals hair of silver and gold.

The Smoking Log smells of food and ale and flatulence. A man with a lute plays in one corner and the patrons are more interested in him and the food on their tables than the newcomers who weave through the throng and enters a private room in the back. In there, at a table set with plates, cutlery, and two tankards, sits Euron Greyjoy. Alone.

“My Queen.” He rises, bows, and never takes his black-lined eyes off her.

Dany takes her seat while the Unsullied position themselves behind her. “You come alone? How brave. Or is stupid more accurate?”

“Oh, you’re not going to kill me.” He flashes a smile, teeth gleaming. “You’re too interested in what I have to say.”

“You’re Cersei’s errand boy. I’m interested in what she has to say.”

“She doesn’t know I’m here.”

Euron leans back in his chair, legs spread wide. His smirk is infectious; she can’t help a smirk of her own quirking her lips. She was right, then. A woman always knows.

A serving maid enters the room with a tray, and Dany pulls the hood tighter around her head. Not that the maid notices. She only has eyes for Euron and his wicked smile. With hazel eyes, long brown hair, clear complexion, and a slender figure, she’s a pretty thing. But even though she sways her hips and shows off her cleavage when she sets down glazed ham, roast potatoes, bread, and a pitcher of ale on the table, Euron’s eyes are locked on Dany.

“I ordered for us,” he says. “Thought you’d like that.”

Dany moves her gaze over the food, then looks up at the maid. “I’m quite fond of your Northern pies. What do you have to offer?”

“Mushroom or kidney, m’lady.”

“Mushroom.”

The maid curtsies and rushes out of the room, and Dany turns her gaze to Euron. “You think I like men making my decisions for me?”

Grinning, Euron pops a potato into his mouth. “Thought you’d appreciate a real man after that
brooding twat I hear you’ve taken for a lover. Can't be big, little man that he is.” With a swift kick
against the leg of the table, Euron slides his chair backwards, enough to draw her attention to the
bulge between his legs. "You deserve a big man."

He pours ale into their tankards without breaking eye contact, without spilling a drop, and puts down
the pitcher with a cocky smile. When the maid returns with the pie, he shifts in his seat to keep
Daenerys in view, and when they’re alone again and she sensually slips out of the cloak to reveal
herself and the daring, blood-red dress she wore beneath it, drool practically drips from his mouth
and into the tankard still in his hand.

Dany straightens her back with a slow breath and waits for him to look his fill.

Finally, Euron licks his perpetually smirking lips and leans closer. “Cersei has hired the Golden
Company. Qyburn has built more Scorpions. They’re ready for you. Unless you have someone on
the inside, someone who can open the gates for you and your Dothraki hordes and your Unsullied
armies, someone who can dismantle the Scorpions before you arrive, taking the city will be difficult.”

The pie is rather good with its creamy mushroom filling and crisp crust, and she takes her time tasting
it before putting down the fork to sip ale. He wants her to ask for what price, she can tell, but she
knows well what price he has in mind for his help. It's written plainly on his eager face.

“I hear there’s wildfire hidden beneath the city,” she says, casually.

“Some, that’s true. But she used up most of it when she blew up the sept.”

“Still. Wouldn't it be easier for you to deliver Cersei to me? Do that and then we’ll talk.”

“She’s well-guarded, Your Grace. I’m one of the best fighters in the world, but not even I would
take on the Mountain. He’s not human, that one. If you want to take the city, you’ll have to attack it.”

“I’m not here to be Queen of the ashes.”

“If you’re the Dragon Queen, you don’t have much of a choice in the matter. Fire tends to leave
ashes behind.”

“I’ve come to Westeros to make things better. To break the wheel. To build a new world.”

“How are you to build a new world unless you tear down the old one first?”

“That’s fair. But the people of King’s Landing--”

“The people of King’s Landing hate you," he says, unperturbed by her icy glare. "Every man,
woman, and child know who burned the food that was to feed them in winter. They know who
burned the farmers and fishermen and cobblers on the battlefield. They know who killed husbands
and fathers and brothers and sons without a care in the world.”

“I did what I had to, to win the war. To take the throne from a queen who oppresses them. And soon
they’ll learn that I saved them all from the dead. They’ll be grateful.”

“They don’t know about the dead. They only know of one threat: you. And right now they’re
watching Cersei prepare their city for fighting off the Dragon Queen and her savages, who are
coming to kill their brothers and rape their wives and take their children as slaves. You won’t be
welcome. She’s made sure of that. They love her. They chant her name in the streets. Good Queen
Cersei, they call her. It’s her they want, not you.”
A fire burns deep in Dany’s belly, sears through her veins until her blood boils and her hands are clenched so hard her nails bite into her palms. She’s going to burn Cersei and feed her to Drogon for all the horrible lies she’s spreading. Then she’ll burn her brothers too and every living Lannister remaining in Westeros.

With a deep breath, she forces herself to calm. “Then the North will tell them. They will tell the East and the West and the South.”

“The North? The moment you kill the Night King, they’ll find a way to kill you and your dragons.”

“The North loves me.”

Euron laughs. “You don’t know the North. They’re only loyal to other Northerners. They don’t want a Targaryen ruler.”

“Do you take me for a fool? I’ve spent weeks in the North. If I say they love me, they love me.”

“And I spend my days in ports and taverns. I know what the people truly think. You’re the most powerful woman in the world. So powerful her advisers are too scared to tell her the truth. But I’m not scared of you.”

“Then tell me the truth, Euron Greyjoy.”

“The North wants you dead. They can’t wait to get rid of you. I hear that Arya Stark has a sharp blade. That she killed Petyr Baelish in the Great Hall. That she killed Walder Frey and all his sons with poison. The moment you stop being useful to her, you’re next.”

“You’re lying.”

“Yeah? Pull that hood back up, go back outside, and sit among the smallfolk for a while, then. Listen to them. Listen to what they say when they don’t think anyone important is listening.”

“I have a spy. She tells me differently.”

Euron leans forward, elbows on the table. “And you trust her?”

Daenerys thinks back on the first time she met Sally, on their every meeting since. Everything she’s shared as proven to be true.

Unless Varys and Arya are working together. Unless they tell Sally what they want me to believe. For Gendry’s sake. They want the Usurper’s bastard on the throne, in case Jon falls. That’s why no one ever told me the truth about his identity.

“What the people think now doesn’t matter, though,” Euron continues with a shrug. “Once you sit on the throne, they’ll get used to it. Like they get used to any other ruler. But you belong on that throne, and you need someone by your side who sees that. Who wants that as much as you do. Do you think Tyrion has kept all your secrets to himself? No, he’s spent his days singing all sorts of songs to his sister. She knows everything she needs to know about you, your strategies, your strengths, and your weaknesses. He’s told her about the dragonglass on your island, and now King’s Landing is full of bolts and daggers and arrows.”

And my treasure? she wants to ask, heart in her throat. What about my treasure?

“Take the city with me, My Queen. And when the dead comes, we’ll fight them from King’s Landing. And if we fail, we’ll fly to Essos and take every city there. We’ll rule all the living,
together, and leave Westeros to the dead."

“That’s your price? My hand in marriage.”

“Ever since I was a little boy, I’ve wanted to marry the most beautiful woman in the world. I always heard that was Cersei. Then people said it was that frigid cunt I abducted. They can’t have seen you, Daenerys Stormborn. They can’t have seen you and the fire in your eyes. Who’d settle for anything less after seeing you?”

The smirk returns to Dany’s lips. “You don’t strike me as the marrying kind.”

“Seeing you arrive at the Dragonpit, this tiny silver-haired girl atop a huge black dragon… I knew I had to have you. I knew you and I were meant to fly the skies together.”

Daenerys arches a brow. “You’ll ride my dragons?”

“I’m a man of magic.” He touches the horn hanging from a leather string around his neck. “I stole this from the warlocks in Qarth. With this, I can control one of your dragons. I can be its rider. When the kraken weds the dragon, Your Grace, let all the world beware. Together, we’ll rule it all and anyone who’d oppose us will burn. We’ll burn them together.”

After Euron leaves, Dany pulls the hood back up and stays to finish her meal and ponder his proposal. She’d have to destroy that horn, of course, but other than that… He speaks of a fire in her eyes, but in his she sees a storm and she can’t help but wonder what it would be like to let that storm pull her in. Jon was always too little for her, but with Euron by her side she could do what her son was meant to do, had that witch not stolen him from her. She could conquer the world.

The serving maid returns, her hips no longer swaying, and as she starts clearing the table, she asks Daenerys whether everything was to her satisfaction.

“It was, thank you. I quite enjoyed the pie.”

“The secret is browning the butter.” The serving maid smiles. “Would m’lady like something else?”

“Your best wine.”

She should return to Winterfell to talk this through with Varys, but instead Dany sips wine and mulls over Euron’s proposal until the wine has her cheeks flushed and her belly warm. It doesn’t help her reach a conclusion, though, and she heads to her dragons. This is a decision she must make on her own with wind caressing her hair and heat burning between her legs. It’s when her thoughts are sharpest, her mind clearest, and she flies and flies through the night until the light of morning kisses the horizon.

It’s tempting, finding Euron at White Harbor, telling him to sail south and prepare for her arrival, meeting her armies on the Kingsroad, and traveling with them to the gates of King’s Landing to finally take what was stolen from her. To burn Cersei and Jon and Sansa and Tyrion and anyone else who has betrayed her. But as she watches a thousand rays break through the clouds, Dany knows she is the Princess That Was Promised, the light who brings the dawn. Once the people of King’s Landing learn of her saving the world, they will welcome her. No matter what lies Cersei spreads.
It’s tempting, finding Euron, but Cersei might not be the only one spreading lies. With that horn, he doesn't need Dany, and if he wants her dragons, of course he’ll make her doubt those closest to her. Of course he'd want her to abandon the people who've welcomed her so warmly. Yes, Dany must kill the Night King, be celebrated as a hero, and arrive at King’s Landing with all the North behind her, cheering and chanting her name. If she closes her eyes, she can already hear their voices in the wind.

She doesn’t see the army of the dead until she’s so close to Winterfell she can hear the cries of battle too. A milky curtain of mist surrounds the castle, clings to both ground and sky, hiding the grey mass gathered outside the castle walls. Thousands upon thousands moving closer to the gates. The living shout orders, pour oil from the battlements, shoot fire arrows into the crowd. The dead walks on.

Dany leans forward; Drogon and Rhaegal beat their wings harder.

Some have already found their way past the castle walls. She can hear the din from the courtyard even up here as she incinerates horde after horde. People run along the walls, firing more arrows, dropping more oil. Part of Winterfell is burning—the stables, she thinks, and part of the wall has been torn down by giants and mammoths.

Someone shouts about the Scorpion and she turns to look over her shoulder. Gendry and Brienne’s squire are loading it and she’s one breath from saying *dracarys*, to burn it to ashes before they take the opportunity to take her down, but then she sees it—what sent them to the Scorpion—and that breath catches in her throat.

Through the misty clouds comes Viserion, blue and terrible, mounted by the Night King. Numbness spreads through her body, but then rage chases it away and instinct propels her and Drogon forward. They slam into the hollow shell that once was her beautiful child, and she clings to Drogon’s scales as they spin through the air. As they hurtle. Drogon's body crashes into a tower and falls to the ground like a sack of flour, and Dany tumbles onto the cold ground. Above them, what once was Viserion opens its maw and she can’t believe it’s over this soon. It wasn’t supposed to end this way. She's the Princess That Was Promised! She was meant for more than this. But then Viserions shatters into a million shards of ice that rain down on the ground to the sound of Gendry’s whoops of victory.

The Night King lies only a handful of yards from her. Groggily, he rolls over on his hands and knees to push himself to stand and this is her chance. One word and it’s all over. One word.

“Dracarys.”

Drogon doesn’t move.

“Dracarys!”

No smile twists the Night King’s blue lips, and yet she feels him mocking her, taunting her. There are no weapons at his hips, no weapons in his hands, but he could hurt her, easily, squeeze the life from her with those icy hands wrapped around her throat. The Night King moves closer. She scrambles back against the solid warmth of Drogon. He’s so close now, so close, and she doesn’t know what to do. Drogon is breathing at least, its body moving slowly against her own, and she prays for her child to wake up wake up wake up!
A bolt hits the Night King in the chest. For the space of a breath, she thinks he’s defeated, but the bolt doesn’t pierce him. It shatters, just like Viserion, and falls to the ground in a sad heap of wood and obsidian.

When the Night King turns his gaze toward the wall, toward Gendry and the Scorpion, strong hands close around Dany’s upper arms. She’s pulled to her feet and carried off. She cries out her dragon’s name and finally Drogon shakes itself to its paws like a wet dog and lifts off. The Night King follows its flight for a beat, then fades back into the mist, and she’s carried into a large tent a good distance from the caste walls.

Missandei and Maester Wolkan fuss over her. Varys is there too, and others who have fled the castle, but she can’t make sense of their words. Her children are out there all alone. If the Night King has more javelins, they won’t live long.

“Your Grace!”

Maester Wolkan’s voice breaks through her thoughts. He tells her her ankle is sprained, her palms scraped, and her knees bruised, but she feels none of it. She must get back out there. She must kill the Night King. She must kill him for what he did to her child.

The tent flaps as and she senses, more than hears, that it's Drogon who's landed outside. Dany sighs with relief, pushes away the people around her, and slips back into the clothes and boots she didn’t even notice Wolkan removed to examine her scrapes and bruises. Missandei is instantly by her side, steadying her. Her foot feels fine. Wolkan tells her the pain will come later, but she doesn’t care about later. She only cares about now.

Then comes the most awful sound in the world. One she never thought she’d hear again.

*Rhaegal.*

Dany flings the tent flap aside and stares up at the sky in horror. High above Winterfell, Rhaegal falls and falls, droplets of blood spraying from its body, until it lands somewhere behind the castle, and Dany feels nothing. Nothing at all. No pain, no fury. She doesn’t feel the cold or the wind or the time passing. She no longer hears the noises of battle or her child's last song.

One dragon left. One dragon. If she loses Drogon too, she loses her armies, her people, her throne. She loses everything.


“My Queen.” Missandei’s fingers tighten around Dany’s arm, pulling her to a stop. “You cannot leave us.”

“I must go to King’s Landing.”

“Your Grace.” Varys rushes to her side and blocks her path to Drogon. “You once told me to tell you if you were failing the people. And I am doing that now. If you fly to King’s Landing, you won’t just fail the North. You’ll fail all of us.”

“You saw how quickly Gendry killed Viserion. Once resurrected, Rhaegal won’t last long. I’ve already burned thousands of wights. The Night King’s army is small because of me. You can defend Winterfell until I return.”

“We need you here.”
“I’m a liability here. If he kills Drogon, he’ll destroy you all.”

“If he kills Drogon, then Drogon won’t last long either. You said it yourself. But at least you’ll obliterate the army of wights before that happens and give us a fighting chance. What is the life of one dragon against the lives of every person in the world?”

“That’s what you wanted all along, hm? All of you. To kill my dragons. I’ve had them for years and no one's hurt them, but after meeting you and Tyrion and Jon, I'm down to one. You're not killing Drogon too.” Lip curled with anger, she speaks through gritted teeth. “Get out of my way, or I’ll burn you alive.”

With a bowed head, Varys falls back, but Missandei lingers, hands clutching Dany’s arm.

“But the wildfire, Your Grace,” she says, but Daenerys doesn’t listen.

Varys is already far away, sprinting toward an empty stretch below the castle walls where he shouts something to one of the guards. At this distance, she can't hear what, but she doesn't need to. Euron was right. They only wanted her for her dragons, and if they can't have that, they'll try to kill her and Drogon both.

Missandei still clings to her arm, but with one scorching look, Dany slips free.

“You might kill thousands of people,” Missandei whispers, eyes filled with tears. “Hundreds of thousands.”

With a hand on Drogon’s wing, ready to climb, Dany turns around. “If they die, they will have died for a good cause.”

“Is that why we will die too, Mhysa? For a good cause?”

Dany’s only reply is a disdainful glare. Then she mounts Drogon and flies away without looking back.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know that the horn is huge in the books. But iirc, it's not featured in the show, and this is based on the show, so I'm taking liberties. :)
Sansa

Chapter Notes

This takes place directly after the last Sansa chapter. If you need a reminder, it was after Tyrion was forced to punish Tisiph, and Tisiph and Sansa were in Qyburn's laboratory.

And while I have your attention, I’d also like to thank you all. It means a lot to me that you read and comment and give kudos. Thank you so much! <3

A still crying Tisiph waits outside Sansa’s chamber. Every sob heaving her thin body annoys the guards posted in the hallway. They sigh and exchange tired looks and roll their eyes, while she does her best to stifle the offending noise without success—until she notices ser Gregor looming behind her and hiccups to a stop. Only her bottom lip still quivers.

Sansa loops their arms together and ushers the maid inside.

“Lie down for a bit, Tisiph,” she says, leading her to the bed.

“I have work to do.”

“I can do it myself. It’s all right.”

Tisiph wipes her face and sniffles in a way so unlike the heartbroken little sniffles she’s done so far. It’s the sniffle of someone pulling themselves together, and it only makes Sansa want to tuck Tisiph into bed even more.

“There’s nothing wrong with needing rest,” she says. ”You don’t need to be brave around me.”

“I’m fine.”

It’s not Tisiph’s meek voice but Shae’s exasperated tone, and the stark contrast makes Sansa back away. Tisiph meets her suspicious gaze without wavering, and while her skin is smooth and hair is black, those dark eyes belong to someone who’s lived too long.

“You think I’ve never been beaten before?” Tisiph huffs out a laugh. “I don’t know why you keep provoking that woman, but you better stop because she’s onto you.”

“That woman? She’s your queen.”

Tisiph spits on the floor. “She’s a cunt.”

Sansa backs farther away. The door hits her bruised back; she winces.

“Are you all right, m’lady? Maybe you should lie down.”

“Who are you?”

“You don’t know?”

That story of her childhood, the names, the details, the dreamy look in her eye as she spoke.
games she plays. The ever shifting personality. A chill trickles down Sansa’s spine. She’s seen this before, heard all about the lies they give as truths.

“A Faceless Man,” she whispers. “Wearing a dead woman’s face. To make me trust you. To torment me. To torment Tyrion. Someone bought your services at the House of Black and White. But not Cersei. You wouldn’t tell me, then. Who was it? Who’d know about Shae?”

Tisiph hums and inspects her face in the looking-glass. “I never thought we looked that alike. Her nose was cuter, her lips fuller. Lady Zuriph always told me to bite mine swollen. And yet people mistook us all the time. But Shae was always prettier. Stronger. Smarter. She was everything I wanted to be. But I was never jealous.”

“No.” Sansa shakes her head. “It’s not possible. Out of all the people in the world, Cersei happened to find you? You can’t expect me to believe that.”

Tisiph spins around, scowling. “She didn’t happen to find me. I made sure she did!”

The anger fades as quickly as it flared and she starts tidying up the room, nonchalant in both manner and voice as she speaks, “I don’t remember our parents. I only remember Shae. Lady Zuriph found us when we were little. Took us in, raised us, taught us how to please.”

She looks up from what she’s doing with a wry smile. “She wasn’t lady of the canals. She owned a brothel. Years later she sold Shae to a fancy lord. Some Westerosi arse who paid well to keep her as his own pet and she was gone. Then he died. I think she killed him, but she never said. She sent me letters when she could. We have our ways, whores. We find a sailor, and the letter moves from port to port. If he leaves it in the right hands, those hands will treat him well all for free. She wrote me about Tyrion. She wrote me about you, once. Never your name. The Sad Maiden, she called you. Then the letters stopped coming and--”

She sucks in a sharp breath, releases it with a shiver, allowing a touch of real emotion to seep through. When she looks back at Sansa, her eyes are wet.

“I knew,” Tisiph whispers. “I felt it. That she was gone. So I came here, found the Street of Silk and got to work. Been here for about a year when I heard the Queen was looking for a dark-haired Lorathi woman. So I made sure she saw me. Then I worked hard and I learned everything I could and I waited.”

“For me?”

“For Tyrion. I know you’re planning something. I can help you, but only if you help me.” She drops what she’s doing and inches closer, eyes locked with Sansa’s. “I’m going to kill him. I’m going to kill him for what he did to my sister and I want you to help me.”

“Kill… He was always kind to me.”

The words come out of their own and they sound like the sad echo of a girl who never learns, and she ducks her head to hide her pink cheeks.

“Was he? Then why didn’t he help you escape? Why did he let the woman he claimed he loved wait on you hand and foot, instead of fleeing King’s Landing with the both of you?”

“He did love her.”

Tisiph scoffs. “Have you ever been in love, m’lady?”
“No,” Sansa says, arms wrapped around her body.

Tisiph looks at her as if Sansa were a five year old with sugar-covered lips denying she ate the last lemoncake.

“If you loved someone and you could be with them, wouldn’t you take the chance?”

The memory of running to Cersei so that she could stay in King’s Landing and marry Joffrey leaves Sansa so deeply ashamed she often tries to block it out. But that doesn’t undo it. She chose love. Foolish, deceitful love. Though, she was young and stupid then; she had not yet learned how much love hurts. How much better and safer life is without it.

“I don’t know,” she murmurs.

“You know. They could’ve been happy in Essos. But he never loved her as much as he loved his Lannister name and his Lannister gold. That’s what he chose. That and you and your Winterfell. Don’t you dare say he loved her. He killed her.” When Tisiph blinks, tears drop from her lashes. “He killed her with the golden chain he beat me with.”

With a shudder, Sansa closes her eyes against the memory of Tyrion with that necklace spilling from his hand. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t give me back my sister. Sorry does nothing, means nothing. Only life can pay for death.”

“He’s a prisoner here. Just as I am. It doesn’t seem right.”

“Right? What if he’d killed Arya?” Tisiph’s voice is like steel, her face so much like Shae’s Sansa can’t stand it. “What if he’d bought her and fucked her and killed her? Would you hesitate then?”

Sansa moves to the bed as through water, each step heavy and slow, and sinks down on the soft mattress. The backs of her thighs are still tender and bruised, but she barely feels it.

“I have to think,” she mumbles.

“Then think quickly. Your brother should be here any day now.”

Sansa stares at the sky and the sea, both as empty as she. “He’s not coming.”

She wakes that night to the gentle scrape of a window being pushed open. A man climbs into her chamber and sneaks across the floor and yet she’s not afraid. It’s Jon. She knows it. Jon came for her and his smile is warmer than the sunshine spilling in through the window. The ground is so far down and the trellis clinging to the wall looks rickety, but when he smiles at her and holds her hand, Sansa is brave. The flowers and vines growing on the trellis fill the air with the sweetest scent and she knows it cannot be. Then they’re on the ground, and she runs and runs through King’s Landing, skirts flapping around her legs, all the way to the harbor. Once they stand on deck, watching the Red Keep growing smaller and smaller as they sail to safety, Jon pulls her close and kisses her. The summer breeze plays in their hair and she knows it’s winter now and that she’s dreaming, but she lets herself believe. She believes it so hard, so well, that when Tisiph wakes her in the morning, Sansa can’t help the tears forming in her eyes.
“Just a little bit longer,” she mumbles into her pillow, chasing the dream that will never be. “Please.”

“Get up.”

Tisiph pulls the coverlet off Sansa, and she curls into a little ball with a whine.

“It’s cold.”

“Then get up.”

With a sigh, Sansa forces herself to sit up and swing her legs over the edge of the bed. It’s good that he’s not come. He’d complicate everything.

“You remind me of my sister,” she says, glaring good-naturedly at Tisiph.

“Funny. In her letter, Shae said the Sad Maiden reminded her of me.”

“I’ve changed.”

“So have I. Now, hurry up. The Queen is waiting for you.”

When Sansa arrives, Tyrion is there too, only now he’s clean-shaven, and his hair washed, trimmed, and brushed. He’s even wearing a leather doublet atop a tunic in Lannister red. She stills, staring at that ghost from her past, and he gives her a friendly smile, one that says they’re in this together, him and her. That they both hate Cersei. That they should help one another. When Cersei invites Tisiph to stay as well, Sansa eases herself down on her chair and steels herself for today’s games.

“The ocean is unforgiving in winter.” Cersei’s standing by the window, stroking Joffrey’s ring as she gazes out over a dark city lit with the twinkling lights of candles and lanterns. “Perhaps they’ve had to wait a few days at a port to avoid sailing through a storm. Have faith, little dove.”

“Your own brother left you to fight the dead, and you think mine will abandon the only war that matters to save his stupid little sister?”

“Jaime has lived a life of dishonor. He killed his king. He fucked his sister. Gave her three beautiful children. He’s murdered and betrayed and broken every vow--and still, he cares about honor. He rode north because he’s foolish enough to want to die an honorable man.”

Cersei turns around, her usually sharp beauty softened by candlelight. “Your father was an honorable man and yet he died with a lie on his lips. All to save his stupid little daughter. If you think Jon Snow wouldn’t do everything in his power to make his father proud before the dead come and kill us all, you’re even more stupid than I thought. He’s on a ship, worrying himself sick that I’ve already killed you while clinging to the hope that I have not. Jon will come, I have no doubt. He’ll want to save his precious sister.”

*Has he sent a raven?* Sansa wants to ask. *Did he send one before leaving?*

“Have you confused me with Arya?” she asks instead. "Jon and I were never close."

“That’s not what I’ve heard.” Cersei’s smile stretches her mouth into a cruel curve. “I’d like him to give you away.” The revelation leaves Sansa agape with horror, which only makes Cersei’s smile...
grow. “Oh, where are my manners? You must be starving. Let's eat.”

Once Cersei’s plate holds a boiled egg and grilled fish she'll only pick at, the rest of them fill their plates too. Sansa can feel Tyrion’s eyes on her, but it can’t be. Linette has told her about Cersei’s plans and it was only ever murder. Never marriage.

“Father always talked about legacy,” Cersei says, eyes faraway, wine cup in hand. “But now our dynasty is ending before it’s had a proper chance to flourish. There’s only one person who can change that.” Her eyes clear and she focuses them on Tyrion. “Three heirs. One for the throne. One for Casterly Rock. And one for Winterfell. Any spares, we’ll wed to other houses. Then Westeros will be ours. House Lannister will rule. Isn’t he clever? A clever little man with clever little plans.”

Sansa glances at Tyrion who’s doing his best to shrink in his chair.

“I’m only trying to protect you,” he mumbles to his plate.

“Yes of course.” Cersei sips her wine. “Always so selfless and chivalrous, my little brother. Three children, Sansa. Three sons. You won’t have an accident until you’ve given birth to three sons. Well, three normal sons. Any dwarves would be smothered in their cribs. You’ll—”

Sansa gasps out a no at the awful suggestion, and the reaction earns her a look of pure adoration from Tyrion, as though she’s already attached to the babies she’ll never have with him and he loves her for it.

“You’ll have five to ten good years together, I’d wager. Then an accident can’t be helped, I’m afraid.” Cersei smiles sweetly. “You haven’t touched your food, little dove. Isn’t it to your satisfaction?”

“It’s delicious, Your Grace,” Sansa says and takes a demonstrative bite of bread that tastes like parchment.

She doesn’t know for how long she’s been chewing on that bit of bread when the door opens and Qyburn steps inside with a raven scroll. Cersei’s eyes move over the letter and then she and ser Gregor leaves, and they’re left alone to finish their breakfast. Sansa’s knife lies next to the plate, gleaming like gold in the light of the chandelier. A useless temptation. If she slips it into her sleeve, someone will notice and turn her chamber upside down and find all her secrets. If she uses it now, she won’t get far before the guards posted outside stops her.

“This way we’ll live,” Tyrion says. “I’m trying to save your life.”

“Until I have an accident.”

“I won’t let that happen.” His gaze is tender as he lays a warm hand over hers. “We could have a good life together, you and I. We get along. Don’t we?”

I’d be a prisoner again. Winterfell will fall into the hands of the Lannisters and soon House Stark will be forgotten. Cersei will see to that.

“Do I have a choice? Or is this like last time?”

Tyrion removes his hand and returns his attention to the food, which he eats with a healthy appetite. There’s nothing wrong with his table manners and yet the sight of it offends her when she’s so sick to her stomach she doubts she’ll ever eat again.

He’s not wrong for eating, though, Sansa supposes, not when he’s spent his days in a dungeon on
water and bread while she's been spoiled. Jon would've eaten too. Regardless of his mood or the quality of the food, he knows to grab any sustenance available in case he’ll have to go without. And yet Sansa can’t make herself eat.

“I didn’t think you’d mind.” Tyrion bows his head and adds quietly, “This much.”

“You know what I went through. You know how Ramsay treated me.”

“I wouldn’t treat you like that.”

“I know. But the thought of--” She can’t even finish the sentence and her body is already seizing up, trembling, hands clenched, stomach in knots.

Tyrion glances at Tisiph before leaning in and speaking only for Sansa's ears. “It can be good, you know. Pleasurable, even. I have some experience in the matter, and if you’ll let me, I’ll show you. If you’ll let me, I’ll be gentle.”

“And if I don’t let you?”

He sighs. “We’ll have to produce children eventually or I don’t think we’ll keep our heads.”

“We won’t either way. She’s toying with us. This is entertaining to her. If she has her way, neither of us will leave King’s Landing alive.”

“All my father ever thought of was legacy.” Tyrion fills the wine cup to the brim. “The House is all that matters. Nothing else. Cersei is my father’s daughter.” He drains the cup in five loud swallows. “He’s dead and buried and she’s still trying to make him proud. And even he, as much as he despised me, wanted my children to be the heirs of Winterfell. Had he still been alive, he would’ve wanted them to be heirs to the throne and Casterly Rock as well, now that Jaime is off and getting himself killed. Because the Lannister name and the Lannister line are too important. So, yes, Sansa. She means it. And that means that if Jon doesn’t come, you’ll still get to live.”

It also means that even if Jon comes, I’ll still have to marry you. It means you took my choice away from me.

“You did the same,” Littlefinger whispers in her mind. “You suggested marriage to protect Jon. You thought Daenerys would feel desperate enough for an heir to accept Jon’s child. You pretended you only wanted to protect Jon when, deep down, you wanted him for your husband.”

But I never went to Daenerys before speaking to Jon, she tells the voice to quiet it. And we were never going to actually marry; it was all a ruse.

Is this too? Does Tyrion have a plan? He’s much smarter than she is, after all, and he’d never tell her the truth in front of Tisiph.

"Sometimes when I try to understand a person's motives, I play a little game. I assume the worst. What's the worst reason they could possibly have for saying what they say and doing what they do?"

Sansa gets to live, that's true--but only for a few years--while Tyrion doesn’t merely get to live. He’ll be a lord, have a lady wife, and children. He’ll have respect and money and power while she loses hers. And once Sansa gives him a son, he’ll be able to get rid of Cersei. The houses will support a Lannister boy with Stark blood over the queen who blew House Tyrell and the Great Sept of Baelor to pieces. And until their son comes of age, Tyrion will rule the Seven Kingdoms through him.

He’ll be the most powerful man in all of Westeros.
Why would he risk anything for Sansa’s sake, when he risked nothing for Shae? Why would he risk anything for Sansa’s sake, when marrying her gives him everything he’s always wanted?

She stays silent until she and Tisiph are back in her chamber. The handmaiden steers her to the padded bench, grabs the brush, and grooms Sansa’s hair even though it’s not needed. Is that something Shae wrote in her letter? That the Sad Maiden felt a little less sad when someone brushed her hair. Through the mottled surface of the looking-glass, she watches Tisiph work. Humming to herself, she’s fully focused on brushing and braiding and winding those braids into something pretty.

“Are you spying on me for Cersei?”

“Yes,” Tisiph says without taking her eyes off her work.

“And what are you telling her?”

“That you cry a lot. That you made yourself throw up after eating those lemoncakes. That I have to force you into your old dresses because you hate them. That you’re trying to flirt with ser Nyles so he’ll be nicer to you. That you’re too dumb to see he’d never want you. That you like Qyburn because he’s the only person who’s kind to you. That you pray for your brother every day in the godswood.”

“None of that is true.”

Tisiph shrugs. “I have to tell her something.”

“And what if I say no--what if I don’t help you--what will you tell her then?”

Tisiph lays down the brush and meets Sansa’s eye through the looking-glass. “When you came here, I didn’t know if I could trust you. I had to get to know you first. I had to see who you are and what you’re made of. Now I know you loved my sister and that she loved you, and for that I’ll protect your secret. But I won’t help you unless you help me.”

Sansa shifts her gaze to her own reflection. Once upon a time, she would’ve refused. Once upon a time, she would’ve helped Tyrion even after everything he’d done to her, her family, and Westeros. Is there any of that girl left in her? Father would’ve insisted on giving Tyrion a proper trial for his crimes, but Mother… After everything that’s happened, her mother wouldn’t even have hesitated, would she?

“If you want to make it out of King’s Landing alive, you have to become ruthless. It’s you or him, Sansa. If the choice was his, he wouldn’t hesitate. So do you truly still need to think about this?”

It’s Shae’s voice. Mother’s voice. Arya’s voice.

Once upon a time, Sansa was innocent and naive, but now she knows people only look out for themselves. She doesn’t need to repeat all the things Tyrion has done to her and her family. She doesn’t need to remind herself that he lured Jon into a trap. That he helped Daenerys in undoing everything for which Sansa’s family and all the North have fought and bled. He let an invader into Westeros. He’s a traitor. He’s the enemy. And now he’s looking to be her lord husband. Her superior. To bind her to him for however long he’ll let her live.

Once upon a time she would’ve said she’d rather starve herself, kill herself, but those days are gone. Her life is worth so much more than that. She is worth so much more than that.
“No,” Sansa says. “I don’t.”

In the godswood, snow lies like a pristine blanket over the shrubbery, the stump that once was a weirwood tree, and the low stone wall creeping along the edge of the bluff. No one ever comes here. It’s the only place where she’s free from people’s glares and sneers and insults. Sansa brushes snow off the stump, pulls off her glove, and touches the cold wood as she kneels. It doesn’t fill her with strength or hope. It doesn’t fill her mind with whispers of the gods. But her chamber is cluttered with bad memories, and thinking is easier out here.

Linette has told her many useful things, snippets she overhears here and there that Sansa has to piece together so that she can form a plan that means they’ll both get out alive. No, all three of them. Tisiph too.

Without protectors, though, they won’t get far. Westeros isn’t safe for two women and a child to travel.

She sighs, pets the stump again, puts her gloves back on and turns around. Against the colorless canvas of sky and ocean, a speck of color stands out. A ship! A ship is sailing into the harbor. With her breath in her throat, Sansa rushes forward to better see the sails—only to be yanked back by the arm.

“No, all three!” ser Nyles barks in her ear.

She pulls herself free and curls her hand protectively around her aching upper arm. “I wasn’t going to jump!”

“You hurt her.” Tisiph glares at him. “You didn’t need to be so rough. Why are you always so rough, huh?” Nostrils flared and dark eyes burning, she steps closer to him until she has to tip her head back to still bore her gaze into him. “Are you trying to punish her?” She pokes ser Nyles hard in the chest. “Is that it? Are you so sad, poor little boy, now that you can’t sneak away and fuck your lover like you used to, that you’re taking it out on her? Hm?” She pokes him again. “It’s not her fault!”

“The Queen’s told me to be rough!”

“She’s not here, though, is she?”

“She’ll tell my father! Please. I’ll never see Finn again.”

Tisiph rolls her eyes. “So what if you never see him again. You’re just a boy! You’ll love many men in your life.”

“No,” Sansa says, caressing ser Nyles’ shoulder with a gentle hand, caressing his feelings with a gentle voice. “It’s true love, isn’t it? Like in the songs. And true love always deserves to win.”

“Don’t tell Finn, my lady. He doesn’t know the Queen knows. If he knew, he wouldn’t dare. His father would kill him.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” Sansa smiles at him, still brushing his arm in soothing motions. “And my offer still stands, ser. My chamber is yours, if you need it.”
Tisiph’s eyes move between them, already catching on. “The guards posted outside get bored easily. When m’lady sups with the Queen, they leave for an hour for dicing and ale. I’ll change the sheets when you’re done. No one will know.”

That same night, when Sansa returns to her chambers after supper, she finds the sheets rumpled. With a smirk, Tisiph gathers the linen and replaces them with fresh ones.

Three days pass before Tisiph leaves the boys a bottle of wine laced with dreamwine--just enough to get two lovers dozy--and that evening Sansa finds the boys asleep and entwined in the coverlet and each other, ser Nyles resting his head on Finn’s chest. They look beautiful, peaceful, and she can’t help but smile at the sight. Can’t help the envy burning in her chest. Will she ever know the sweet bliss of resting in a lover’s embrace?

She rouses them gently from sleep, and presses a finger to her lips when they scramble out of the bed, linens wrapped around their bodies, horror etched on their features. Sansa turns her back to them when they slip back into their clothes, but Tisiph stands by the door with her arms folded across her chest and her sharp eye trained on them.

“You can’t leave,” she says. “The guards are still out there. We’ll all get in trouble.”

“We didn’t mean to fall asleep, my lady,” ser Finn says. “I promise.”

“It’s all right.” With a smile, Sansa invites them to sit down at the round table. “I’ve been meaning to speak to you. Now is as good a time as any. If you don’t mind.”

“Speak about what.” Ser Nyles moves restlessly. “Treason? We won’t touch her. We refuse to be known as the Queenslayers. As the Oathbreakers!”

“Sit down, Nyles,” ser Finn says as he sits down himself.

“What I tell you now cannot leave this room. You have to swear to me.” She waits until both boys have sworn to not betray her trust before continuing, “A Targaryen heir has been found. One born and raised in Westeros, by a Northern lady. Northern houses are already rallying behind him and the Southern houses will too. No one wants Daenerys, and Cersei’s position is tenuous at best. They accept her for now because she’s powerful, but that won’t last. The North will see to it. And when this son of the North takes the throne, what do you think will happen to you, who stood idly by as a daughter of the North was tormented and beaten? What do you think will happen to you”—she turns to ser Nyles—“when they learn it was your hand who beat Ned Stark’s daughter?”

Ser Nyles looks away, but Finn meets her eye steadily. “Who is this heir?”

“Someone who won’t use what you are against you.”

“Like you’re doing now?”

“I’m trying to survive, ser, just like you.”

“And why should we trust that this heir cares about what happens to you? No one cared last time.
Not even your own family.”

Sansa draws in a deep breath through her nose. “Because we’re betrothed,” she says, voice strong and clear. “When the wars are over, when my intended has taken the throne, I will be your queen.”

Ser Finn leans back in his chair, eyes narrowed and alert and viewing her in a whole new light—and she knows she finally has his full attention. If she convinces him, ser Nyles will follow.

"Tisiph, find us fresh cups and more wine, please. We have much to discuss."

Sansa sits by the window, staring out over ocean and sky for the last time. Three weeks have passed and still no Jon. She knew he wasn’t coming. She knew—and yet she can’t help but be disappointed. He loves her, she knows, but not enough to risk the fate of the world. Nor should he. He’s being a king, and when he’s king, she’s not his sister.

A ship is drifting into the harbor, but it stirs no hope within her. No one aboard that ship is a friend of hers; a Kraken is painted on the black sails. The Silence. The fastest ship in all the world. Blood magic, Qyburn has told her. Euron cuts the tongues off all his crew and lets the deck drink their blood to make the Silence quick and quiet. Even more so now, since the dragons were born. Qyburn’s own concoctions have grown more potent too, he’s told her during one of her many visits to his laboratory.

“And what happens if the dragons die?” she asked him one afternoon.

His only reply was a look alight with a glint so frightening it made her shudder. He’s found a way to control them, then. Like he controls ser Gregor.

“It’s almost time,” Tisiph says.

Instinctively, Sansa touches the hidden pockets she’s sewn onto her wedding dress and the treasures hidden therein. It’s the same one, that dress. The one she wore at her first wedding. Swaths and swaths of golden brocade that weighs her down and constricts her. Her hair is the same too. And the lion pendant still hangs around her neck.

She looks just the same and still so different.

“Linette will be here soon.” Sansa opens the trunk at the foot of the bed and pulls out a bundle of warm clothes she’s sewn from fabric Tisiph has stolen. “Put her in these and get dressed yourself. Once Cersei’s dead, we’ll have to hurry.”

“I know. Are you ready?”

How could Sansa ever be ready for this? But she’s as strong as the river, as unwavering as the heart-tree. Her roots stretch deep into the ground and she draws from the ancient strength of the Tullys and the Starks as she walks to the throne room and Cersei on steady legs.

The black has left the Queen completely; she’s steeped herself in the past. Heavy red velvet. Gold embroidery. A lion choker resting around her neck. Only the hair is different.

Sansa looks around the room. Ser Nyles escorted her, of course, and ser Finn is there too. A couple of men from the Queensguard stand by the doors leading outside, and Qyburn stands by the throne.
But no Tyrion and no septon and no ser Gregor.

“Please, my lady”—Cersei gestures at a table standing at the side of the room, draped with red silk and cloth-of-gold and set with plates and goblets—“won’t you sit down.”

Heart hammering in her chest, Sansa takes her seat. Cersei gestures at ser Nyles, who ties Sansa’s hands to the armrests, then Qyburn pulls out a necklace from his pocket and secures it around Sansa’s neck. The missing purple crystals—one taken by Olenna; the other crushed by Littlefinger—have been replaced. Cersei wants her to look scared now, she knows, and it’s hardly difficult to comply. One slip and she’s dead.

Once Cersei’s finished ogling Sansa’s terrified face with glee, she perches herself on the throne and motions at the guards by the doors.

The doors creak open.

“Ah. Here he comes.” Cersei smiles like the sun, bright and scorching. “I told you so, little dove.”

No. No no no.

Jon’s hair is tousled by the wind, his face weathered, his clothes dirty, and his beard wild—and yet no one’s ever been more handsome. He’s led by ser Gregor, and his gaze travels from the huge monster to Cersei to the guards and back again. He’s more than halfway into the throne room when he finally sees Sansa. Her name leaves his lips in a breathy whisper and she feels her armor slipping. He came. That beautiful idiot came for her and she’d do anything to run to him, to feel him in her arms, to breathe him in—but Cersei cannot see that wish. If she sees, everything will fall apart.

I’m sorry, Sansa thinks. Then she breathes in deeply and cloaks her heart with ice.
Cersei

Chapter Notes

To those I promised a Jon chapter: I'm very sorry. He wouldn't cooperate and Cersei demanded to take his place. There was little I could do.  

When Ned Stark’s bastard son whispers his sister’s name and darts forward, ser Gregor slams his heavy paw down on the bastard’s shoulder and yanks him back. It should be enough to stop even the most foolish of men, but Jon is his father’s son through and through. He shrugs off ser Gregor and keeps running and Cersei allows it. Let them have a moment of happiness, of hope. It’ll only make what she has in store for them that much sweeter.

Stroking Joffrey’s ring restlessly, she leans back and watches the reunion. A tight hug, she assumes. A kiss on the forehead or cheek. Tears of relief--Sansa’s definitely, perhaps even Jon’s, if he’s a weepy kind of man. But as Jon reaches his sister, he stops, curls his fingers into his palms, and pulls back his hands, his intention, his instinct to touch. Then he sinks down on his knees, and there’s a desperation in him, in the way he breathes, in the way he holds back, that so intrigues Cersei she leaves the throne to get a better look.

Her red and golden skirts sweeping down the steps and across the floor draws Sansa’s attention instantly, but Jon? Oh, Jon sees nothing but his sister.

“Are you all right?” he asks, voice hoarse with emotion.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re hurt, Sansa.”

“I’ve been through worse.”

With his eyebrows tugged together in the most sincere concern, he moves his gaze over the scar running along her cheekbone, the bruises dappling her upper arm, and the dark circles under her eyes. And even though he’s exuding unadulterated need to touch her, he still keeps his hands to himself while she sits there, beautiful and forbidden, and it’s the most delicious thing Cersei has witnessed in years. She’s intimately familiar with holding back this way, even in a moment when emotions are running high and instinct guides your bodies.

The children of the honorable Eddard Stark are secret lovers.

Joy pulls her mouth into a wide smile. This will be even better than she’d imagined.

“Why are you tied up?”

“Don’t,” Sansa says when his fingers move to the rope. “She’ll punish me.”

Jon’s jaw muscle tenses up and when he rises to his feet, as graceful as a cat, his shoulders are rounded and back curved as if he’s ready to pounce Cersei and tear her to pieces if only she gives him an excuse. He’s a rather attractive man, she realizes. Despite his height.
“I know I’m late, Your Grace. But I can’t control the weather and I’m here now. Release her.”

“You’ve yet to kneel.”

“All right.” Jon rounds the table so that he stands in front of Cersei. “I kneel and you’ll let us go.”

“After the long journey you had, you must be parched. Won’t you sit down and have a drink with me and your sister?”

“No. I kneel. We go. That was the deal.”

She gestures at the chair opposite Sansa. “Sit down.”

“No. I--”

“Ser Gregor, kill lady Sansa.”

Ser Gregor pulls the sword from its sheath. Jon’s eyes move over the room, glide over the guards, his sister, Cersei, the throne and its sharp blades. A heartbeat of calculations. He did the same when he entered the room, and even though they confiscated his sword when he arrived, she doesn’t doubt he’d be able to take someone else’s and do some damage before ser Gregor cuts him down. She’s heard the stories about him. Littlefinger has supplied her with much news, scroll after scroll finding its way to the capital to make up for his many deceits.

“Jon,” Sansa says, “sit down or you’ll get us both killed.”

Jon gives his sister a look full of longing and regret, while she only looks annoyed. But he takes his seat and Ser Gregor’s sword returns to its sheath. Cersei looks up at the balcony, where Bernadette waits in the shadows for her command, and she nods at her to bring out the wine.

“Every day, your sister repeated the same words, over and over, like the pretty little bird she is: ‘Jon’s not coming. Jon’s not coming.’ The most tedious song I’ve ever heard. You see, I already knew you were on your way. Your brother sent me a raven.” When Sansa’s eyes widen, Cersei turns to her. “You should thank the cripple for saving your life when you return home, dear. If he hadn’t sent that raven, you’d already be dead.”

Sansa’s eyes harden and remain so even when she looks at her big brother. “The war against the dead. It’s over?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know whether it’s begun.”

“You don’t know? Did you leave before... How could you! How could you leave our home, our family, when they needed you the most?”
“You needed me.”

“You left them with Daenerys!” The ungrateful little bitch glares at him, cheeks red and chest heaving with angry breaths. Then she forces herself to calm and lowers her voice, speaking through tight lips, “Do you know why Robb never came for me? Because he was a good king and understood that you can’t risk a war or a kingdom over one girl. Not even your sister. I was praying you wouldn’t come, you idiot! But then you always were an one, weren’t you? Why am I even surprised?

Jon gapes at her like the halfwit he is, too stunned to retort. Too ashamed as well, Cersei imagines, for Sansa speaks nothing but the truth. That Stark hotheadedness Cersei counted on to get the better of him truly did, then. The moment her raven arrived, he threw himself on a horse and rode off without a second thought, without a plan, right into her trap. Whatever sense that Stark litter possessed must’ve come from lady Catelyn. Poor Jon had to go without.

“You shouldn’t be so harsh, little dove. He was driven by desperation. A man in love never thinks clearly.”

Sansa frowns, confused, but Jon ducks his head as if it could hide how he blushes like a maid. Had Tyrion not told Cersei about Jon fucking that dragon bitch, she would’ve assumed he was one. Too honorable to ever break his Night’s Watch vows or pay for a whore.

“You didn’t know?” Cersei asks Sansa with her most gentle voice. “That your brother is in love with you. If I were to guess, it started when you were young. Perhaps when your breasts started budding. That’s usually how it goes.”

Lips pressed into a thin, pale line, Sansa shakes her head.

“It’s true, Sansa. Look at him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a grown man with that color of cheek. You should be flattered. He’s quite a pretty man, your brother. And a king. Not for long, granted, but…”

“Flattered? Would you feel flattered if your brother… Oh.” Sansa lets out a hollow laugh. “I forgot to whom I’m speaking. But I’m not a depraved monster like you. I could never want my own brother.”

Cersei leans over the table and grabs Sansa’s chin so hard her nails dig into the soft, pale skin. “Mind your tongue or I’ll have ser Gregor rip it out.”

Jon flies to his feet so quickly the chair falls back, but ser Gregor puts the chair back with one hand and slams Jon back down with the other, and the little king lets out a muffled groan of pain.

“Ser Nyles,” Cersei says, Sansa’s small chin still in her iron grip, “secure the King in the North to his chair as well. Hands and feet.”

Then she releases the tart and rubs her thumb soothingly over the red crescents her nails left on that pretty skin.

The night Sansa arrived, Cersei saw all the things Ramsay Bolton had done to her body. All those scars snaking across her back and thighs like rivers and roads on a map. Has Jon seen them? If he didn’t fall for her when they were young, perhaps Ramsay’s treatment of her did the trick. Men always like the little dove with the broken wing. One they can pretend to nurse back to health while all they’re doing is clipping its wings so that it can never fly away and leave them. Not Jon, though… He’s much too soft. No, he’d heal the little bird and then, after it had grown strong and flown away, he’d weep himself into an early grave. He’s a pretty man, there’s no denying that, but
he's much too easily broken and the more she sees of him, the less attractive he becomes.

Why the silver-haired cunt let him into her bed is beyond Cersei.

It’s beyond Sansa too, it seems. Her nostrils are flared and her lips are curled with fear, disdain, disgust, and a thousand more negative emotions warring to take control over her features. With one last haughty look at her brother, she averts her eyes as though she can no longer stand the sight of him.

Now that both are tied to their chairs, Cersei grabs her cup and stands so that she can move freely between the tortured bastard and his repulsed sister.

“Isn’t she beautiful, your sister?” Cersei touches Sansa’s hair gently, adjusts the collar of the dress. “Just perfect. Well, almost. I wanted her in the gown she wore to my son’s wedding, but we never found it. We only found this.” She taps the crystal necklace. “This gown had to do. She wore it to her wedding. Did you know that? When she married my little brother.”

“I’m to marry Tyrion. Again. That’s what this is all about. Cersei would like you to give me away. Then, once she's had her fun, I'm sure we'll be on our way.”

Jon shakes his head, fury tightening his hands into fists. “No. I kneel and we leave. No marriage.”

“It’s all right, Jon.” Sansa’s eyes are cold as winter when she looks at her brother. “After Ramsay, anyone would do.”

“He wants you for himself, Sansa.” Cersei hums thoughtfully. “And if anyone would do… Perhaps I should marry you to him instead. Would you like that? I’m feeling generous today. I’ll let you choose. Your brother or mine.”

Sansa chews her lip, squinting as she thinks. “When ser Jaime came to Winterfell to kneel to me and vow to be my sworn sword, he told me you were pregnant.”

Jaime knelt before that murdering whore? Cersei’s blood is boiling, but she refuses to give Sansa the satisfaction of showing how the news upset her. Instead she sips her wine casually and listens with a nonchalant quirk of her brow.

“I assume you lost the baby,” Sansa continues, “and you’re getting old. Too old to bear another child. That’s why Tyrion spoke of heirs. Stop pretending you’re giving me a choice. Even if I were to choose Jon—which you know I never would—you’d still marry me to Tyrion.”

Cersei emits a small laugh. “Do you honestly think I’d let Tyrion’s spawn inherit the throne or Casterly Rock? He’s a dwarf. His blood is tainted. And he killed my mother. He killed my father. And if I marry him to you, the moment you whelp, he’ll do his best to get rid of me as well. He thinks he’s so much more clever than everyone else, but a man that arrogant can never truly be clever. He thinks he can manipulate me into doing what he wants, but I’ve only kept him around to amuse myself, to get information about the Mad King’s daughter, about you. He won’t live to see tomorrow.”

“And neither will I.” Sansa glances down at her chest, at the purple crystals. “You’re going to kill me after all. Even though Jon came, you’re going to kill me.”

“I’ve spent my nights staring at the canopy, thinking about all the ways I could kill you. You were like a daughter to me once. And you, you ungrateful whore, had my son murdered. Joffrey, my father, Tommen, Myrcella, they all would’ve been alive had you not wrapped the Tyrells and Lord Baelish around your finger with your innocent little act. But do you know what I realized? Death--
“even a cruel death--would be a kindness. You deserve a life in pain.”


“Yes, and you’ll have to watch. And then you’ll have to live with the knowledge that your beloved brother died a painful death all because of you. You’ll have to carry that guilt with you until the day you die. And once you wed and bear children--and I’ll make certain you do--you’ll have to live every day with your heart in your throat, wondering whether that’s the day I will take your family from you. Every day, you’ll have to look over your shoulder as your children play, every meal, you’ll have to wonder whether someone’s poisoned their food, every night, you’ll have to post guards outside their bedchambers. But it won’t help. Because I will pick them off, one by one, and then, once you’re all alone, I’ll throw you in a dungeon and leave you to rot. That’s what you deserve.”

Voicing her plans leaves Cersei in a state of near euphoria, goosebumps of pleasure spreading across her skin, but it lasts only for a breath, for Sansa doesn’t look shocked or scared at all. No, a smile is playing on her lips: a smile which grows and grows until the insolent girl chuckles.

“I don’t know who’s been whispering in your ear, but they’ve fed you lies. Ramsay raped me every day, several times per day, for months. When I didn’t fall pregnant, the Maester examined me and found me barren. Ramsay was looking for a redheaded girl when I escaped. Someone he could get pregnant. He said he’d make me wear pillows beneath my dress and that once the girl gave birth, the babe would be passed off as mine and I’d have an accident. I think you would’ve liked him, Your Grace.”

Throughout her little speech, Sansa kept a condescending smirk on her lips, but as she now turns to her brother it turns into derisive snarl. “And whoever told you I’m close with Jon was mistaken. I’ve worked with him, for the sake of the North, for the sake of my family, but I don’t care about him. I never have. His death won’t haunt me.”

“You’re lying.”

“Lying? Lying?” A tremor of barely contained rage travels through Sansa’s face. “I won the battle of the bastards. I did. And they crowned him king. Him. The Knights of the Vale rode North for me. To help me take back my home, where I was raped and cut and beaten every day while he was gallivanting with wildlings, fucking wildlings. They should’ve crowned me. And then he dumps his kingdom in my lap so that he could gallivant with the Dragon Queen and fuck her too. Now he’s finally back and instead of protecting his kingdom, his people, my family, he leaves them all with that pyromaniac and lays himself willingly in a trap like an idiot. None of this would’ve happened had I been queen. None of it. He’s useless. And now you tell me he’s in love with me?” Sansa shudders. "I despise him."

Loathing drips from her every word, hate burns in her eyes, and it weighs down on her brother until his head is bowed to his chest. Staring at the table, he sniffs and swallows as if he’s fighting tears.

“Deep down, I think I knew. The way you looked at me. The way you stared at me. Touched me. Kissed me. I thought it was me, that I was broken. That I didn’t know what a brother’s love was anymore. Littlefinger always talked about how he should’ve been my father before stealing a kiss. He’d ask me to call him uncle before pulling me into his lap. But I’m not broken. You are. With Targaryen blood running in your veins, how could you be anything but a monster?”

Cersei nearly chokes on her wine, and her eyes shoot to Jon whose weepiness has shifted to utter shock. Face now drained of color, he’s gawking at Sansa in disbelief.
“Targaryen blood?” Cersei asks.

“You didn’t know?” Arrogance paints an ugly smile on Sansa’s face. “All this information coming your way and yet you never learned anything useful. He’s Lyanna’s son. With Rhaegar Targaryen. We found out only days before you abducted me and I was relieved. I was happy he wasn’t truly my brother. I’ve tried to love you, Jon, I really have. For Father’s sake. For Arya’s sake. But I can’t. What you are, what you feel, it disgusts me. Of course you fell in love with your sister. Of course you fucked your aunt. It’s in your blood. I almost pity you.”

The poison crystals glimmer against Sansa’s skin, but there’s nothing inviting about it. With Littlefinger’s letters, and the things Tyrion has shared since the abduction, Cersei was so certain that Jon and Sansa had grown close. She sips her wine. Perhaps she won’t get the pleasure of watching the pain of losing a loved one on Sansa’s face, but she can see it on the face of Rhaegar Targaryen’s bastard. On the face of Lyanna Stark’s son. He even looks like her, doesn’t he? That Stark face. Lyanna was pretty too. Pretty enough for Rhaegar to abandon his wife and children. Pretty enough that Cersei’s own husband whispered Lyanna in Cersei’s ear on their wedding night.

Cersei leans down and nicks one of the crystals, inspecting it against the candlelight. “Perhaps I should give you the poison, then, little dove.”

Jon’s head snaps up. “No, you need her. I’ll take it! Give it to me!”

Sansa nods emphatically, eyes wide with fear. “You do need me. I won’t do anything. I promise. I’ll return home and warden the North for you. No one thinks Jon’s worth starting a war over. But you can’t hold the North without me.”

“I’m sure I’ll find a way.”

“Please don’t.” Sansa’s bottom lip trembles and her eyes fill with tears as she moves them rapidly between Cersei and Jon as though she’s rifling through her feeble mind to find a good excuse. “I was lying! I didn’t mean it. I did it to protect him. Jon means the world to me!”

“Has anyone ever told you, my perfect little Sansa, that you’re a terrible liar?” Cersei puts the crystal in Sansa’s cup with a wicked smile. “A liar and a coward. Drink.”

“I won’t. I refuse.”

“Drink, and I promise I’ll leave your family alone. Refuse, and I’ll give you to ser Gregor. After being married to Ramsay, I trust you can fill in the rest. Only…” Cersei leans closer and whispers loudly, “This will be so much worse.”

Cersei pauses to let the threat settle and when she sees resignation smothering the tiny spark of fighting spirit still in Sansa’s eyes, she turns to ser Nyles. “Release one of her hands. I’ll let her die with some dignity intact.”

By the time Sansa’s hand is free, she’s shaking with fear while Jon’s going wild in his chair. He’s struggling against his restraints which dig into his wrists. He’ll rub himself raw soon and Cersei can’t decide what she wants to watch more: Jon’s pain or Sansa’s fear. It’s too good, all of it. She wants to draw it out, soak in it, until she feels as fresh as a young girl.

Sansa looks up at Cersei with wet eyes. “Will there be pain?”

“Don’t you remember? I do. Vividly. I’ll never forget. To this day, whenever I close my eyes, I see my son’s face before me as he struggles to breathe. I don’t know how anyone could forget something so horrible. Oh. That’s right. You’d already fled. Yes, little dove. There will be pain.”
Sansa sniffles and wipes away the tears from her cheeks. “Well”—she forces a brave smile on her face—“at least this pain ends.”

When Sansa takes a deep, steeling breath and lifts the cup to her lips, the most wonderful feeling fills Cersei’s chest until she’s floating, lifted high by the pure bliss of justice. Jon’s screaming and thrashing as good as he can, poor little fellow, and she commands ser Gregor to hold him down lest he breaks the chair. When she turns back to Sansa, the girl’s head is tipped back, her throat works with swallows, and a thin stream of wine trickles from the corner of her mouth down her chin.

Then Sansa puts down the empty cup, dabs away wine and tears from her face, and manages to blubber her brother’s name. The boy stills, eyes dull and glassy.

“Tell Arya and Bran I love them.”

The pathetic little bastard breathes out her name and gazes at her with so much love Cersei can’t help the laughter bubbling out of her. When was the last time she felt this happy? Her cheeks ache from smiling and yet she can’t stop.

“You’re having fun without me?”

Cersei spins around. Euron's sauntering into the throne room, mouth curved in that usual manic grin of his.

"Where’s the Imp? I’ve always wanted to drink with him.”

“Euron, what are you doing here?”

“I wanna watch you kill the bastard.”

“I’m not. I’m killing lady Sansa.”

Euron rubs his hands together. “Even better. Can I have the body once you’re done? She's a pretty little thing.”

“You really are a twisted man, aren’t you. Qyburn gets the bodies.”

“Bodies?”

“He wants Jon as well.”

Sipping her wine, Cersei turns back to watch the scene before her. Even though it’s too late to save Sansa, Jon’s struggling to move his chair closer. Wants to be with her as she dies, of course. When Sansa clears her throat and shifts uncomfortably in her seat, he struggles even harder and ser Gregor closes his mighty arms around the bastard’s arms and chest and holds him still.

“Please, Your Grace.” Jon’s dark eyes plead at her. “Get a Maester. Give her an antidote. I’ll do anything. Anything you ask.”

“Will you kill your… Oh, what is it--aunt? I hear she’s impervious to fire. Is that all fire, I wonder... What if we poured wildfire down her throat, would she survive that? Would you do that for me? Kill your aunt to save your sister?”

“Anything. Just give Sansa an antidote. Please.”

Cersei hums, head tilted to the side as she watches Sansa coughing and clutching her throat. “It’s too late. She’ll be gone any moment now.”
Sansa collapses over the table. Her clenched fist knocks over the wine cup and it falls to the floor with a clink and rolls in a half-circle until the leg of the table stops its journey. Jon lets out a strangled sob. Face down, Sansa’s coughing and gurgling against the table cloth until she slips away with a final wheeze. Cersei closes her eyes and lets out a long breath of relief. *Finally. Finally, the whore is dead.* Then she opens her eyes to revel in Jon’s anguish. She’s never seen a man look more defeated, as if his soul has fled his body. The world could burn and he’d sit there, hollow-eyed and ashen-faced, staring at his love’s lifeless form—and he’s not even seen Sansa’s face yet! He’s not seen those purple splotches, the blood running from nose and mouth, the blood-shot eyes.

Cersei’s so excited the words tumble out in a rush: “Her face. You have to see her face.”

She takes a step forward to lift Sansa’s head by the hair and force Jon to stare and stare until he’s the one who can never again close his eyes without seeing the purple, blood-streaked face of the person he loves the most in the world.

Euron stops her with a hand on her arm. “Your Grace. Let me.”

He catches her eye and nods at her to back away from the table. Frowning, Cersei gives her head a slight shake as if to ask him what’s wrong, but Euron only nods more insistently. And so she walks back to the steps leading to the throne, where she’s at a safe distance but still can get a good view of Sansa.

Euron then carefully rounds the table and crouches down on the floor. When he rises, he holds a small vial in his hand. An empty vial. Then, quick as a snake lashing out for a bite, he closes his fingers around Sansa’s wrist and squeezes hard. Sansa gives a grunt and opens her closed fist.

“Sansa?” Jon’s pale and sweaty and shaking. “Sansa!”

Sansa sits up with a scowl on her pretty porcelain face, perfectly blue eyes boring into Euron, and that rage returns to Cersei’s belly, spreads through her body like wildfire. That *bitch.* That deceitful *bitch.*

“Look at this!” Grinning, Euron holds up the thin object—a darning needle—and sniffs it. “Laced with poison. If she’d scratched you with this, Your Grace, you would’ve died. And the vial? Antidote, yeah? You’re clever.” He strokes Sansa’s hair, her cheek, touches her chin gently. “Everyone’s told me you’re a stupid little girl. Guess you proved even stupid girls learn eventually.”

He grabs the flagon from the table. “This is good, yeah?” Cersei nods, teeth grinding hard, and Euron takes a swig. “Perhaps you should get that Maester of yours. Find a better poison.”

Seething, she rubs Joffrey’s ring as she thinks. Who can she trust in here? Someone must’ve helped the little whore. Not Qyburn. He’s loyal to her. Ser Nyles… No, the coward wouldn’t dare. It’s Tisiph. That dumb cunt must’ve taken pity on Sansa.

“Ser Nyles,” she says. “See to it that Tisiph’s thrown into a cell and get Qyburn. Tell him to bring the Long Farewell immediately.”

She’ll have Jon do it. She’ll smear that poison on his lips and make him kiss Sansa and then she’ll throw them both in a cell so that he has no choice but to watch his love decompose.

Euron slings his arm around Cersei’s shoulders and pulls her close. “Now, now, why the sullen face?” He splashes more wine into her cup and takes another swig himself. “I just saved your life! You should kiss me, Your Grace. Show your gratitude.” He waggles his eyebrows. “Hold the
Cersei takes a sip. The rage is still building within her, so powerful her whole body tenses up, while the whore Sansa Stark has the gall to sit at that table looking aloof, even bored. Cersei clears her throat. A lump of frustration has lodged itself there. She wants to rip that woman’s hair from her head, claw her eyes out, and smash her face into the table.

Another sip. A mouthful—and yet that lump refuses to budge. Cersei clears her throat, coughs. Once, twice. She’s about to take another mouthful of wine when she notices how Sansa’s expression has shifted from boredom to triumph. The truth settles in Cersei’s gut like a stone.

She opens her mouth to scream for help, but the only thing coming out are coughs. Clutching her throat, she turns to Euron for help, but he just stands there, watching her calmly. They’re all watching her calmly. Only Jon, who’s craning his neck over his shoulder to see, looks confused while ser Gregor, the big oaf, has his back to her, arms dutifully locked around the bastard, oblivious to her distress.

Then Cersei’s legs give way and she drops to the floor. Pain sears through her skull as it hits the stone; her crown clatters down the steps. Euron positions himself over her, his shadow spilling over her body, cold and dark.

“I’ve been waiting for this day,” he whispers and crouches down so that their noses are mere inches apart. Then he brings a hand to his forehead and pulls his face clean off.

Beneath is a girl with gray eyes and a wolfish grin. Cersei gurgles, reaching for her with a weak hand.

“You remember me. I was hoping you would. I’m so happy the last thing you see is…”

Arya Stark’s face and words all blur into an incomprehensible mess. In the distance, Cersei thinks she hears the booming of castles falling, or the heavy footsteps of an elephant thundering through the throne room, or the hooves of horses at a tourney. Yes, a tourney. She can hear the sword fighting too. The clink of metal as they clash, as her crown tumbles down the steps, as the wine cup falls to the floor, as the knitting needles move in a soft and steady pace, held by a golden-haired woman. She sits by the hearth, smiling as she works, that warm and beautiful smile that made everything better. And when she notices little Cersei hovering in the doorway, her smile grows even more warm and beautiful, and she stretches out her hand in invitation.

Despite the whole world stretching out between them, Cersei feels that hand against her fingers, tugging at her to come closer, begging her to join her.

*Mother…*

Cersei closes her eyes and lets herself be led into the dark.
When Jon said goodbye to Arya at the gates, she bit her lip and watched him pensively. Not until he’d swung himself up on his horse did she release her lip and the words on her tongue. Words that came out rushed and mumbled, as if she wouldn’t have to acknowledge the meaning of them if she only got them out fast enough: “Sansa was really upset when she thought you loved Daenerys. Really upset. Thought you should know.”

At first he didn’t dare hoping, but during his too long journey south hope grew despite his doubts. And he let it. He should’ve snuffed it out, but instead he reexamined all their interactions, viewed them in a new light, and allowed himself to believe.

Well, Sansa was right. He’s always been an idiot. He’s always longed for more than he deserves and now he’ll die with the bitter taste of poison and shame on his tongue. But at least he tried. For what it’s worth.

As they wait for Qyburn to arrive, Cersei and Euron are talking by the throne while Sansa stares down at the table, her face a mask of indifference. Since her bluff was revealed, she’s not looked at Jon once. No tender gaze. No reassuring whisper. Not even an explanation mouthed quickly to put him at ease and he has no pride anymore, none at all, and he breathes out a desperate, pathetic, “Sansa, please,” that would’ve humiliated him to his core had Cersei’s coughing not drowned it out. And that, Cersei’s cough, is what finally draws Sansa’s attention from the table. Her gaze flickers over to Cersei. Then, as if she’d been holding her breath, Sansa exhales loudly in a relieved smile. Jon cranes his neck to look over his shoulder in time to see Cersei collapsing and then everything happens all at once.

The Mountain’s grip around his body loosens. The guards standing by the doors start running toward them. The Mountain stomps up to Cersei; Euron whirls around with his sword drawn. Sansa slips out of her ropes and darts to Cersei’s lax form. The footsteps of the guards are coming closer and closer. There’s a dagger hidden in the shaft of Jon’s boot, one they didn’t bother to look for when they threw him in a cell yesterday, but his hands are tied, his feet are tied, and he hears the whoosh of swinging steel behind him. Jon throws himself to the side, falling to the floor, chair and all, as steel clashes into steel. His eyes snap up. Above him stands a knight, the tall one, his sword blocking the guard’s attempt to hit Jon. More footsteps approach from a different direction. The table and its rich cloths block most of his view. He can’t see Sansa from here. But he hears fighting and grunting and breathing. Falling. The gurgling of dying. A sword clattering on the table. Jon looks up just as ser Nyles grabs the chair and turns Jon upright again. But as the boy starts undoing the ropes, the Mountain comes closer.

“Hurry up!” Jon shouts but ser Nyles scrambles back, terrified, and all Jon can do is--

“Stop!”

A blur of gold and copper flashes between him and the Mountain. Sansa’s skirt brushes his legs. Her hands are lifted between herself and the Mountain as a useless shield. A shield he’ll cut through like butter with that great sword of his before he cleaves Jon as well, all in one fell swoop, and yet that hulking beast obeys her, freezing in the middle of swinging his sword.

“I’m your mistress now.” At first her voice is frail, but as she speaks and ser Gregor remains still, it grows strong and steady. “Listen to my voice, ser Gregor. This is the voice you will obey. You’re
not to hurt him. You’re not to hurt anyone, unless they try to hurt us. Do you understand?”

The Mountain’s sword returns to its sheath, and as his arms fall limply to his sides, so does Sansa’s arms to her sides. Her breathing is a loud staccato and her body sways with each breath until she sags to her knees in a pool of golden brocade, pale fingers splayed over marble.

Jon is only dimly aware of his surroundings, of the fighting coming to an end. All he sees is Sansa and the fades bruises on her back. All he hears is the breathing she struggles to get under control. She needs help and he’s tied up and useless. Looking around the room for assistance, Jon meets Euron’s eyes. They should be cold, those Greyjoy eyes, cold and manic, but in them Jon finds a warmth and care that make his skin crawl. The man even helps Jon out of his restraints and gives him the sword lying on the table. Did Sansa befriend him on that ship? Did she manage to wrap him around her finger too—or is the man playing some twisted sort of game?

Before Jon has had a chance to offer his hand, Sansa pushes herself to stand on her own. Her fingers close around the necklace and with a sob she yanks it off, throws it on the floor, and stomps the crystals into dust. Then she undoes her fancy hair so that it falls in thick, messy swaths around her shoulders, and rips at her dress until she wears only silk sandals, a shift, and a ring with a black stone. Like a girl lost in a winter storm, she stands there, wan and red-nosed with her thin arms wrapped around her shivering body, and he aches for her, for everything she’s been through. Ever since they met again she’s been so strong, but King’s Landing has drained her reserves and all he wants is to wrap his arms around her, pull her close, and tell her he’ll never let anyone hurt her again.

But he can’t. He shouldn’t. Instead he lays down the sword and unhooks his cloak, drapes it over her shoulders with careful hands and tries his best not to remember how often he’s dreamed of this, of cloaking her just like this. Of Sansa turning around with a shy smile and-- Jon swallows hard and lifts her hair from under the cloak so that it fans out over the fur. It’s silky in some places, tangled in others, her hair, and it smells all wrong. Like spices imported from Essos rather than rosemary and lavender. Sansa turns around until she faces him fully and his stupid heart races. In his dreams, this is where she kisses him. Her eyes are wide and wet and she says his name in a delicate little whisper and he can’t stand it. Can’t stand seeing her in his cloak, with his name on her lips, with a plea for his forgiveness in her eyes.

She should’ve told him. She should’ve let him know, somehow, that she was fooling Cersei. It’s only when Sansa shakes her head and tells him she couldn’t that he realizes he said it out loud.

“I thought you died, Sansa.”

His eyes well up and he feels his face scrunching up as he tries holding back all the emotions swirling within. It doesn’t deter her, though. No, she emits a soft little noise and reaches out for him and if he didn’t know better he’d call her gaze loving, full of longing, but he knows it’s still nothing but that plea. He knows it says forgive me.

She doesn’t hate him, he knows that too, but all those things she said... There was truth in them. It’s her duty to love him and protect him and so she does. A creature of duty, always, while he’s a depraved monster who loves his sister. She doesn’t blame him, though. That’s what she was trying to make him understand, wasn’t it? That he’s not truly a monster because he can’t help it. It’s in his blood. It was always in his blood.

Jon shies away before her touch breaks the little part of him that still remains whole.

“Jon, I didn’t--”

“Not now.”
“Listen to me, please, I--”

“Would you please shut up!”

He takes another step back and curls in on himself, watching the people around him through a curtain of wild, dark hair. No one’s looking at him and yet he’s never felt more exposed. He’s a young boy again who wants to hide under his cloak to sulk in peace, to lift his shoulders until the cool fur shields his warm cheeks. But instead it’s Sansa who pulls that cloak tighter around her body. It’s Sansa who ducks her head until the fur obscures her pink face. Euron watches her with so much empathy Jon hates him, just a bit. He’s not a good man. Jon’s seen the real him. Perhaps Sansa is naïve enough to trust him, but Euron will stab her in the back the first moment he gets--just like he did with Cersei--and when that man steps closer to Sansa, so does Jon, a glint of warning in his eyes and the sword sharp in his hand.

“Jon, it’s Arya,” Sansa murmurs, only for their ears.

Euron lifts his hand in an little wave. “Gotta look like this a while longer. No one’s gonna look twice at this face. Mine, on the other hand...”

Jon pulls his chin off the floor. So this is what his little sister meant then, when she said she could be anyone. A thousand questions lie on his tongue, but in the distance something rumbles, the sound of disaster, of worlds collapsing, and he realizes it’s not the first time he’s heard that sound today. He was just too distracted for it to register. His feet move before he can think and don’t stop until he’s outside on the terrace overlooking the city.

To the west rises an enormous cloud of dust and snow the brightest color of green he’s ever seen. To the south, another cloud is settling, fading. But there are no dragons in the sky, neither living nor dead. When he turns around, everyone has gathered behind him. Even a few guards new to him, whose gazes flicker around and hands hover at the hilts of their swords. Then the two knights bow at his feet, call him Your Grace, and offer their names and service as if Jon’s climbed the steps and taken the throne, and the guards stand back. It’s Sansa’s doing. She must’ve told the knights he’s the rightful heir, perhaps even given them that name he’ll never embrace to convince them to help her, but he can’t blame her for that. If it helped her, he’s grateful that the awful truth did at least some good.

“The wildfire?” he asks, gesturing impatiently at them to stand.

“None beneath the Red Keep, Your Grace,” ser Finn says. “Cersei has moved it all. She’s set traps all around the city, mostly at the gates. For a few days now, the Dragon Queen and her Dothraki horde have camped a day’s ride from the city. We’re not certain why she’s yet to attack, but we are ready for her.”

“She was waiting for me to sail south.” Arya’s words have barely left Euron’s mouth before another rumble echoes far away. “She didn’t want to attack the city with dragonfire and believed I was going to open the gates for her armies. Suppose she got tired of waiting. If I were to guess, I’d say a lot of her army just went up in wildfire flames.”

“That means she’s angry,” Jon says. “Angry and desperate. She’ll attack with dragonfire after all.”

“Your Grace, if I may,” ser Finn says. “There are Scorpions mounted on rooftops all over the city. The bolts are laced with something that’ll knock those dragons out, if only you get a good enough hit. Qyburn wants them alive. Our armies carry both steel and dragonglass and they’re already out
there. Look, Your Grace.”

Jon squints out over the rooftops and notices men manning the Scorpions, armed soldiers rushing down the streets.

“The city can defend itself. Your Grace must get yourself and your betrothed to safety.”

Betrothed? Jon glances at Sansa, who meets his gaze without wavering. Her chin is tilted too high, though, and her cheeks are flushed a pretty pink.

“The Dragonpit,” Arya says. “Bran said the ship isn’t safe, what with the dragons and all. We need to get people below the Dragonpit.”

“Right. We’ll split up. We--”

“No!” Sansa steps toward him, a trembling hand extended but never touching. “We have to work as a pack or--”

“You’ve not even listened to my plan! We need to evacuate. We need to stop Daenerys. We can’t do both at the same time unless we split up.”


The more scared she looks, the softer he feels. But softness won’t win this war. Softness won’t protect her.

“I’m not Jon right now. I’m not your bro-- Betrothed. I’m your king. And as your king, I’m ordering you to evacuate this castle.”

His harsh words brings out the steel in her. Her mask slots in place, as hard and smooth as his own. "Anything else, Your Grace?"

“Take these guards. They’ll help you evacuate the castle. Get everyone to the Dragonpit. As many as you can. Me and A-- Euron will stay here and take care of--”

The screech of a dragon cuts him off. Daenerys is soaring over the city, Drogon sweeping its dark shadow and bright breath over the rooftops.

“Go, Sansa, go!” he shouts and to his big relief she obeys. As she, the guards, and the Mountain run back into the castle, he grabs ser Finn’s arm and says, “Go with her. Protect her with your life. If anything happens to her…”

“I understand, Your Grace.”

With one last look at the woman he loves, Jon turns his attention back to the city. He has a war to fight, and he can’t do that if he has to worry about her.

While ser Nyles runs back into the castle to round up every Gold Cloak and guard still there and march them to the streets, Jon and Arya make their way down the long winding stairs leading to the city. It’s odd, hearing about everything that’s happened from Euron’s lips, in Euron’s voice, but every so often her words come out fervently, in a way that is all Arya, and he forgets his little sister
doesn’t look like herself until he takes another glance at her face and nearly stumbles.

She tells him about how Cersei’s plans regarding Sansa kept changing, that she couldn’t decide whether to trust or ignore prophecy, that she couldn’t settle on whether to kill Sansa slowly or to keep her alive in the gilded cage of a husband and household all loyal to Cersei. The only thing that never changed was her plans for Jon: she wanted to murder him in front of Sansa and drink her pain like wine.

“And it would’ve hurt Sansa. Seeing you die. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know.”

“She loves you, Jon.”

“I know,” he says but it doesn’t feel like truth.

“I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let the Lannister take more of my family. But I couldn’t get to King’s Landing in time either.”

Shooting through a cloud, Drogon starts another circle around the city. Fire spills from his mouth in short bursts, incinerating Scorpions. Burning debris falls to the ground; a trap explodes into a cloud of sickening green followed by the horrified cries of the living.

“I should’ve just killed her and taken her face when I had the chance. But I didn’t know whether it would work. Whether Drogon would accept me. Spied on her instead, tried to be her friend. That’s how I learned about Euron. His ship is fast. Like, really fast. I followed him to White Harbor to steal his face and his ship. But before I got to him, Daenerys showed up. They made their plans and after she left, I killed him. As I was carving off his face, a raven flew into the room. Bran’s letter told me to wait. That they were coming, him and the others. Seven hells, I nearly chewed off my fingers, waiting. Took them long enough—hours—but then they were all there. Bran, Brienne, ser Jaime—”

Jon grabs Arya’s arm, slowing her to a stop. “Why did they leave Winterfell?”

“Viserion fell almost instantly. Then the Night King killed Rhaegal and Daenerys left. She just left. As soon as he resurrected Rhaegal, the Night King took off as well. Suppose he didn’t want us to kill it as easily as we killed Viserion. You don’t even need a good hit. As long as you hit, the dragonglass does the rest.”

“Winterfell. Does it stand?”

Arya shrugs, shaking her head. “It’s not pretty, apparently. The godswood stands, though. Most of it. But we’ll have to rebuild, Jon. So much fire and giants and mammoths. Winterfell’s a ruin.”

Jon’s stomach churns, but he can’t let that truth weigh him down. He can mourn his home later; now he has to run and fight. And Arya’s right. They’ll rebuild. Winterfell’s been rebuilt before. But the people...

“Fought well,” Arya says when he asks, running again. “Brienne killed a White Walker. The Hound another. Grey Worm killed one. And every time, their armies thinned. And Daenerys did burn thousands and thousands of wights before she left, I’ll give her that. The oil took care of a thousand more. When Bran and the others left, there were more living than wights. Yohn Royce said he’d lead the people so that we could stop Daenerys and the Night King. Brienne told me they fought so well. Men and women. Boys and girls. You should be proud.”

“Has Bran kept an eye on them?”
“A little. He’s mostly looked at Daenerys, the Dothraki, the Night King, Cersei—even Sansa.”

Jon lifts his eyebrows. “How did you manage that?”

“I have my ways. A little guilt goes a long way.” Arya flashes him a smile that’s still a bit jarring on Euron’s face. “The Night King isn’t alone, though. Bran says he’s been raising a new army. All the settlements around King’s Landing, gone. Slaughtered and resurrected. To invade the city. And now Daenerys is destroying all the defenses. Blowing up all the wildfire. All he needs to do is wait. Once we’ve killed Drogon, he has two dragons. Even if we evacuate half the people of King’s Landing, we won’t stand a chance when he comes for us.”

“What did ser Finn say? The bolts don’t kill. So if we aim for the body, not the head. Unless... Do you think we can convince Daenerys to join us again? Cersei’s dead. Nothing stands in her way anymore.”

"She'll never join us, Jon." Arya glances up at the keep and Jon follows her line of sight. The stairs are empty. "Nor will ser Nyles. Probably hiding somewhere until this all blows over instead of following order. He's a coward."

"Aye, I noticed."

“I think we’re on our own.”

“Well, at least we have each other.” He gives her a smile. “Although, it is weird. When you look like that.”

“It’s better this way. In case we run into someone.”

“I know,” Jon says and then they’re out in the city, where panicked people rush down the streets like a muddy river, fleeing the conqueror showering their homes with sprays of fire.

Down the street he hears the unmistakable noises of Dothraki screamers, their shouts and the beating hooves of their horses loud even in the cacophony of sounds washing over the city.

All that time spent on watching Daenerys, learning her weaknesses, observing her servants, pretending to enjoy her flirting, pretending to enjoy a lot of things--all of that and for what?

He should’ve just knelt, first thing, helped her take King’s Landing more peacefully and then moved her North. It would’ve taken a lot less time and left them with a lot fewer casualties. Perhaps the Night King even would’ve stayed in the lands beyond the Wall. Would the Wall ever have fallen without Viserion? Did he deliver the one thing the Night King always needed right to his frozen doorstep, wrapped with a pretty bow?

If I had stayed home, I would’ve been there when Bran returned. I would’ve learned the truth much sooner and everything would’ve been different...

“Stop it.”

Jon turns to his little sister with a frown.

“You’re brooding. This is not your fault. And even if it were, you can brood about it later. We don’t have time. Look, there’s a Scorpion there.” She points to a roof a few blocks behind them. “I can get up there, but if the Dothraki come...”

“I’ll hold them back.”
“You’re one person, Jon.”

“Yeah, well.” He shrugs, the corners of his mouth tugged up in a defeated smile. "I'll slow them down, then."

“I have this.” She strokes a horn hanging around her neck. “Euron claimed it controls dragons. But everyone who’s ever blown it has ended up dead. Burned from the inside. Maybe we don’t have a choice but to…” She trails off, narrowing her eyes at something in the distance. “Maybe not… That’s Theon, isn’t it?”

Between them and the approaching clamor of Dothraki, in the midst of the panicked crowd, Jon spies Theon and group of Ironborn. They’re bloodstained and dusty but alive and armed and plowing through the crowd without dropping speed.

“Go,” Arya says, nodding at them. “I’ll climb.”

Jon weaves between people, jumps over debris, dropped baskets, dropped shoes, trampled bodies. Theon nearly moves past him, but Jon grabs his sleeve and pulls him to a stop.

“Jon! What are you doing here?”

“We have to stop Daenerys.”

Theon shakes his head. “Yara. Been looking for her for ages. Euron’s impossible to find. Was in a whorehouse he visits when the attacks started, but I managed to get enough information out of one of the whores. She’s in the dungeons. I have to save her.”

“Well, we have to stop Daenerys first. I need your help.”

“But Yara--”

Jon twists Theon’s tunic and yanks him closer. “Sansa’s here too. There’s nothing I’d like more than to run to her, but I can’t. Because unless we stop Daenerys, we won’t have any sisters left to protect.”

Theon hesitates. Behind him, a Dothraki rider whoops as he mows down the crowd with his horse and that does it. Theon knows exactly what will happen to their sisters if those men reach the castle. With a rallying cry, the Ironborn fall in behind Jon and they run to meet the approaching army. The traps, the Gold Cloaks, the Golden Company, perhaps even the citizens of King’s Landing, have all done their best to minimize its size, but they’re still on horses while Jon and the rest meet them from the ground.

They’re close now. Jon takes a deep breath through his nose, releases it through his mouth. Focuses. He doesn’t like killing but this, this dance with its swaying and swinging and ducking never fails in giving him the oddest sense of calm. Nothing exists but the sword in his hand, the blood pumping through his veins, and the people rumbling around him. He forgets who he is, all his pain, all his sorrow, all his worries. Out here he’s not a king, not a bastard, not even Jon. He’s just a fighter, nothing but a fighter, and he moves and he kills until the street before him is littered with the fallen.

Blood drips from his sword. His labored breaths freeze in the cold air. Farther ahead stands ser Jorah, as tired and blood-drenched as Jon. His sword as red as Jon’s. But not Longclaw. It hangs from ser Jorah’s hip, unused. His gaze travels over the rooftops behind Jon, lingers a bit where Arya must’ve found her place and is waiting for a clean shot.
"You're in my way, Jon."

"Aye. And you're in mine. I don't want to kill you. But I will. If I have to."

"I don't doubt it." With one hand, ser Jorah undoes the sword-belt. "This belongs to you." He takes a swift look around, mouth set in a grim line. "I don't deserve it. I never did."

"You don't have to follow her."

"I made my choice a long time ago. There's no going back now." Ser Jorah throws Longclaw in a neat arch and it lands on the back of a fallen Ironborn in front of Jon. "If you're going to kill me, I'd prefer dying by that blade."

Eyes locked, Jon tosses the old sword aside, picks up the scabbard, secures the belt around his waist. A dark shadow passes over them and Jon shifts his gaze quickly, prepared to dive into an alley, but Drogon flies on.

"Tell me." Ser Jorah tightens the grip on his sword. "Did you ever love her? Even a little?"

"No."

"And lady Sansa?"

"I'd do anything for her."

Ser Jorah breathes out a mirthless smile, a touch of self-deprecation to it when he shakes his head, and Jon has no difficulty guessing what the man is thinking. His endless loyalty and devotion garnered him nothing while Daenerys fell for a man who barely spared her a second glance, and gave him her love and her body while he longed for another.

"We're not so different, you and I."

"I'm nothing like you."

"I tried warning her about you, but she wouldn't listen. You fooled her well, Jon Snow."

Jon pulls Longclaw from its sheath. "I barely did a thing."

It feels right in his hand, his trusted old sword. The grip, the weight. Perfect.

In the distance, Drogon swerves a bolt and sets his course. Ser Jorah's eyes seek out Arya once more. Jon inhales deeply and charges.
Drogon’s roars are growing louder. Loud enough that Jon and Jorah both stumble to a stop and look to the skies. Another bolt whistles through the air. Jon shadows his eyes and follows its long clean arc which ends at Drogon’s neck, where it pierces the thick scales and pulls a screech from the monster. Ser Jorah gasps and watches in horror as the dragon hurtles toward the ground, his sword-arm sinking until it hangs uselessly by his side. Jon lowers his sword too and scans the skyline in search of Euron’s silhouette. He finds only Theon glowing with exultation.

Beating its wings, Drogon takes control of itself and slows its speed until it hovers only a few feet over the rooftops. Dust and snow and dirt whirl up in the air; Jon’s hair whirls about his face. Out of buildings, alleys, and nook and crannies, stream frightened people desperate to get away from the enormous dragon. Its jaws open wide. Jon whips around to shout at Theon to jump, but he’s already gone and Drogon’s flames engulf nothing but the Scorpion.

Father down, where the street leads into a square, Drogon lands with a boom that shakes the buildings around them. If it were to breathe fire now, that fire would roll down the street and swallow them all. Him, ser Jorah, and all the people scrambling to get away. The children clutching their mother’s skirts. The strong sons scooping up the elders too frail to run and climb. The soldiers too frightened to fight anymore. The pretty ladies with pretty dresses too thin for this weather, who move up the street with determination, hands linked. Their patrons not far behind, some only half-dressed, as though they stayed inside the whorehouse to fuck their way through the end of the world until the end came a little too close for comfort.

Through the spikes crowning Drogon’s head, Daenerys peers out. Even from this distance, Jon can see the fury burning in her eyes. If it weren’t for ser Jorah standing between them, Jon would’ve already been ashes.

“Ser Jorah!” The echoes of her voice bounce between the facades. “Remove the bolt.”

As ser Jorah rushes to obey, Jon puts Longclaw back in the scabbard and approaches carefully, hands held up.

“Dany! Cersei’s dead. The throne is yours. No one’s stopping you.”

“No one’s stopping me? The bolt in my dragon says otherwise!”

“Because you’re attacking the city!” Jon lets out a harsh breath and calms himself, speaking in a kinder tone. “The Night King is coming. He’ll kill us all unless we work together. Cersei’s dead and-

“You think I believe a single word you say? You betrayed me. Do you know what I do to people who betray me?”

“Then have ser Jorah arrest him.”
Jon spins around. Tyrion Lannister is climbing over the messy street. He looks thinner, older, and dirty, and he’s wrapped in a threadbare cloak, the fabric hacked off to end at his ankles. Several steps behind him trails a young woman in a pink gown, a cloak hastily thrown over her shoulders, her dark hair sprinkled with dust. They’re the only people on the street moving toward Drogon rather than from it.

“He’s guilty,” Daenerys says. “And guilty men burn.”

Tyrion shakes his head softly. “Your Grace, enough.”

Ser Jorah pulls out the bolt and drops it to the ground. The arrowhead glistens with dragonblood. The poison. It must’ve entered Drogon’s bloodstream. Crouching down for the dagger hidden in his boots, Jon keeps his attention on the dragon as Tyrion keeps moving toward Daenerys.

“You’ve taken King’s Landing,” Tyrion says. “Cersei’s dead. I saw her body myself. There’s no need to burn anyone else.”

“Get out of the way, Tyrion.”

Drogon blinks slowly, head moving woozily as if it’s too heavy for its neck.

“I know you, Daenerys. You don’t want to hurt people. You want to protect them. You can only do that if you sit on that throne. So sit on it. Ser Jorah and I will be there. We’ll witness you taking your throne. Finally.” He gives a shrug and Jon can hear the smile in his voice when he continues, “It’s why we’re here, isn’t it? To see you rule. To see you be better than those who came before you. To prove to everyone that you’re not your father’s daughter, just as I am not my father’s son.”

Daenerys’ nostrils flare. “I’m giving you one last warning. Out of respect for your service as my Hand. Get out of the way or you’ll burn with the rest of them.”

“I don’t believe you. You are not cruel. You, Daenerys Stormborn, are unlike any woman I’ve ever met.”

Gingerly, lest Daenerys notices his movement, Jon’s fingers close around the dagger and pulls it out. He only needs to get a little closer and then, if he’s lucky, he’ll hit her only a beat before Drogon slips into a poison-induced sleep. If he’s unlucky… Best not think about that.

“You must already know this,” Tyrion says, “surely you know, even though I’ve never said so, but I love you and I think you love--”

“Dracarys.”

Drogon’s maw opens. The woman in pink throws herself forward. Jon aims--and slips on a patch of blood-sticky ice and falls on his arse before the dagger’s even left his hand. A measly burst of fire slips out of the sleepy dragon and merely singes Tyrion before he’s knocked over by the woman. They roll together on the ground, quenching the flames eating at Tyrion’s clothes and hair.

“What did you do!” Daenerys urges the dragon forward. A building crumbles beneath its paw and the sound is sickening. Like booming thunder and splintering wood and rattling rocks and the horrifying much-too-short cries of people. People too scared, too old, too sick to run. “What did you do to my dragon, nephew?”

Drogon’s enormous head blots out the sun, leaving Jon in cold shadow. At this distance, even a measly flame would be the end of him.
“I gave you everything.” Daenerys’ lips tremble with rage. “Everything! And all you gave in return were lies! You’re going to die today, Jon Snow, for what you’ve done to me—and you will die screaming. Dracarys.”

Its mouth is enormous, the tongue long and mottled with black, the teeth sharp and too many to count. Its throat glows like embers. Jon thinks of Arya perched on a rooftop, of Bran waiting aboard the Silence, of Sansa…

He can feel the heat already. It’s almost a comfort.

Something whizzes through the air. Jon’s head snaps up. A bolt burrows into Drogon’s eye and a death song louder than anything Jon has ever heard sweeps over the street. Its head crashes to the ground and the world quakes and dust sprays over his face and Jon closes his eyes and then there’s only silence.

Jon exhales slowly. Once, twice. Everything aches. His back, his muscles, his head. His wrists and ankles where the ropes rubbed him raw. And yet he feels light. Free. After weeks of anxiety forcing his heart up into his throat, he can now finally breathe properly. He can feel his heart beating in his chest, its rhythm steady and true. Jon opens his eyes. Hazy sunlight catches in the tiny snowflakes and specks of dust dancing in the air. The world is glittering.

Then sound starts creeping back to him. His breathing. The blood rushing through his veins. Sobbing. Clothes rustling behind him. Beside him. In front of him. Everywhere. One after another, people creep out from their hiding places, eyes warily trained on the unmoving dragon. Blood seeps from Drogon’s eye, drips down on the ground where the snow is melting from the heat still trapped in its body. Dany’s long silver hair is draped over the black ridges, swaying as her small body heaves with sobs. Ser Jorah’s gaze moves over the encroaching mob, and he reaches up for her, his lips forming the word Khaleesi over and over.

“Help her.” Tyrion looks down at Jon. The hair on his right side is gone, the skin beneath red and blistered. “They’ll rip her apart. No one deserves that fate.”

Jon rises to his feet. On his lashes, on his lips, on the hair tumbling down over his face, snowflakes catch. They’ve grown as fat and soft as the delicate down of a dove.

“Did you see?” Theon’s hand lands on his shoulder. His breaths come in short bursts, like a happy dog panting in the summer sun. “I killed it! I slayed a dragon, Jon!”

“Your Grace.” Tyrion looks up at him with sad eyes. “She’s your kin. Stop them.”

Jon grips his sword. Tyrion is right. No one deserves that fate. But as Jon steps forward, mist rolls in over the street and heavy clouds roll in over the sun. The snowflakes floating down are now as fat as quail eggs. The cold air nips at his cheeks and nose.

With barely focused eyes, he sees ser Jorah helping Daenerys down to the ground. The people are so close to her now and they’re hurling insults and accusations at her, picking up whatever they can find to hurl that too. But Jon knows this weather. He knows this cold that pierces your skin and settles in your bones.

Spinning in a slow circle, he scans the sky after Rhaegal. The clouds are thick and the mist obscures his view, but there, to the west, behind the feathery curtain of clouds, the sky lights up with a blue flame. West. Jon looks around to navigate himself.

Jon darts into a house, its door wide open. Inside, the furniture are toppled over. Clothes are strewn over the floor. A stew is burning into the kettle on the hearth. He flies up the stairs, climbs out a window, up on the smoldering roof where snowflakes land with a hiss. From up here, the city glows. He runs over the roof, jumps to the neighboring house, and so makes his way in the direction Arya took off earlier.

Theon, the two Ironborn still standing, Tyrion, and the woman in pink are heading back to warn Sansa and the others. Once Tyrion saw the Night King, helping Daenerys didn’t seem so pressing anymore. Soon countless wights will flow into the city through the gates knocked down by Daenerys and her armies, and then they won’t stand a chance. Even if they’re safe from dragonfire beneath the pit, the dead can still find them. And with all the Scorpions burning…

Euron’s horn. He needs Euron’s horn.

The clamor of fighting draws Jon’s attention to the ground. And there, on a street so narrow he sees little but shadows, Arya is fighting. Grabbing the edge of the roof, Jon lowers himself down until he hangs from his hands, then drops down on the ground. Metal flashes in the dark. A warhammer. It lands in the face of a bloodrider with a crunch.

“Arya! Gendry!”

Arya steps over the fallen bloodrider. “Daenerys?”

“I don’t know. Drogon’s dead, though.”

“Good!” Arya wipes blood splatter off Euron’s face, and she and Gendry step out from the alleyway. “The Scorpion had no bolts. Was looking for another one when these idiots attacked. Then Gendry came.”

“I’m going to Fleabottom. I have to find my niece and her mother.”

“The Night King,” Jon says. “He’s here. I have to kill him.” He nods at the horn hanging from Arya’s neck. “How does that work?”

“I’m not sure.” She lifts the chain over her head and hands Jon the horn. “Bran was trying to find out more when we sailed here. But he had to do so much, keep track of so much, he missed a lot.”

Jon runs his hands over the horn. It’s smooth, surprisingly warm, carved from black bones and decorated with flames of gold.

“Only someone with the blood of old Valyria running through their veins should blow it.” Bran’s voice. As cool and soft as powdery snow. “Or so they say.”

He’s lying in the arms of the Mountain. Next to them stand lady Brienne and ser Jaime, their cheeks flushed and foreheads glistening as if they’ve been running.

“Lady Sansa is safe,” Brienne says. “I was loathe to leave her side, but your brother insisted. He also insists we can trust…” Her mouth curls with distaste as her eyes trails over the Mountain. “This.”
Bran blinks calmly. “Sansa has ordered him to protect me and obey me. And he will. He takes no initiative anymore. Without someone to obey, he just… stands.”

“We have to get them away from the Dragonpit. How far have they gotten?”

“We caught up with them in time. They’re on their way back to the harbor now. The Night King came sooner than I thought and if we fail, their only chance is leaving for Essos.”

“All right, what’s the plan? I blow this and…?”

“Rhaegal should come to you. Or you boil from the inside. It’s hard to tell.”

Jon chuckles joylessly. “Well, suppose there’s only one way to find out.”

“I’ll do it, Your Grace.” Gendry nods with determination. “I’ll blow the horn. Got Targaryen blood too, don’t I? A drop or two. And if it don’t work, well…” He flashes a brilliant smile. “A little heat never bothered me.”

They find another square. It’s strewn with the bodies of highborn, lowborn, soldiers, Dothraki, even archers who fell from the rooftops when Drogon rained fire down over the city. But as far as they can tell, there are no living left, and the square is large enough to house a dragon, and it’s connected to streets without any traps. According to Bran there’s still wildfire scattered around the city, some of it has even leaked out into the open. After soaking up enough sunlight it’ll go off, even in this cold.

There are bloodriders too, he says, still fighting here and there--some of them aware of the fallen dragon and getting loot before they board a ship and return home. Something they did on the way back south as well, after spending too many weeks on the cold winter road where their devotion to their queen faded as their hunger and boredom grew. But Jon can’t think about that, about his own culpability, when the Night King is here. They have only one chance. Either they succeed and he’ll have the rest of his life to feel guilty over all the stupid decisions he’s made lately, or they fail and it won’t matter anymore.

“Are we ready?”

“Just…” Arya says and, in one simple movement, removes her Euron mask.

Drowning in Euron’s clothing, she looks up at Gendry with wide glassy eyes and a sad mouth. As they allow themselves a quick embrace, Jon looks away to give them privacy. When he looks back, Arya is Euron again and standing a safe distance away from her dearest friend.

Gendry exhales. Swallows. Brings the horn to his lips. Then he looks up at the skies, mumbles a prayer, and fills his lungs with air.

The bellow that follows is louder even than Drogon’s death song. It’s so loud it forces Jon to his knees where he clutches his throbbing head. His brain is melting, pouring out of his ears. His skin’s aflame. Wave after wave of heat wash over his body until the flesh sloughs off and he’s nothing but charred bones. As the bellow fades, cold rushes back and soothes his pain, rebuilds his flesh and skin until he feels whole once more. Panting, Jon pats his hands over his chest, his face, his hair, it’s all still there. The same old body with its scars and aches and bruises.
Silence lasts for only a heartbeat or two before a howling storm whirls into the square. Snow swirls up and more is pouring down from the overcast sky until the air around Jon is thick as milk.

The moment he gets himself back on his feet, a gust knocks him over again. Dragons smell of sulfur, but not Rhaegal. It smells like the crisp nights before snow. Like the damp chill of the deepest, darkest crypts. Like being pulled from a black nothingness and thrust into a too bright world where nothing makes sense anymore.

Through the snowy veil before him, Jon sees the enormous creature landing. The ground trembles. Jon jumps to his feet and charges, Longclaw in hand. But even though the distance between them is short, running against the storm is like moving through mud. His legs pump, his arms swing, and yet he inches forward.

Something’s rattling behind him. He spins around in time to stop a sword from cleaving his head in two. He pulls back. Swings. The wight collapses. Then comes another and another and another and soon the square is as thick with wights as the air is with snow.

Jon grips Longclaw tightly. He kicks a wight, stabs another, crouches down, thrusts the sword into the chest of one as he rises. He lets his mind leave his body and runs on instinct, mowing down the wights like a farmer scythes grass until the rattling around him as stopped and no cold fingers grasp at his legs or arms.

Catching his breath, Jon peers through the snow. Dark shapes move close to him. One so tall it must be Brienne. The wind mellows, the snowfall thins, and Jon sees more clearly. Ser Jaime is fighting closely behind her, but they’re too blinded by snow and battle, and when they bump into one another, they both swing around, swords ready, and Jon shouts uselessly into the howling wind.

Oathkeeper and Widow’s Wail kiss. Light springs forth between the blades and radiates out over the square with such force Jon has to shield his eyes lest it blinds him. Peering between his fingers, he sees the Night King slide off Rhaegal. Gendry’s there, still standing, hammer in hand. He shifts his stance, swings the hammer--

The Night King stops the blow with his hand and pulls the hammer from Gendry’s grip easily. The Night King lifts the hammer. Arya charges. He sweeps her away with his free arm and she barrels into a group of wights. Then the hammer falls, but it’s not Gendry it hits but the horn which splinters into a thousand pieces. As if that lifted the spell with which the horn bound the dragon, Rhaegal raises his head with a victorious roar.

The light fades, leaving the square in murky afternoon haze, but the halves of Ice still glow and pulse as if they’ve come alive. All wights stop their fighting, turn toward Brienne and Jaime at the same time. They move as one, a mass of gray death coming to swallow them whole. Brienne links her arm with Jaime’s and pulls him behind her, so that they stand back-to-back. Their dance is a wonderful thing to behold, their swords glowing warm and true, glimmering light trailing behind as the blades swish through the air. Oathkeeper slides through a wight as easy as a warm knife through butter and the creature crumbles into dust. Brienne’s eyes widen, but the shock doesn't slow her down. No, she swiftly moves the sword through the army, creating more dust with each swing.

The Night King watches, expressionless. It never changes, that stony mask of his, and yet Jon can see the defeat in his eyes. He knows, deep in his gut, that the Night King will climb back atop Rhaegal and lift to the skies where no one can touch him.

“Stop him!” he shouts into the wind. “Kill Rhaegal!”

But everyone’s swarmed, Gendry’s without a weapon, and Jon is too far away. His fighting has
brought him so close to the buildings lining the square that even if Jon sprints, the Night King will be in the air once Jon’s closed the distance between them. Unless…

Jon moves on all fours, scouring the ground, rifling through the row of fallen archers. There! A bow. Wrong arrows. Another quiver. Dragonglass! He nocks it as he spins around. He doesn’t need a good hit, as long as he hits. He draws. Releases. The Night King is gripping Rhaegal, one foot on the wing. The arrows shoots through the snow-filled air. Jon holds his breath.

He never sees the hit. One moment the arrow’s flying. The next, Rhaegal shatters.

The Night King stumbles forward into thin air, catches his balance. Slowly, he turns his head to Jon, that icy stare piercing him.

Jon drops the bow and gets to his feet. Draws Longclaw. Gendry comes up behind the Night King, unarmed, to do only the gods know what, but without even looking, the Night King thrusts the shaft of the hammer backwards and Gendry sinks to his knees with his hands covering his groin.

Jaime and Brienne are still working their way through wights, and while Arya’s back on her feet, what can she do? Blood’s dripping from several flesh wounds and she’s too tired to keep Euron’s body fully upright. She’s hunched over like an old man with a bad back, leaning against her sword as if it were a cane. No matter how good a fighter, the living tire eventually while the Night King’s strength never wavers. And now he’s coming closer, eyes locked on Jon, the heavy hammer light in his hand.

Jon steadies himself, focuses his breathing. Tries not to think of the nauseating crunch of that hammer smashing into the bloodrider’s face. The Night King picks up an arakh on his way.

Jon blocks the first swing. The second grazes his arm, the sharp arakh drawing blood that steams in the cold air. As the Night King pulls back his arm for a third swing, a shadow looms over them. Bare hands come from his left, closes around the Night King’s forehead. The Night King’s eyes dart back and forth, roll in his head. Jon sees the tension in his enemy’s shoulder loosen a beat before the hammer drops, and he dives to the side just in time for the hammer to merely ghost his leg when it plummets to the ground.

Bran lies in the Mountain’s arms, his eyes white as snow and his hands spanning the Night King’s head like a crown, fingers splayed over the horned forehead.

Jon readies himself, but before he’s thrust his sword into the Night King’s chest, Bran’s voice comes from far away, or from inside Jon’s head, dreamy and slow.

“Not you. Not yet.”

Jon stands back. Golden light bathes the Night King from behind and leaves him in a smoky glow that softens the hard ridges of his body. A terrible noise grinds in Jon’s ears, like a thousand whetstones sharpening a thousand blades. The Night King’s mouth drops open. Golden cracks spread across his armor, across his skin, like veins filled with liquid fire. The light seems to come from inside his body, ready to burst free. Something sharp and gleaming protrudes from his chest. Twin blades. The edges clean and shining. Jon squints against the light that suffuses the Night King’s body as the blades are pushed through to the hilt.

The Night King sags to his knees. Behind him stand Brienne and ser Jaime, her left hand clasped around his right wrist, their other hands leaving the hilts of their swords.

Jon glances at Bran for directions, but the boy lies limply in the Mountain’s arms, eyes closed and
lips pale and parted.

“Do it.” Brienne’s tone is gentle. “Go on.”

The Night King tips his head back and looks up at Jon. There’s no pleading in his eyes. No regret. There’s only hate, burning colder than the heart of winter.

Longclaw sings as it cleaves the air, as it slides through the frozen neck of Jon’s final foe.

The Night King’s head tumbles off his shoulders and he topples forward. The hilts of the swords stick out of his back like golden trees as his body glides down the blades until he’s flat on the ground.

The end of White Walkers would be the end of Jon, he once thought, but even now as the Night King's body slowly melts from the heat of the glowing swords, Jon's heart beats on in his tired body. He doesn’t feel free or light this time, though. The world doesn’t glitter. It’s tinted a cool shade of blue and the shadows of winter afternoon are creeping closer.

The ground is creeping closer too and then it's cold against Jon's cheek. Cold and sticky and hard--and yet it's sweeter than the softest featherbed.

Jon's eyelids grow heavy. He lets them drift closed.

When he comes to, the world is bobbing as if he’s lying on a skiff. He can almost smell the salty ocean air. But when he opens his eyes, the skiff isn’t a skiff at all but Brienne’s strong arms. Her jaw his set and her blue eyes trained on the street before them. She barely looks tired. Ser Jaime carries new gashes on his handsome face, and when he looks at Jon lying like a babe in Brienne’s arms, a smirk quirks his mouth.

Frowning, Jon extracts himself and plants his feet on solid ground. Brienne is kind enough not to comment.

Moving through the city is a cumbersome chore. The streets are filled with embers and snakes of fire and dead bodies and dead horses. With ashes and debris and snow and blood. With crying survivors trying to find loved ones among the dead. Their attempts to bring them along to the harbor is fruitless. No one cares about these unknown heroes, and the Mountain only deters.

Darkness has fallen, the swords no longer glow, and Jon has no idea where they are anymore, but ser Jaime finds them torches and leads the way. Both he and Brienne seem relatively alert. Bran still hasn’t woken up. Arya limps. Gendry’s lips are blistered and he’s much too winded for the pace they’re keeping. They need a maester. If a maester can do anything to help a man who came too close to being boiled from the inside.

When the reach the top of the stairs leading down to the harbor, the sea opens up before them. Seven ships are already asea, traveling toward different destinations by the looks of it. Greyjoy sails, Lannister, others he doesn’t know. But the Silence is still there, and a group of people still waits on the jetty. In the light of braziers illuminating the harbor, Sansa’s hair glows like molten copper and he’s so relieved to see her safe and sound his knees go weak. She holds a child in her embrace, five-six years old, and the child is leaning her tired head on Sansa's shoulder, two dolls clutched in her
arms.

“Nettie!”

Gendry’s voice breaks and he coughs and he runs down the last few steps of the stairs leading down to the pebbled beach. The child slides out of Sansa’s embrace and throws herself into Gendry’s arms. He holds her tightly, burrows his head in her hair, and when he pulls away to smile his niece, his cheeks are wet with tears.

As Gendry and Nettie speak, Davos comes up to Jon to ask about Daenerys and the dragons and the Night King, but Jon can’t take his eyes off Sansa. She’s smiling at Nettie as she rambles on about dolls and lemon cakes and pretty dresses and, "Look at my cloak, uncle. M’lady made it for me," and when Gendry in a fit of gratitude pulls Sansa into his arms, Sansa’s smile only grows despite his too-familiar manner. Her cheeks even go a little pink. They look like a family, the three of them. The handsome bastard prince, the beautiful lady, and their precocious daughter.

Jealousy fills Jon’s stomach, hot and dark like tar, and it only grows worse once they've boarded the Silence, for Sansa has time to fuss over everyone but him. Over Bran and Arya and Brienne and even ser Jaime. A woman who doesn’t like being touched anymore has a hug for everyone, it seems, a kind word for everyone. Everyone but Jon. And he shouldn’t be jealous of his friends or his family--nor of a child, for fuck’s sake--and yet he is. Because she’ll never fuss like that over him. She’ll never hug him again. Why would she? She thought she was broken. All that time when he couldn't stop staring at her like a lovesick idiot, she thought she had to be imagining things because her big brother couldn't possibly be that horrible. But he was that horrible. Is that horrible. A depraved monster. Sick. But now she knows the awful truth and she couldn’t have been more clear about how that made her feel.

As the others listen to Brienne and ser Jaime speaking of glowing swords, and Theon speaking about dragons, Jon moves to the stern of the ship and watches King’s Landing grow smaller. Emerald clouds rise all over the city and the sound of buildings collapsing rolls over the water. Even the Red Keep cracks, a terrace and a tower sliding off the facade and plummeting into the waves before more follows. Cersei didn’t get all the wildfire from under it after all.

“There are still people in there,” Sansa says behind him. He doesn’t turn around. “Some refused to leave. Didn’t trust me. Not that I blame them.” She positions herself next to him, and her cloak--his cloak--brushes against his legs. “Others left on horses or carriages. I hope they made it out.”

“I doubt it.”

"You killed the Night King."

"We all did."

"Still... You saved the world, Jon. You saved us."

He can feel her eyes on him, but he refuses to meet them.

“Jon,” she says and the softness in her voice makes him bristle. “Please.”

“What.”

“Would you at least look at me?”

He sighs deeply and turns to her, exasperated.
“I didn’t mean it. What I said to Cersei. I didn’t mean any of it.”

Jon tugs the corners of his mouth down, nodding.

“You don’t believe me.”

“I do.” His heart races and his mouth feels dry and yet his lips keep moving, spilling words so eager to come out. “I believe you think that’s true. That you want it to be. But do you know what I think, Sansa? I think that deep down, it’s exactly how you feel. Because I’ve never heard lies sound more like truth. Not ever. And you’re not that good of a liar.”

He doesn’t stay to witness her reaction. Instead he lets the rush of speaking his mind carry him all the way below deck and into the first available cabin he can find. It surges through his body, that rush, even as he peels off his armor with trembling fingers and slips beneath the blankets of the berth. But there, in the dark, damp cold of the cabin, in the calm of ropes creaking and waves lapping against wood, the rush dissipates. All Jon feels is alone.
Sansa

Chapter Notes

Warning: a little bit of violence.

Sansa’s body aches with longing, tells her to run run run, to grab Jon’s hand and tug him back to her. But they’ve made enough scenes as it is today. She stays on deck, his cloak pulled tight around her shivering body. After his long boat journey, it smells musty, less like Jon and more like weariness, and yet she’s kept wearing it. Even after she found Tisiph and Nettie and the bundle of warmer clothes and shoes they’d brought for her and now that bundle lies forgotten on the streets of King’s Landing, dropped in their haste to get to safety.

When Jon cloaked her, Sansa’s heart beat so madly she could’ve sworn she heard it echoing in the throne room. If he’d kissed her then she would’ve let him. She would’ve kissed him back.

Sansa feels someone’s eyes on her and meets Theon’s gaze across the deck. He’s regarding her with sympathy too heavy for her exhausted mind, and she turns back to watch King’s Landing and find a sense of peace.

Deep down she’s always known Cersei would figure out a way to get to her. That Sansa one day would have to use everything she’d learned from the players taking her under her wing. And now, as her cage grows small in the distance, there’s finally room to spread out her own wings, to rely on them instead of seeking shelter in the shadow of another’s.

Winterfell is a ruin, but come spring they’ll rebuild. Her family is alive. The threats are gone. They can finally start living instead of surviving.

“Does Jon know where we’re going?”

Arya’s words in Euron’s voice still make Sansa jolt.

“I didn’t have a chance to tell him. You should do it. He doesn’t want to see me. I said horrible things. To make Cersei think I hated him. And he believed me.”

“He’ll get over it. He just needs to sulk for a bit. Give him time.”

Sansa sighs but nods, and Arya puts her arm around her for a hug, but no matter how much Arya sounds and acts like herself, she still looks like Euron and Sansa can’t help but recoil.

“Not while you’re wearing that face. It makes my skin crawl.”

“Sorry. While we’re on the ship, I have to--”

Arya’s eyes widen. Her lips part with a wheeze. Then she gasps, stumbles forward and catches her balance with a hand on Sansa’s arm, her fingernails sharp even through the thick layer of wool.

“Don’t you touch her.” Theon stands behind Arya, eyes wild and head trembling with rage. In his hand is a dagger, the blade wet with blood. “The Silence is ours now. Mine and Yara’s.”
Theon pulls back his hand, lifts it, aims at Arya’s neck, the blood gleaming in the moonlight, and Sansa screams. Heavy feet stomp over the deck and then Theon is ripped away by enormous hands closing around his neck. Ser Gregor squeezes, the dagger slips from Theon’s grip, droplets of blood scattering over the deck, and Sansa screams and screams, for help, for ser Gregor to stop, and Theon drops to the deck like a ragdoll, head smacking against the wood. People are running, their footsteps thundering around her. The tongue-less crew of the Silence pulls Arya from Sansa’s arms and rush below deck. Familiar faces close around Sansa and shower her with questions and concern--and poor Theon lies still and ignored and lifeless.

“Help him!” She shoves away the hands all too eager to help her. “Help Theon!”

The healer’s cabin reminds Sansa of Qyburn’s lair. Bunches of herbs hang from the ceiling and the walls are lined with barred shelves containing flasks, jars, and vials with a wide variety of contents: translucent liquids in every color imaginable, powders, teas, grain, even animal parts, all labeled by a neat hand. There’s something Qyburn about the healer as well. Not her appearance. She’s tall and slender, black of hair and eye, with tan skin and bronze jewelry around neck, wrists, and ankles. No, it’s her air. The passion for her gory work. The fascinated glint in her eye as she stitches wounds and smear salves. The satisfied sigh when she straightens her back after a job well done, as though it soothes her the way sewing soothes Sansa.

Theon came to right away. The healer stuck something pungent under his nose and his eyes shot open. Now he lies wrapped in blankets on one of the three cots bolted to the floor, eyes closed, resting as the pain relief does its job. Next to him lies Bran, still unconscious, and next to him lies Arya, dull-eyed and pale as death.

She bled and bled and bled, and even though she murmured that she’d been through worse, even though her wounds are stitched and bandaged, Sansa finds little comfort in it. As does Gendry, it seems. The cabin has a berth with two bunks as well. The top bunk is decorated with Essosi tapestry and shell necklaces, ostensibly where the healer sleeps, while the lower bunk is plain and neatly made. In it sits Gendry with his belly full of medicine and his lips smeared with ointment, Nettie asleep in his lap. When they burst into the healer’s cabin, Tyrion had just left and Gendry was on his way too. One look at Arya had him turn on his heel and march back inside.

Rummaging through her flasks, the healer murmurs to herself in her own language. Not Dothraki or Valyrian. Something softer, more melodic. Then she returns to Arya’s cot and gives her something for the pain. Barely a breath later Arya sleeps. As herself. The moment the crew left the cabin, she pulled off Euron’s mask and handed it to Sansa. And Sansa has stood frozen ever since, holding that awful mask she doesn’t know where to put.

Washing her hands, the healer looks at her with an amused twinkle in her eyes. “Sit, copper lady. Lay down the mask. Rest. She would want you to rest.”

“Will she live?”

“If your gods are kind.”

“Her secret can’t leave this cabin. Euron’s men will hurt people. Innocent people. On this ship, on the other ships. You’re a healer. I’m sure you don’t want to see anyone hurt.”
The healer’s eyes glide over ser Gregor, who stands by the door, and Sansa knows she’s thinking of Brienne and ser Finn as well, who are posted outside to ensure no one leaves or enters the cabin without Sansa’s approval.

“You need not worry about me, lady. This is not my first Faceless Man. I knew at White Harbor what she was and no word has left my lips.” The healer pours herbs into a mortar, pestling as she talks. “Many years ago, I was stolen from my family and my people. I served as healer to a master for some time. He bragged about me, about my skills. Soon I was stolen again. That’s what men do, is it not? They steal. And yet I heal them. For you are right, lady. Healing is my purpose. I heal the good; I heal the wicked. And every night I pray for my luck to change.” The healer watches her with narrowed eyes her smile doesn’t soften. “It finally has, it seems.”

“It has,” Sansa says. “We have more people looking to return to Essos. They’re in the North now, but I’ll arrange for them to stop by Dragonstone as they sail south. You’ll have a place aboard one of the ships.”

The healer nods slowly, scrutinizing Sansa with her sharp gaze, then she pours hot water over the herbs and strains the liquid while transferring it into a cup. “I am named Ozeah. Here.” She plucks Euron’s mask from Sansa’s fingers and presses the cup into her hands. “Sit down and drink this.”

“I’m not sick.”

“Yes you are. Sick with worry. This will help. Sit. Drink.”

Settled down next to Gendry on the berth, Sansa blows on the hot tea with her hands wrapped around the mug. It smells like spring, like flowers, wet soil, and bright green grass, and when she sips it, warmth spreads in her tired, cold body.

They got out all the children, all of Qyburn’s little birds. The servants listened too, thanks to Tisiph. Some of the highborn listened thanks to ser Finn, and they gathered more city folk as they fled. When they boarded the ships waiting in the harbor, they told her to come aboard as well. To save herself now before it was too late. But how could she? How could she leave when her family was still in King’s Landing, fighting to save them all? So she stayed, with Nettie in her arms and ser Davos telling her about the battle of Winterfell while the chill of winter penetrated her too-few layers and settled in her bones.

They can’t have waited long on the jetty, but it felt like days. When Jon and the others finally showed up at the top of the stairs, she was so relieved she almost burst into tears. She was happy. And now three of the people she loves most in the world are hurt. She never learns, does she? How could she think their fight for survival was over? It never will be. They gods aren’t kind; they’re cruel.

Sansa glances at Gendry. Every so often, he muffles a cough in the crook of his elbow. Ozeah says he’ll be fine, but that his lungs will never be the same. That he won’t have the stamina he once used to, but Gendry doesn’t seem to care. Stroking Nettie’s hair absentmindedly, his slow-blinking eyes never leave Arya.

“She’s strong,” Sansa tells him and places the empty cup on the deck. “Stronger than anyone I know. And so is Nettie. She’s a remarkable little girl.”

“Thank you, m’lady. For taking care of her.”

“She was the one who took care of me.” A strand of hair has fallen across Nettie’s cheek, and Sansa tucks it behind her ear. “If not for her, I would’ve been dead. Jon would’ve been dead. And then we
all would’ve been.”

“She said… Did m’lady really promise her that she can stay at Winterfell?”

“I did. You and her both. You’ll will always have a home with us, if you want it.”

Gendry gives her a watery smile. “I’d like that very much, m’lady.”

She likes the way he looks at her, all friendly and warm without any lechery or adoration, and when he wraps an arm around her so that sit huddled together, the three of them, she finds that she quite likes that too. He doesn’t want anything from her. He doesn’t want her. It’s like hugging Theon, like hugging Robb, and she closes her eyes and enjoys this comfort offered without demands or expectations. And to the homey noises of Ozeah pottering about the cabin and the gentle rocking of the ship, with the tea soothing her nerves, Sansa soon drifts off to sleep.

Someone clears their throat. Sansa’s blinks her eyes open. On a stool by Arya’s cot sits Jon in a tunic and breeches, his hair a mess, his beard still wild and long, his hand cupped around Arya’s. Sansa sits up properly, smooths a hand over her tangled hair, picks up the cup, and gives it back to Ozeah. There she stays, leaning against the healer’s workbench, and pretends to not be bothered by Jon stubbornly avoiding to look at her.

Jon indicates ser Gregor by leaning his head back a touch. “Why is he here?”

“He’s protecting Arya.”

“He almost killed Theon.”

“Because he was protecting Arya. I told him to.” Sansa rubs Joffrey’s ring, the black stone smooth against the pad of her thumb. “Don’t hurt anyone unless they try to hurt us. It was my fault that Theon got hurt.” She swallows and stares down at her hands. “It was my fault that Arya got hurt. I forgot to tell Theon. I’m so sorry, Jon. I forgot to tell him that Euron wasn’t Euron.”

“Yeah, well, so did I. If this is your fault, it’s mine too.” Jon heaves a sigh and scrubs a hand over his jaw. “It’s been a rough day.”

There’s blood on his sleeves, at the wrists, and pain shoots through her own wrists, as if she can feel the burn of the rope from when he thrashed in the chair.

“You’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. Ozeah, see to my… See to His Grace’s injuries.”

Jon gives another sigh but gets to his feet and starts pulling at the laces of his tunic and she’s rushed back to another dimly lit lit room, weeks ago now, where his dark eyes bored into her as she undressed him. As he stilled her hands. He wanted her. That’s why he bolted out of the bedchamber. Jon wanted her. It hits her with such force she can’t help but gasp, and Sansa turns around to give Jon his privacy, to hide her flushed cheeks and how breathing has become a struggle.

“Well,” Jon says in an all-too sober voice, “you can dismiss him now. Right to the bottom of the sea,
if you like. He doesn’t need to protect Arya. I’m here. I can protect my little sister just fine.”

“We need him. Two ships have sailed already, full of people with nowhere to go. People who are tired and hungry and scared. If Cersei has left soldiers at Dragonstone, we’ll need every fighting man we can spare—especially now that…” She swallows, massaging the palm of her hand. “We need him.”

“Dragonstone?”

“We have nowhere else to go. Winterfell has burned. They’ll have enough trouble feeding and housing everyone as it is. I can’t bring hundreds of people there. We’ll all starve. As soon as everyone’s rested, we’ll go back to King’s Landing and get food from the Red Keep. We can fish and… Oh, I don’t know, Jon. We can ransack Dragonstone and have ser Davos sail to Essos or Dorne to trade? It’s yours, now, isn’t it? You’re the last Targaryen.”

“Aye, if it helps feeding people...” Jon sucks in a breath through his teeth, and Ozeah tuts at him. “Well, it stings!”

“Are you a king or a babe? The one whose hand you held said nothing when I stitched her wound.”

Jon mutters a curse, but then keeps his mouth shut, and for a while all Sansa hears is Ozeah working and the gentle breathing of people sleeping. Even Gendry, who’s now curled up on the berth with Linette next to him, her little hands still clutching the dolls. Then Jon draws a breath to speak.

“Arya. Will she... Will she be all right?”

Ozeah hums. Water splashes into a bowl. “The dragons are dead. I feel it. This ship used to sail as if pulled by the gods. And my healing... It was stronger while the dragons lived.”

Cloth rustles, slides over skin. Sansa turns around and finds Jon lacing his tunic back up while Ozeah dries her hands.

“But,” Ozeah continues, “there was magic in the world before dragons and there is magic here still. And I have practiced my craft since I was but a lamb, as did my mother before me, and her mother before her, and they taught me how to whisper in the gods’ ears.” Her eyes travel over the people in the room and when they finally land on Sansa, there’s true warmth in them. “I’ll make sure your gods are kind, copper lady. Now you should rest. In a few hours we’ll be at Dragonstone and all those people will need someone to lead them.”

“Never thought I’d return here.” Hands clasped behind his back, ser Davos smiles at her. “It’s a magnificent place, though. I hope my lady will like it.”

“Ozeah said the ship is slower.” Sansa runs her hand along the taffrail, staring down at the waves rushing by. “It feels slower, doesn't it?”

“She is.” Davos looks up at the full sails. “But she's still quicker than any ship I’ve ever seen. Ah. There it is.”

Atop the cliffs, the castle sits like a jagged crown of stone, left behind by the giant kings of old. Mist clings to its towers and wind has blown snow into high banks against its facade. The waters leading
into the bay is gray as iron and holds two ships waiting for them. And on the beach men have gathered. Men in Lannister armor.

“Ser Finn, find ser Jaime.”

Sansa’s hand curls around the taffrail. So there’ll be another fight, then. Unless they can convince them to yield now that Cersei is dead and ser Gregor serves another mistress. But when ser Jaime joins her on the forecastle, he takes one long, squinty look at the beach before bursting out laughing.

“Ah,” ser Jaime says through a chuckle, “he finally got his castle.”

It takes only a little digging from Tyrion for ser Bronn of the Blackwater to reluctantly and grumpily admit that, no, Cersei never gave him Dragonstone. He’s only here to guard it.

“And to drink my wine, I imagine,” Tyrion says.

“Oh, there’s some left.” Bronn grins. “A barrel or two.”

Luckily, there’s more than a barrel or two left. Much more. Food as well. Enough to feed the Lannister forces for months. And there are servants and a Maester and Sansa gets to work.

Not until afternoon darkness falls over the island does Sansa have time to retreat to the chamber prepared for her. By now whatever calm Ozeah’s tea infused in her weary body has faded. Her feet and back ache, her head pounds, and her mind is frayed with the worries of the hundreds of people who’ve tugged at her all day—and with her own worries over her loved ones and what the future will bring. How she’ll find sleep in this state is beyond her, but as though the healer can read her thoughts, she slips Sansa a vial of sleeping potion.

“Two drops of this, copper lady, and you will sleep until dawn. You will need your strength tomorrow.”

When Sansa takes her leave, ser Finn is instantly by her side, offering his arm and leading her through winding corridors to the guest quarters. He’s been attentive all day, sticking to her side and warding off those who forgot to keep a respectful distance. Jon must’ve said something. It’s clear that the boy is looking to impress his new king.

Now that they’re alone, though, ser Finn’s brave mask slips a touch, enough for his worries and fears to shine through.

“Ser Nyles--have you seen him?” she asks and Finn shakes his head. “I’m sure he’s all right.”

“He might not be.”

“We’ll look for him. When we go back to King’s Landing, we’ll look for him.”

Ser Finn nods, his mouth twisted sadly.
“How long have you two…?”

“How long have you two…?” Ser Finn’s mouth curls up in a gentle smile. “He and I… I’m sorry, my lady. You don’t want to hear this.”

Sansa tugs his arm a little closer to herself. “Yes I do.”

“When I came to King’s Landing, he was the best fighter. I looked up to him, wanted to be him. He was kind enough to help me, found places where we could train together at night. I got better, we got closer, and one night… I don’t know what came over me. But he looked at me in a way that left me dizzy and I kissed him.” Finn’s smile grows wide, cheeks warm in color. “He hit me. Not hard. But he hit me, said I was disgusting, avoided me for days. Then one day, he shoved me into a room and kissed me until I was out of breath. Then he apologized and kissed me again.”

Sansa hums, smiling. “That sounds very romantic.”

“I know he’s not brave, my lady. I know he didn’t treat you chivalrously. But I love him. The King…” They’ve stopped outside her door, and Finn’s hazel eyes search her face, the scar running along her cheekbone. “Have you told him? About who… punished you.”

“No. Jon doesn’t have to know.”

Ser Finn exhales his relief. “Thank you, my lady.” He bites his lip, eyes narrowed, and then he leans in close and whispers in her ear, “Are you and the king truly betrothed?”

Sansa’s mouth drops open, and when she pulls back, her eyes flit between Finn’s as she struggles to find an answer.

What could she possibly tell him? Not the things she’s mulled over all day. That if Jon wants the Iron Throne, he’s better off granting the North its independence and securing the support of the South by marrying the daughter of a respected lord. Talla Tarly, perhaps, to show the kingdoms that Jon isn’t his aunt. Sam would become lord of Horn Hill, give his little family a home and cheer up his poor mother. And he’d gain Jon for a brother. He’d like that.

That if the Northmen still want to be ruled by the Starks and she’s crowned queen, she’s better off picking the son of a Northern lord to prove where her loyalties lie. That without the threat of Daenerys and her dragons, there’s little reason for her bannermen to accept their queen marrying a Targaryen who used to be her brother. A Targaryen who left them when they needed him the most.

That kings and queens can’t marry for love.

A feeling of being observed draws her attention to the right. Farther down the hallway stands Jon, cloaked by shadows. She can’t see his eyes, but his lips are pursed and jaw clenched. He can no longer look at her without bristling, it seems.

Ser Finn sheds his familiar mannerism and slips back into appropriate knightliness. “My lady,” he says with a bow. Then he turns to Jon, who’s moving toward them. “My king.”

As ser Finn leaves, Jon’s gaze lingers on her for a moment, shoulders tense, and then he murmurs a good night and slinks into the chamber opposite hers.

She waits a moment for him to come out again, to be an adult and talk to her, but when his door remains closed, Sansa sighs and heads into her own chamber. It’s better this way.

A fire crackles in the hearth and the room is lit with sconces and braziers, and between the bed and a
small table with two chairs stands a tub full of hot water. Exhaling with relief, Sansa peels off her clothes and sinks into the tub. A washcloth hangs over the rim and she starts scrubbing her aching limbs free from the patchouli stink of King’s Landing.

Everyone has gotten a warm and dry place to sleep, servants, city folk, and highborns separated into groups for everyone’s comfort. They’ve been fed as well—breakfast, a midday meal, and supper. Ravens have been sent to the North. Ser Gregor is locked up in the dungeons, as are the prisoners they saved. Arya and Bran rest in a chamber close to the Maester, with Ozeah still there to watch over them, and Theon has woken up. His bruised throat is too sore for speaking and his head is throbbing, but otherwise he’s fine and sharing a room with his malnourished, tired sister, both choosing to stay in there all day to recuperate. And Jon…

Sansa holds her breath and sinks deeper into the tub until she’s fully submerged. Even though they spent all day together, working side-by-side, eating side-by-side, walking down all those murky hallways side-by-side, he barely looked at her, only spoke to her when necessary, and made sure they were never left alone together. He couldn’t have made it more clear he’s uninterested in her excuses and explanations had he sewn her mouth shut.

She breaks the surface and sucks in a big gulp of air. It’s colder here than at Winterfell, colder even than the Red Keep. The storm has followed them from King’s Landing, the winds howling outside and finding their way into the castle through cracks and crevices. Gooseflesh spreads on her shoulders and neck, and she sinks back until the water reaches her lips.

Except the vial of sleeping potion, which gleams prettily where Sansa placed it on the nightstand, there’s little in the room upon which she can rest her eyes. No tapestries. No vases or baubles or figurines. Like the rest of the castle, the room seems painstakingly designed to deter rather than welcome. There is an armoire, though, and in it she finds clean clothes sewn for a woman shorter than her. One of Daenerys’ handmaidens, she gathers, as she rifles through the collection of dresses in hues of blue, white, and gray, and nightgowns in diaphanous pale silks. She settles on a pink nightgown that swishes around her calves as she walks and a bedrobe that ends below her knees. She’s just cinched the robe at the waist when someone knocks on the door. Her breath catches in her throat. Jon. He wants to talk after all. Her hair is still wet, dripping down on fabric that now clings to her breasts. Her mouth feels dry. He can’t see her like this. She’ll pretend she’s sleeping.

“M’lady.” Another knock. “It’s Tisiph.”

Sansa sags with disappointment, forces herself to smile as she opens the door. Tisiph holds a cup of tea and a basket with items for grooming: a brush, a comb, a pair of scissors, oils for hair and skin.

“I’ll help you get ready for bed, m’lady.”

“You don’t have to be my handmaiden anymore.”

Tisiph rolls her eyes and pushes the door open, heading inside. “It’s been a long day. It’ll help me unwind.”

Tisiph puts the teacup on the nightstand, calls for servants to remove the tub and Sansa’s dirty shift and smallclothes, then helps Sansa out of the bedrobe. Once the servants are done and they’re alone again, they settle down in front of the fireplace together, where Tisiph starts drying Sansa’s hair. Brushing it takes an age and a half. Shedding the costume Cersei forced her into was instinct, impulse; Sansa didn’t consider how tangled it would leave her hair. But thanks to Tisiph’s skilled fingers, it becomes smooth and soft, the split ends trimmed, the tips oiled. The handmaiden massages oil into Sansa’s arms, neck, and shoulders as well, and Sansa breathes in its lavender scent with a
hum and allows herself to relax.

Afterwards, Tisiph helps her back into the robe and fetches the teacup for Sansa before sitting back down. As Sansa blows on the brew to cool it, she realizes with a smile that it’s the same calming tea as Ozeah gave her last night. But then she notices Tisiph’s glassy eyes and her smile dies.

“What’s wrong?”

“I couldn’t do it,” Tisiph whispers to her lap. “I couldn’t kill him.”

Sansa’s stomach tightens into knots. Tyrion. She’d forgotten about him. She’d forgotten about the help she’d promised Tisiph. She puts the cup down on the table.

“I thought I was ready. I had the golden chain and I went to his room and I was ready. But when he saw me, he beamed. Thanked me for saving him. And he looked so pathetic with that poultice on his face and that look in his eyes, as if he thought… I hate him. I hate him.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?” Sansa asks; Tisiph shakes her head. “It’s not an easy thing to do.”

“To him it was. For Shae it would’ve been. She was always stone while I was soft as a eunuch’s belly. But it’s not fair that he lives when she’s rotting in the ground somewhere. It’s not fair that he gets to live, thinking I saved his life because he matters. He doesn’t! He must learn the truth. He must learn that I couldn’t let him die without telling him that Shae’s the one who matters.” Tisiph’s eyes well up with tears she brusquely wipes away. “He needs to know that when he stole her life, he stole her from me. I need him to know she was important. That she was loved. That he can’t treat women like cattle without being punished. Death alone isn’t justice.”

“No, it’s not. Perhaps we could put him on trial.”

“For killing a whore? No one would put a lord on trial for killing a whore.”

Sansa picks up the cup. “Jon might.”

Brow furrowed, Tisiph watches her with skepticism. “Men don’t care about whores.”

“Jon’s not like other men. He’ll listen to us. You’re right, you know. Men do treat women like cattle. Perhaps…” Sansa blows on the tea again and brings it to her lips, speaking against the rim of the cup. “Perhaps this could be a first step toward change. We could help women all over Westeros.”

“Don’t drink that.” Tisiph takes the cup from her hand. “Do you truly think he’d listen?”

“What did you do to the tea?”

Tisiph averts her eyes and, slowly, pulls something out of the pocket of her dress, lays it on the table. The black stone of Joffrey’s ring shines in the light of the hearth. Sansa never even noticed it being gone.

“I put sleeping potion in the tea,” Tisiph murmurs. “I came here to steal the ring so I could use ser Gregor. Have him kill Tyrion for me. But,” she says, looking up at Sansa, “I like your suggestion better. That would be true justice.”

Sansa wraps her arms around her body and leans back in the chair, looking at the woman she considered a friend with cold eyes.

“I wouldn’t hurt you, m’lady. I just needed you to sleep, that’s all.”
“We’ll speak with Jon tomorrow. You can leave now.”

“Sansa, I’m sorry but—”

“I’m tired and wish to go to bed.”

Sansa grabs Joffrey’s ring and leaves the table, grabs the vial of sleeping potion as well. Then she waits for the creak of the door opening and closing until she discards the robe and curls up in bed.

She’s not angry with Tisiph, not really. Tisiph didn’t believe Sansa would help her and took matters into her own hands. Sansa can’t fault her for that. But Tisiph’s actions reminded her of something important, something she forgets over and over because life forces her into situations where she must take a leap and rely on strangers to catch her: don’t trust anyone.

Light and shadows play on the rough-hewn walls, like dancing demons come to haunt her. Like the shadow of Stannis Baratheon who murdered his brother, a shadow Sansa since has learned was conceived in this very castle. But magic is weak, now, the Night King gone, Melisandre banished, Cersei dead, Daenerys and her dragons all dead. The castle is full of people sworn to protect her and no demons hide in the shadows.

She is safe.

Sansa pulls the blankets up to her chin and closes her eyes. Something creaks. Her eyes fly open. She didn’t search the room after entering. Heart thundering in her chest, she drops down on the floor and checks underneath the bed. Empty. Behind the curtains. Nothing. Inside the armoire. Only clothes. She jumps back into bed, pulls her knees up to her chest, pulls the blankets over her head to block out the world. But in the pitch black, she sees only horrors. Arya’s ashen face. All that blood soaking through linen. Ragdoll Theon on the deck. Bran lax in Ser Gregor’s arms. Ser Nyles’ fist, ring flashing, crashing into her cheek. She feels the lashes against her back, against her thighs, feels fingers closing around her wrists and ankles, over her mouth, as strange men pull her from her bed and carry her away.

Sansa flings off the blankets. Another creak. Her head snaps to the door. The handle moves slightly. Her breaths come fast and sharp and shallow. Nothing happens. Did she imagine it? She closes her lips and swallows, staring at the handle without blinking until her eyes sting. Still nothing happens.

She is safe. She is safe she is safe she is safe.

But her heart won’t slow down and her breathing won’t even out, and even though silence is sweet after a long day of hard work, loneliness amplifies every little sound until each shadow in the room is filled with demons.

Her panicked gaze bounces over her surroundings until it lands on the basket. On the scissors. They still lie there, all sharp and polished into a shine. A weapon.

Or an excuse.

Massaging the hollow of her palm, Sansa stares at the scissors. She shouldn’t. It’s better this way. She’s better off alone. And she should give him time, to sulk, to be angry and hurt. To forget he ever loved her. To find that pretty Southern lady who’ll love him well, without a lifetime of trauma between them that complicates everything. The wind howls and the draft in the room whispers at her neck, ghosts its fingers over her skin. She is shivering; she’s shaking. The sleeping potion would help. But then she wouldn’t even notice if someone tried to grab her again. She can’t trust anyone. Locks can be picked and ladies can be plucked from their beds.
She should take the potion anyway. She should ignore what her heart tells her and take that damn potion and trust that she’s safe, that there's no one left in the world who wants to hurt her--and yet Sansa puts her robe back on, grabs the scissors and Jon’s cloak, and heads outside.

Ear pressed to his door, she hears him moving on the other side. He’s awake. Heart racing in her chest, Sansa takes a deep breath and knocks.
Jon

Jon leans back in the tub, the hot water easing the tension in his body. Although everyone insisted on his taking Daenerys’ chambers, he chose his old room. It’s been tidied but not cleaned out, and still holds things left behind in his haste of getting off the island. Leather strings for his hair; whale-shaped driftwood and pretty rocks he found on the beach and placed on the dresser in an unsuccessful attempt of making the chamber seem less like a prison cell; books he found in the library to pass the time; even a set of clothes that were being washed when he left. Now the tunic, breeches, and smallclothes lie on the bed, clean and ready for him.

If he ever manages to leave the tub and the brooding he does so well in its comfortable warmth, that is.

Despite his tender age, ser Finn is broad-shouldered and a head taller than Sansa--and considering her reaction to whatever he whispered in her ear, he’s man enough to make women blush. Captivated by his hazel eyes and pretty words, she gazed up at him with pink cheeks and parted lips. Jon should’ve expected this, that at least one of the knights would grow infatuated enough to betray the queen. And that Sansa would love him for it. Ser Finn is everything she’s ever wanted: honorable, strong, a good fighter, a knight. Taller than her.

Jon groans and rubs his forehead. He’s acting the child. Sansa’s happiness is everything, and if ser Finn makes her happy, Jon will support it. He’ll accept the proposal once it comes. He’ll even force a smile on his face when they gather to witness the union. And, yes, at the wedding feast he’ll retreat to some dark corner and drink himself into oblivion, but he’ll be all right. Because he’ll still have her in his life, he’ll get to be an uncle to her children, and he’ll get to see her happy and safe and fulfilled and how could he wish for anything more than that?

Until then, he must better himself--and apologize. The way he’s been acting, it’s not fair on her.

Once the servants have hauled out the tub and left him fresh bandages for his lacerations, Jon treats his wounds, dresses, and pads across the hall. There he leans against Sansa’s door, palm pressed against the wood, and gathers himself. But whatever courage carried him this far fades. Instead of knocking, his hand drops to his side and nudges the handle on the way with a clink that echoes in the empty hallway. Jon cringes and bolts back into his chambers.

It’s better this way, though. He’s bad with words as it is, and the past few weeks--the past few months--have left him with little sleep and a dull wit. He’ll talk to her tomorrow; he’ll be well-rested then. Perhaps he’ll even prepare what to say. If Sam were here he could’ve helped, but Sam is at Winterfell with Ghost, taking care of the household now that everyone's left for King’s Landing.

Jon throws a few more logs on the fire and stretches out his tired limbs. Rolls his neck and shoulders. Paces the room to rid himself of the burst of nervous energy still simmering in his body.

A knock comes on the door and despite the hour it’s almost a relief. Some problem to solve to get his mind off this mess with Sansa.

Jon pulls the door open. Oh, seven hells.

Sansa’s hair falls in soft waves around her face, tumbling down her shoulders to cloak things he shouldn’t notice. Things usually hidden beneath layers of corsets and wool and linen. Things the thin fabrics of the trumpet-sleeved robe and revealing nightgown show off all too well.
Jon closes his mouth and swallows.

Seeing her in his cloak all day, as though she were his lady wife, has been an exquisite torture; this is even worse. He can’t remember ever having seen her bare feet before, nor her ankles or so much of her chest. Her skin is a bit flushed, as if she just had a bath, and she smells like herself again, like lavender, and Jon’s stomach feels all odd.

“I brought your cloak. Thank you for lending it to me.”

She hands him the cloak and then they stand there, staring at one another. Why isn’t she leaving? Should he ask her to come in? No, not while she’s dressed like that. There’s nothing appropriate about that at all. If someone saw her, they’d think…

“Can I come in?”

Even though he knows the only way this night can end is with his heart even more shattered, Jon steps aside.

“This is a nice room,” she says, looking around his old prison cell.

“What do you want?”

His words come out harsh and angry, and Sansa stares at him in shock before she recovers.

“You hair is too long.” She gestures at him with a pair of scissors. “And your beard. You look…”

As she searches for adjectives, he can’t help but scowl at her. “How do I look? Awful? Like a Wildling?”

“No, you look like a man who’s been at war. But the wars are over now; it’s time you looked like a king again.”

Images flash before his mind’s eye of Sansa running her fingers through his hair, through his beard, moving in close as she works while wearing… that. Jon tugs at the collar of his tunic.

“I can cut my own hair. Just leave the scissors and go.”

Disappointment washes over Sansa’s features before she schools them into a mask of indifference. But as she places the scissors on the table by the hearth, she can’t hide how her hand trembles. Nor how wan she is or how her breathing has become quick and shallow. And the moment she lets go of the scissors, her thumb finds her palm to self-soothe as she moves to the door.

“Wait,” he says and Sansa stills. “I have no mirror in my room. Can’t cut my own hair without a mirror, can I?”

Without waiting for her to turn around, Jon starts undoing the laces of his tunic. He’s halfway done when he feels Sansa’s eyes on him. She’s stands frozen in the room with her mouth dropped open, arrested by the sight of him, of the skin he reveals. Is she…? No. She can’t be. But then she was behaving strangely when he undressed in the healer’s cabin too.

Perhaps it’s the exhaustion, perhaps it’s all those confusing looks she’s given him since they took back Winterfell, perhaps it’s his need to finally get a reaction that makes him act the fool. Whatever it is, it’s not sense that has Jon straightening his back, raising his chin, and unlacing his tunic slowly, inviting her to look her fill. Sansa’s eyes flit up to his and, heart racing in his chest, he meets her gaze without hiding the heat in his. Blushing crimson, she averts her eyes--only to glance back at his chest.
when he slides the tunic off his shoulders and lets it drop on the table.

“Oh, Jon,” she murmurs, staring at his scars with teary eyes, and his heart sinks in his chest. “I can’t even imagine how—”

“It’s fine.”

Jon grabs a chair and slumps down on it. Why is he such an idiot? Why does he keep reading her wrong when he knows?

“*I’m not in love with you, Jon. I’m not.*”

She looked so sincere when she said it too, so desperate for him to understand. He wouldn’t blame her for leaving now after he stared at her like that—he expects it even—and yet the silk of her nightgown whispers as she moves across the floor and picks up the scissors.

She’s gentle with his hair, untangling the ends before brushing it through from roots to tips with her fingers, conjuring wave after wave of gooseflesh across his skin. But she sighs too, with frustration, sometimes jerking her arm. Then she sighs again, deeply.

“These sleeves are ridiculous.”

She unties the belt of the robe and Jon doesn’t know what to do with himself. Has she seen herself in that nightgown? The light of the hearth shines through the delicate silk, outlining every curve of her body, and he can see... all too much. She’s not wearing smallclothes. Jon shifts in his seat, crosses his legs, closes his eyes, and thinks of snow and ice and death and then her hands are in his hair again and this must’ve been the dumbest thing he’s agreed to in his life.

Eyes closed, he listens to the scissors’ cuts instead of her soft breaths, focuses on how uncomfortable the chair is, how uncomfortable *he* is, instead of the tenderness of her touch.

“Daenerys,” Sansa says and Jon welcomes the subject, would welcome anything to distract him from the silk of her nightgown brushing against his back. “I heard about what happened. Did she...?”

Jon clears his throat. “The Night King came. I had to stop him. But I can’t imagine that ended well.”

“I’m sorry.”

“About what?”

“She was your aunt. She was your... She was someone you spent a lot of time with.”

“She was nothing to me, Sansa. Everything I did, I did to get her north so we had a chance to kill the Night King. Not that it mattered in the end. She abandoned them. But, I suppose, so did I.”

“You shouldn’t have come for me.”

“She would’ve left either way and the Night King would’ve followed. And King’s Landing was always going to burn at her hand, sooner or later.”

“We’ll have to go back. To find food and things to trade. Ser Nyles didn’t make it to the boats. He and ser Finn are... close. *Very* close. I’ve promised we’ll look for him.”

Jon purses his lips. “Isn’t he a bit young? Ser Finn.”

“Seventeen, I think. Ser Jaime was fifteen when he joined the Kingsguard. He’s an extraordinary
fighter as well. And he’s more than happy to serve you. If you have a Kingsguard.”

“Doesn’t that mean he won’t be able to marry?”

Sansa’s movements slow down. “It’s not as if he’s able to marry as it is. Unless you want to change the law?”

“Do you want me to change the law?”

“I think it would take more than changing a law for Westeros to accept a man marrying a man, Jon. And even if Finn were brave enough to face people, ser Nyles isn’t.”

Jon presses his lips together to hide the smile of relief tugging at the corners of his mouth. Sansa might not want him, but she doesn’t want ser Finn either and Jon allows himself to bask in this moment, to enjoy the way she fusses over him and his shaggy appearance, to pretend it means something after all.

Humming thoughtfully, Sansa tilts his face with two fingers beneath his chin. Then she circles him, hands skimming his hair and beard as if to examine her work.

“There,” she says and then he feels her leaning in close.

Her cool breath flows over his skin, scattering the hair that has fallen over his shoulders. Oh, this is not good. Fighting the urge to squirm, Jon tightens his hands so hard the nails bite into his palms as gust after gust of breath brush him clean.

When she finally steps away, he’s sweating.

“Do you want me to find a mirror?”

“No, I uh… It’s fine.” He attempts an easy smile. "I trust you didn’t make me look awful.”

“You don’t look awful, nor like a Wildling. You look very handsome.”

Jon looks up at her in wonder. Handsome? She ducks her head, cheeks tinted pink, and he shouldn’t stare at her but he can’t help himself. She’s gorgeous in the firelight and instead of fleeing the tense silence that has settled in the room, she remains planted on the floor in front of him, as though she’s waiting for something. In her pretty silk nightgown. Luckily, where she stands the light of the hearth doesn’t hit her in a way that leaves the fabric sheer. She’s covered. Well… Somewhat. The room is nippy and he can clearly see the outlines of her--

Jon drags a hand over his mouth. What should he do now? What should he say? What is she waiting for?

Sansa twists her hands, eyes drifting to the door, and yet she makes no effort at all to leave. Drawing in a shuddering breath, she scans the room, the fresh bandages on his wrists, his decorations, the books.

“What’s this?” She grabs one and flips through it with careful fingers. “A History of Aegon the Conqueror and His Conquest of Westeros.”

“Aye. I thought I could learn a thing or two about… Well, suppose I didn’t learn enough.”

“The Loves of Queen Nymeria… Perhaps I should read this to Arya. Do you think it would help?”

“I don’t think it would hurt.”
Nodding slowly, Sansa hugs the book to her body and glances at the door, still not moving. Although her breathing returned to normal during their short interaction, it once more races. Her eyebrows tug together almost imperceptibly and her chin is tilted high. He’s seen this look before: she’s trying to hide her fear. A fear so strong it drove her to his room at this late hour. A fear that means she’d rather spend the night with the brother who loves her in a way he shouldn’t than alone in a strange bed in a strange castle.

“Sansa,” he says and he shouldn’t offer, he really shouldn’t, but his mouth doesn’t listen to his brain, “do you want to stay here tonight?”

The smile that touches her lips is brief and faint but it’s there and it’s grateful and radiant and melts his sense completely and has him smiling back at her like the fool he is. Not until her gaze is drawn to the only bed in the chamber does he remember what his offer means. Jon’s stomach flips. It’s not a narrow bed, but it’s hardly wide either. Sansa hugs the book tighter to her body, like a shield, and it shouldn’t be like this. She shouldn’t have to worry about sharing a bed with her brother.

But just as he’s about to suggest he’ll sleep on the floor, she lays the book down and turns to him with a bright smile.

“Arya says I barely move when I sleep. You won’t even notice I’m there. Oh! I almost forgot.”

And then she’s rummaging through his dresser and pulling out her prize: a thin leather string. When she walks up to him, she’s no longer trembling. The hands pulling back his hair into a bun and securing it with the string are sure and steady. And her breathing is calm and her color back to normal and Jon has rarely felt more confused.

Once she’s done, she stands in front of him and adjusts his hair and combs her fingers through his beard with narrowed eyes, as though he’s not going to bed at all but to a feast and it’s her job to ensure he looks appropriate for the occasion.

“Perfect,” she breathes out, the tips of her fingers still touching his beard. “You look like when we met.”

Jon furrows his brow; Sansa’s eyes widen, smile slipping and hands dropping to hang at her sides, and her words come out in a rushed mumble, “When we found each other again.”

“You really don’t see me as your brother, do you.”

Sansa pales, eyes downcast.

“Did I even exist to you? Before Castle Black.”

“It’s not what you think,” she murmurs, twining her fingers. “When I came to Castle Black, you felt both like home and a stranger. I didn’t know you, Jon. Not really. Mother didn’t want me to, so I ignored you most of the time. I was stupid.” Fluttering her lashes, she lifts her gaze and meets his eyes. “You’re worth knowing. You are.”

Her gaze is soft, her lips pink and parted and curled in a gentle smile, and for a moment hope forces itself back into his heart, spreads through his body, flows out into his limbs until the weariness, the exhaustion, is gone. That’s love, isn’t it? That tenderness. He’s not imagining it. That is love and he can’t look away, can’t help but drown in those pale blue eyes and give into the inexorable pull she has on him. He feels her breath on his skin, her nose against his nose--

His name leaves her lips in a whisper, in a terrified little tremble, in a no--and then it’s so easy to pull away. He never thought he’d feel more ashamed than when Cersei laid his feelings bare, but he’s
gone and done it. If he could vanish with a spell, he would.

He wants to tell her he’s sorry, *should* tell her he’s sorry, but what comes out of his mouth is a sullen, “Why did you come here?”

“To cut your hair.”

“Well, you cut it. So why are you still here?”

“Can we just go to bed? I’m tired.”

“Go to… You want to go to bed? With me?”

“I…” Her chin quivers and she wraps her arms around her body. “I know I’m safe. I know that, but when I’m alone, every noise makes me think they’re coming to take me again. Please, Jon. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Brienne is only a room away. As is ser Finn. Ser Jaime. Take your pick!”

“I want to stay with you.” Her voice is barely above a whisper.

“Why? You don’t even like me.”

“That’s not true.”

“You just admitted you don’t see me as your brother! And I heard you, when you talked to Tyrion. I heard what you told him. You just pretend, because it’s your duty. Because Father would’ve wanted it. Because I’m part of the family whether you want it or not. But you can’t stand me. You never have. And it’s even worse now that you know who I am and how I feel. You *hate* me for it. So why are you here, Sansa?”

“I lied!”

“Do you think I’m an idiot? Cersei knows you and she believed every word you said. Why is that--hm? Maybe you don’t want to admit it to yourself, because you don’t want to be your mother, because Arya would be disappointed, but you despise me just as much as your mother did.”

“It’s not true! I was lying!”

“It didn’t sound like lying!”

“It wasn’t supposed to! *I had* to sound convincing, Jon. Because if Cersei realized how much I love you, nothing I said would’ve stopped her from killing you!”

Sansa’s mouth drops open with a sharp gasp. Red roses burn on her pale cheeks. She takes a step back, closes her mouth, still trembling but with a different kind of fear shining in her wet eyes.

“You love me.” Jon exhales sharply. “In what way. Hm? In what way do you love me?”

Sansa sucks in a ragged breath, a tear falling from her lashes when she blinks.

“You come in here, dressed like that, in a bleeding nightgown that lets me see *everything*, cutting my hair, trimming my beard, asking to sleep in my bed. Asking to sleep with *me*. And then I try to kiss you and you-- You know how I feel about you! You know Cersei was telling the truth! You know I can’t say no to you when you need me. What are you doing? This is not fair!”
More tears slide down her cheeks and she stares at her feet instead of answering and it makes him feel like a heartless monster.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles, rubbing his tired eyes. “I shouldn’t have tried to kiss you. I read you wrong.”

“What does it matter.” Her voice is small and hollow. “You can’t marry me, Jon. You’re a king. You’re the heir to the Iron Throne. You can’t just marry your sister because you want to. Whomever you marry, it has to be a wise choice. A choice you must discuss with your advisers. A choice Westeros will accept. You’re not a bastard anymore. You can’t marry for love.”

Jon takes a step closer to her, brow knitted in confusion. “Do you think I’d choose the throne over you?”

“You should. Westeros needs you. It needs a good man.”

“You think I wouldn’t fight for you? I would. Why would I want the throne if I can’t have you by my side?”

“Can we just go to bed? Please. I’m exhausted.”

“Go to…” Jon shakes his head. “You still want to stay here? I don’t understand you, I really don’t. Sometimes you look at me like… What do you want, Sansa? Just tell me what you want.”

She looks like a little girl, hiding behind her copper hair, hugging her body, staring at her bare feet. “I don’t know.”

He’s a king. He’s a dragon prince. The man who slayed the Night King. He’s all her childhood fantasies come true. And he loves her, would do anything for her, rushed across a continent to save her. Perhaps she thinks she ought to love him back, knows he’d be good to her, but that doesn’t mean she does. It’s not how love works.

Jon heaves a sigh and lets all his frustration leave him with the exhale.

“You don’t love me,” he says as gently as he can. “You don’t want me. And you don’t have to worry about me. I won’t try to kiss you ever again. From now on, I’ll be your brother and nothing else. I promise.”

When the last word leaves him, so does his strength. Jon drags himself to bed and curls up beneath the blankets with his back turned to her. She’ll leave him be now, find the protection she craves in Brienne or ser Finn while Jon gets to cry about his pathetic feelings and stupid broken heart in peace.

He counts ten breaths before he hears soft footfalls. He closes his eyes so that he doesn’t have to watch her leave.

He hears a gust of air. Perplexed, Jon opens his eyes and finds the chamber darkening as Sansa blows out one candle after another. Soon only the hearth provides them with its warm glow.

The mattress dips. The blankets rustle as she lies down behind him and he stifles a groan. He craves solitude, yes, but not more than she needs to feel safe. So Jon keeps his frustration to himself, closes his eyes, and tries to clear his mind and find some sleep before the new day brings him new headaches. Sleep proves an elusive thing, though, and he ends up staring at the shadows dancing on the wall while his thoughts go round and round. Why did she tell him she loves him? Why didn’t she leave? Why is she in his bed?
Why is she nudging closer?

A soft hand is placed on his back, fingers splayed over his shoulder blade. Sansa's so close now he feels the heat of her body, her breath against his neck. The cool tip of her nose.

The pads of her fingers press against his back as she burrows her face so close he feels her warm lips on his skin too. Jon holds his breath; Sansa inhales deeply, humming as exhales.

“T missed the way you smell,” she whispers and he can’t help but shudder from pleasure when she breathes him in as though she loves him after all.

Her hand moves to his side, fingers curled over his ribs. He lifts his arm, just a little, and she slides her arm around him and molds her body around his.

“I’m sorry, Jon.”

Her voice breaks on his name. A sob escapes her, then another and then she cries and cries and he wants to turn around and hold her, but some instinct tells him to stay where he is, that it’s easier for her this way, being vulnerable in the dark, shielded behind his back. So Jon lies still and waits while her tears soak his skin and hair.

It takes a good while before the sobbing quiets and her chest and stomach rise and fall calmly against his back.

Sansa noses his skin and cuddles closer still. “You were right,” she whispers into the nape of his neck, ”when you accused me of being jealous. I was. I missed you so much. I thought about you every day and I needed you, Jon. I needed you by my side and then you came home with her.”

The last words comes out bitter and harsh and dark--and it’s a balm on the jagged wounds in his heart.

“You would barely even look at me and it hurt. It hurt me in a way I wasn’t ready to admit. Because you weren’t mine, you hadn’t promised me anything, couldn’t promise me anything, and yet it felt as if you’d betrayed me. You broke my heart. And I know it’s ridiculous and I know you never loved her, but I didn’t know that then. Not yet. And I couldn’t breathe, Jon. I didn’t know what to do. I’ve never felt like that before. Never. It was awful.”

Sansa weaves their fingers together and brings their joined hands to his heart and now he’s glad he has his back turned to her. He's glad she can’t see how this confession is so sweet to him he drinks in every word, every tremble of emotion in her voice, with a smile. She loves him. He scarcely dares breathing lest it breaks whatever spell she's under that lures such wonderful words from her lips.

“Then I learned the truth,” Sansa murmurs, “about you and her. About who you are. And I barely had time to understand, to accept my relief, to accept how I felt, before you told me she was pregnant. And I… I felt numb. How could the gods be that cruel? To give me a chance to be with you only to take it away? Because I knew-- Well, I suspected that you felt it too and it was all too much.”

She pauses and adds in a quiet voice, “It still is.”

She slips her hand from his, and as she speaks, follows the scar running over his heart with the tips of her fingers.

“Ever since Father died, each time someone’s hurt me, I’ve felt myself turn more and more into ice so that no one can hurt me ever again. But you… I try to be cold around you, I’ve tried so hard, but
you ruin it. You make me believe in all those things I knew were false. I thought love wasn’t real anymore. That good men didn’t exist. That I couldn’t have the things I dreamed of as a little girl. That I didn’t want them anymore. But I do. I want those things, Jon, I want all of it and it terrifies me. Because if I get that happiness, someone can take it away and I don’t think I could survive that.”

“We have no enemies anymore,” he says, voice thick.

“You don’t understand. If I let myself love you, Jon. If I let you love me, if I give you my heart and you break it--”

“I wouldn’t!”

“But that’s what men do. I’ve seen it over and over. There's always someone else. And if I marry some lord and he kisses a serving maid at a feast or is caught in bed with another lady or comes home with a bastard, all I’ll suffer is humiliation. And I’ve done that enough times in my life that I don’t care anymore. But if you… If you do that--”

“I wouldn’t!”

“You can’t promise that. You might stop loving me one day or find someone who tempts you or--”

He spins around in bed so he can look into her eyes. “I wouldn’t. If you were mine, I wouldn’t even look at another woman. I’m not looking at other women! Why would I?” He cradles her face in his hand, pouring all the love he feels for her into his gaze, into his voice. “There’s only you, Sansa. There will only ever be you. I swear. I swear it by the old gods and the new and every god there is. I’ll kneel before the heart-tree and swear it there too, if you’ll have me.”

She sniffs and wipes her eyes with a breathy laugh. “I don’t know why I’m so scared.”

“Shh, it’s all right.” He pulls her in close and tucks her head under his chin. “You’ve been through a lot. You need time. You need to feel safe.” He drops a kiss to the crown of her head, breathing in her lavender scent. “I’ll wait for you, love. I’ll wait for you. If you want.”

Sansa’s only reply is wrapping her arm around him, tilting her head up and burying her face in the crook of his neck where she hums against his skin and it feels like a yes. So he’ll wait. She’s worth the wait.
Chapter Notes

This is slightly nsfw maybe? There's no smut, though.

Before he left Winterfell, Jon and Sansa sometimes ended their long, taxing days in front of the hearth. She’d sew, he’d oil his sword or his armor, and he’d often allow his mind to wander in the comfortable silence while resting his eyes on the woman too focused on her work to notice. In his dreams she was his lady wife, and once they grew tired and put away their sewing and sword, he followed her to the Lord’s chamber—their chamber—and fell asleep with her in his arms. A stupid, impossible dream, he knew, and yet he couldn’t stop indulging in it.

Now, though, as he lies in bed with Sansa in his arms, soothing her to sleep with slow strokes up and down her back, it doesn’t seem stupid at all. She loves him—and she has loved him for much longer than he ever dared dreaming.

Smiling, he drops one last kiss to her hair and closes his eyes to sleep.

He’s still smiling when he wakes later to make water. He smiles as he lays more logs on the fire, he smiles on his way to the privy, and he smiles all the way back to his chamber where he gingerly pushes the door open to sneak back inside. The world outside is black as tar and the shadows in the room spread like the dark wings of a raven, but in the amber light of the hearth, he sees Sansa sitting up in bed. Her gaze flits around the room, head moving like that of a nervous bird, while her hand fists the sheets and her chest heaves with loud, quick breaths.

“Sansa?”

Her head snaps to him, eyes wide, and as though he were a ghost of someone lost long ago, his name falls from her lips in an incredulous whisper. He’s at the bed in an instant, has barely sat down before her hands move over his chest, squeeze his shoulders, pat his face. She runs her palms over his beard, winds her fingers around the locks at his neck and tugs so hard it smarts.

“You’re real,” she whispers. “You’re real.”

Then she throws herself at him with such force he falls back in bed, his head hitting the headboard. It hurts, it does, and his neck is bent awkwardly, but he holds her close and smooths a hand up and down her back, murmuring that she’s safe, that she’ll stay safe for he’ll be there now, protecting her, always, and soon her breathing evens out. Then, as he keeps caressing her, the tension leaves her body too and he scoots down to lie more comfortably, still holding her so so close.

“Bad dream?”

“I woke up and I didn’t remember where I was and...“ Sprawled over his body, she props herself up on one arm and gazes down at him with a wet smile. “I dreamed of you, when I was in King’s Landing. You’d sneak into my chamber and rescue me. Every night I allowed myself to believe it was true, and every morning I woke up in that awful room, all alone. And I knew you loved me, I did, but I didn’t think you loved me enough to come. But you came.” She brushes her thumb over his cheek as she cups it. “You came for me.”
“I’ll always come for you.”

Sansa draws a trembling breath, lips curled into a gentle smile and eyes shining with an affection she’s only ever let him catch glimpses of before this. Then her gaze drops to his lips. Jon’s stomach swoops even though he knows it won’t lead to anything. Even though he knows she’ll pull away and cuddle up next to him. But then her tongue darts out to wet her own lips and his heart beats so fiercely it sounds like a war drum in his ears. Slowly, Sansa dips down her head, her breath warm against his face, her hair tickling his skin. Jon closes his eyes.

Sansa’s lips are soft and shy and the sweetest thing he’s ever tasted. They move gently against his, warm and feather light, and he lies back and lets her lead, lets her shower his smiling mouth with kisses while warmth blooms in his heart and heals old wounds he once thought he’d carry for the rest of his miserable life.

When she pulls away, he feels dizzy.

Jon flutters his eyes open and finds her gazing down at him with wonder, with love, and he grows dizzier still. A smile spreads on her face and a happy noise escapes her, the soft hum of complete contentment, and he beams up at her, dazed as he is, for he knows she’s the one who made her this happy.

“Does this mean you’re not disappointed in me after all? For coming for you.”

“Disappointed?” Sansa shakes her head fondly at him; her hair sweeps over his chest and his skin prickles with pleasure. “What you did was dumb and reckless, and I would’ve advised against it. But seeing you in that throne room”—she moves back to his mouth, her lips brushing against his as she speaks—“it only made me love you more.”

Her kisses grow bolder, learning the shape of his lips, sucking a little, even gives a quick nip that shoots sparks down his body, and Jon’s instincts tells him to put his hands on her hips and grind her down on what’s growing harder each time she kisses him like that.

No smallclothes. She’s wearing no smallclothes. She’s wearing no smallclothes and they’re not married and she deserves better than this. He releases a sharp breath and rolls them over on their sides so that they lie face to face.

Sansa strokes back a strand of hair that has escaped his bun and tucks it behind his ear. “Why didn’t you say goodbye to me? Before you left for Dragonstone.”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

She gives his beard a gentle tug. “Indulge me.”

“Because I was afraid I’d do something foolish. I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to leave.”

Sansa bites her lip with a satisfied smile. “And when I was sick. Why didn’t you visit me the first few days?”

“I did. More than once. But you were always asleep. Snoring.”

“Ladies don’t snore. If I was snoring, it was only because of my stuffed nose.”

“Of course it was,” he says and kisses her nose.

Sansa dances her fingers up the scar at his heart and then lays her palm flat against it. “Did you mean
what you said? About the godswood.”

“Aye. Are we, uh…” Fear of rejection still simmers within him, steals his voice; he clears his throat and tries again as casually as he can, “Are we betrothed, then? Or do you think the world will stop us?”

“I’ve wasted so much time fighting my feelings for you, but I’m done with that. Now I’ll fight for you. For us. We’re betrothed.”

Jon echoes her final words with a silly smile and then they lie there face to face, their limbs entwined and their lips never leaving each other for longer than a breath. In his dreams, their kisses were always brazen, desperate, an inevitability after moons of yearning. And the passion will come, he knows, and soon he’ll show her how to deepen a kiss, but for now he couldn’t wish for anything but this softness.

As sleep tugs at his consciousness, their kisses grow even softer, then lazy, and he lets himself fall asleep like this, with his lips still to hers and his hand buried in her hair.

Thunder rumbles over the castle, loudly enough that he would be excused for thinking clouds had replaced the canopy. Jon groans. He’s on his back, something heavy lying on his shoulder, and his lids feel glued to his eyes. He can’t have slept long. Another thunder. No. Knocking. An agitated voice calling, “Your Grace! Your Grace!”

“Enter,” he shouts just to get it to stop.

He squints at the light coming from a too-bright lantern held by a giant silhouette. It raises the lantern and casts its face in golden light, showing pale eyebrows tugged together in concern above wide blue eyes.

“Your Grace! Lady Sansa is missing! We have looked every…”

Brienne’s mouth falls open. Then she turns red as a beet and slams the door shut.

Noises come from outside, muffled by the wooden door: voices speaking over one another; a sharp command; several pairs of retreating feet. Sansa sleeps soundly through it all, her head pillowed on his shoulder and her hand curled over his heart.

Another knock, quiet, almost tentative. “Your Grace, may I enter? I’m alone.”

He allows it and Brienne steps inside, back rod straight, a hand on the hilt of her sword, and an expression he would’ve expected from Lady Catelyn, had she found Sansa Stark in his bed. Well, had it actually been Lady Catelyn, he would’ve been dragged out by the guards to be gelded by now.

“Your Grace, a word?”

When Jon tries to extract himself from Sansa’s embrace, she emit a whiny little noise and snuggles closer, trapping him by wrapping a leg around his. Trying his very best not ignore the lack of smallclothes and the heat against his thigh, Jon looks up at Brienne with an awkward smile.
“May I speak freely, Your Grace?” Brienne asks in a low voice once she’s certain Sansa sleeps. Jon nods. “In just a few years, lady Sansa has been through more than most suffer in a lifetime. She’s scared and hurt and vulnerable. And you are taking advantage. You should know better. Your Grace.”

“You’re right. She has been through a lot. Which is why she knocked on my door last night because she didn’t want to sleep alone and--”

“I’d be honored to stay in lady Sansa’s room, if she needs to feel protected.”

“I know. But… She came to me.”

“To her brother. And this is not how brothers--”

“To her intended. We’re betrothed, Brienne. We’ve not announced it yet, but we are.”

“I thought you said she didn’t love you. That you were going to take the black. Are you sure this is what she wants?”

“Aye, I am.”

“Very well,” Brienne says, nostrils flared.

“You know how I feel about her. Do you really believe I’d push her into something she didn’t want? Something she wasn’t ready for?”

“Quite frankly, Your Grace, I don’t know you very well and I don’t know what to expect from you. From what I’ve heard, you’ve been with and betrayed at least two women before this and now you’re naked in bed with a third who’s not yet your wife. The only thing that speaks for you is that you’ve vowed to protect her, and when it was needed, you dropped everything to do so. That I can understand. That I can respect. But this…?”

Clenching her jaw, she swallows whatever words would’ve completed that sentence. “What’s done is done. But betrothed isn’t married, and there’s neither a godswood nor a septon here. If lady Sansa requires moon tea, let me know and I will ask the Maester and tell him it’s for me.” Brienne lifts her chin. “I will not have her dishonored. I will bear the shame.”

Jon’s cheeks heat up and he’s almost of a mind to toss off the blankets and show that he’s not naked at all but wearing breeches, but Sansa’s leg is pulled up and from the way the fabric of her nightgown is bunched against his bare midriff, he knows her hip is bare as well and she’s still not wearing smallclothes and that’s not a good thought right now and instead he stammers out something incoherent before he calms himself with a sharp exhale.

“Brienne. Neither will I. Have her dishonored. I want things to be right--she deserves that--and I will not touch her until we’re wed. I swear it.”

“Well, if you get carried away, my offer still stands.”

“I won’t.”

“There will be talk, Your Grace. I told the others the lady Sansa slept in the bed while you lay on the floor. But you know how people are.”

“I won’t touch her. I haven’t touched her.”
Brienne hums, lips pursed with disapproval. “Breakfast is served. I’ll leave Your Grace to wake up lady Sansa in peace.”

Brienne keeps an eye on them throughout breakfast, and although she keeps her expression neutral, her disapproval is still blatant. Jon’s never considered himself as a clumsy man, but under her piercing stare, he knocks over his cup of water, pushes the salted cod off his plate when he tries to cut himself a bite, and dribbles butter sauce down his chin. Brienne notices all of it and it only hardens her gaze.

Sansa, though, is too deep in thought to notice the state of him. After he woke her with loving words whispered in her ear and a gentle nudge on her shoulder, they wound up staring shyly at one another, too aware of their scant clothing and last night’s confessions and the too many kisses to count to say anything at all. And even though she gave him a peck on the lips before slinking back to her own chambers to get dressed, he can’t help but worry.

He doesn’t doubt Sansa’s confession. Well, much. Some part of him will always doubt it, he gathers, even when they’re old and gray and have ten grandchildren, because how could someone like him ever be loved by someone like her? But he heard the truth in her voice, saw it in her eyes, felt it in her kisses and the desperate way she clung to him. That doesn’t mean she’s ready, though. That he might’ve forced with his need for validation.

Jon’s eyes search out Brienne and from her cold stare, he knows she would agree.

Yesterday, the healer’s chamber looked like most of the bare-boned chambers in the castle. But Ozeah has kept busy, and now it’s filled with herb bunches, flasks and vials and jars, tapestries he remembers from her berth on the ship, and other knick-knacks she must’ve found on a late night excursion in the castle.

“It helps the healing,” she says, pulling open the curtains to let in the pale light of late winter morning. “No one can heal in a dreary place.”

Jon’s not entirely sure that’s true. He’s healed in dreary placed before, but the woman does seem to know her craft. Arya’s chest rises and falls steadily and her cheeks have regained their color. She’s even strong enough to turn in her sleep and woke a few times last night to eat some broth before Ozeah gave her more milk of the poppy for the pain.

Bran, on the other hand… He barely looks as if he’s breathing, his cheeks are as pale as the overcast sky, and Jon has to help Ozeah wash and turn the boy to prevent bedsores from developing.

“All we can do is pray and take care of his body,” Ozeah says. “What ails him is beyond my knowledge.”
Among the servants Jon finds many familiar faces, Essosi left behind by Daenerys when they all sailed north. The others are Westerosi, once paid by Cersei and now his responsibility. And when Jon orders them to gather anything valuable and clean it for Davos’ inspection, they do their job without questioning, as though they couldn’t care less about who their lord is so long as they get room and food and coin.

But then none of the highborns have protested his leadership either, despite knowing what he is. Or is it because of what he is? Jon has no dragons, though, and neither will he. The dragons are dead and the Targaryens are no more.

Jon retreats to the study he’s made into an office with scrolls of information about the highborns who stayed at King’s Landing but have homes elsewhere. They’ll need to ship them back to their castles as soon as the weather calms, and he pulls out a map to plan the most efficient routes to get as many home in as few trips as possible.

Sansa’s office is in the adjacent room, which he chose for her because while the two rooms share a wall and a private door, it still is a separate room. Something he thought they needed yesterday when the tension between them was too thick and heavy for a single room to bear. Today, though, he misses her company and they could use that room. Perhaps he’ll have her desk moved in here instead, and set up the empty office with a bed for when Arya’s strong enough to be on her own.

Jon’s nose-deep in a ledger when the door between their offices glide open, just a smidge. He hears Sansa’s rustling skirts, her soft footsteps, the creak of wood as she settles down in the chair. Jon’s just about to head over there when he hears a second set of feet and a male voice. Tyrion Lannister. He liked him once, Tyrion, but that was before the man lured Jon into a trap and thought up the bleeding wight hunt and had secret conversations in the godswood with Sansa. He’s a silver-tongued opportunist who cannot be trusted–especially not around her. And Sansa agrees or she wouldn’t have sneaked the door open a crack.

Accepting the invitation to eavesdrop, Jon ignores the map and focuses on the sounds in the other room. After a meager helping of perfunctory smalltalk, Tyrion leads the conversation into something more personal.

“Your handmaiden, is she to follow you to Winterfell once you return?”

“If she likes.”

Tyrion hums thoughtfully. “How well do you know her?”

“She’s a sweet girl and a good handmaiden. That’s all I need to know.”

“My dear sister told me how she found her. She never told you?” When Sansa doesn’t reply, he continues, “I’ve already heard a rumor or two. About you and your… cousin. Rumors I’m inclined to believe after having witnessed the way he looks at you. I saw it even at Winterfell and it explains his frequent brooding when he was our guest here at Dragonstone. But you… Well, you’re a clever girl. If your king asks for your hand in marriage, you’ll say yes.”

The chair creaks again. “Say what you came to say, my lord.”

“My lord…” Tyrion gives a humorless, curt chuckle. “Tisiph used to be a whore. And if you’re to be a queen, you can’t have a whore for a handmaiden.”
“Then what do you suggest I do with her? She has nowhere to go.”

“She could have somewhere to go…”

“You want her. The woman who looks like your dead lover.”

“That’s not the reason.” Tyrion sounds a touch miffed, but after a short beat he speaks in a more tender voice, “I like her. She’s sweet. She saved my life. I often catch her looking at me—and not the way strangers usually look at me. We have a… connection. A connection I can’t explain. She even visited me last night and inquired after my health. I’m not spoiled with such gentle treatment, Sansa. Can you blame me for falling?”

“No, I suppose not. But this is not my decision to make.”

“No, but you can talk to her. For me. See whether she’d be amenable to the idea—perhaps even encourage her to be. I would appreciate the favor—and I would owe you one in return.”

He says it as if his favor is as valuable as caves upon caves of Lannister gold and Jon has no problem picturing Tyrion’s smirk in the long pause that follows. Then Sansa says she’ll think about it, and Jon waits for the sound of a door opening and closing before making his way to her office.

“So,” he says, “Tyrion wants to marry your handmaiden?”

“Marry her? He wants to keep her as his mistress. I hear ser Jaime has no interest in Casterly Rock. It’s all Tyrion’s, and once he’s lord of it, he’ll get himself a proper lady wife. Tywin Lannister might be dead, but part of him lives on in his son.”

“And Tisiph? What does she want? Being the mistress of one lord must be better than being the whore to many?”

“I lied to Tyrion,” Sansa says. “I know Tisiph rather well and I know exactly what she wants. It’s time you do too.”

Despite the personal and traumatizing topic, Tisiph presents her case dispassionately, sensibly. She tells Jon about her upbringing in Lorath with her sister, how Shae was sold, the life she led in Westeros, and her time with Tyrion. Tisiph tells Jon about Shae’s death, and she tells him about weaseling her way into the Red Keep, befriending Sansa, and saving Tyrion because he deserved a different kind of death. And when she’s done, she stands back with her hands folded before her and her head bowed as she waits for his verdict.

“I’m sorry, for what happened to you and your sister. Tyrion Lannister is not a good man. But,” Jon says and Tisiph raises her head, eyes hard and jaw set, “our sister killed the Freys, allies to the Lannisters, and she killed a lot of them. If I put Tyrion on trial, his brother will demand justice for his allies. And I can’t risk getting Arya hurt. What I can do is put Tyrion on trial for treason. He brought an invader to our shores.”

“So did Theon,” Sansa says. “Tyrion won’t hesitate to point that out to save his own skin, and Theon’s been through enough. And Tisiph wants Tyrion to know why he’s being punished. She wants justice for Shae. We both do. There has to be something we can do.”
“Tisiph,” Jon says in his kindest voice. “I want to help you, I do. But we have so much work to do. Feeding everyone, finding homes for everyone, helping the people of King’s Landing. What I can offer you is a place in our household. And that, once things have calmed down a little, we’ll talk about this again. And I promise you we will. I owe you that and much more for what you’ve done for Sansa.”

Tisiph presses her lips together, hands clasped tightly, and stares down at the floor. “And what about the laws, Your Grace? Will you do anything to change them? Women are being raped and murdered without any consequences.”

“Rapists and murderers are punished. They’re gelded or executed or sent to the Wall.”

“Jon,” Sansa says, a hand on his arm, “not if they’re rich enough. Not if they’re highborn. Then they can do whatever they like.”

Jon sighs, scrubbing his beard. “You’re right. Both of you. Women--all women--need more protection. And, perhaps, women like you”--he looks at Tisiph--“need someone to speak for them. I’ve yet to form a proper council, but I’m starting to think I should. Davos is an invaluable adviser, because he grew up poor in Fleabottom. Because he’s been a smuggler. He knows things a lord never could. As do you.”

Tisiph’s eyes shift to Sansa, who smiles encouragingly. “I’d be a part of His Grace’s council?”

“Perhaps not in an official capacity. At least not at first. If we want to change the world, we’ll have to do it little by little.”

Biting her lip, Tisiph stays silent for a while, ostensibly mulling it over. Then she nods slowly, a smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. “I want justice for my sister. But… Justice for all women is more important. Shae would’ve wanted that. Tyrion can wait. Thank you, Your Grace.”

When Sansa follows the handmaiden outside to talk privately, Jon stays in her office and stares longingly at the door. Most of the day has come and gone without them spending much time together--and when they have, she’s been quiet and distracted. Only when they found Arya awake after the midday meal did Sansa brighten up, but then their attention was on their sister and soon their work demanded their parting again. In that silence, his fear and anxiety run amok and chase away the logic telling him he has nothing to worry about. He can't let it go on. They need to talk before this snowballs into a misunderstanding.

Sansa returns to the office and sinks down on the desk, that troubled look back on her face.

“Sansa?”

It takes a beat for her to register his voice, for the faraway look in her eyes to dissipate. “Mm?”

“Are you all right?”

“We should marry now.”

Jon blinks. “We should what?”

“If we marry now, if we return to the North married, and the marriage is consummated, what can they do? I’ve been thinking about it all day, what the best solution is. I’d like for Bran to wake up first, of course, but… I don’t want to take any chances, Jon. And if they don’t want either of us to
rule anymore, so be it. The Dreadfort is still mine. We can stay there until Winterfell is rebuilt. They can't take that away from us."

Jon does a poor job at fighting the smug grin spreading on his face as he loops his fingers under her belt and pulls her close. “That’s what you’ve been thinking about all day?” Brushing the tip of his nose against hers, he slides his arms around her waist and pulls her flush against him. “Marrying me.” He lowers his voice into a raspy purr, ”Consummating that marriage…”

Scandalized, she gasps out his name, but he slants his mouth over hers and swallows that delicious sound. Sansa links her arms around his neck and there’s no hesitation when she kisses him back, no shyness, only a hunger that tells him she truly has thought about this all day, about them, together. And when he nudges the seam of her lips with his tongue to deepen the kiss, she opens up for him readily and he melts, loses himself in the sensation of their tongues learning each other, of her pliant in his arms, of the pleasure building in his core. He sucks on her lips, on her tongue, and she follows in kind and her hips are supple in his hands and the soft skin of her neck is salty and sweet and it’s so good and he’s throbbing.

Sansa’s moan--a proper, wanton moan--pulls him out of the haze. Oh. He’s lifted her up on the desk and stands between her open thighs, grinding his erection into her. Jon stumbles backwards and tugs at his tunic to hide his arousal.

“What?” Sansa pants, lips swollen and pink, cheeks flushed and hair a tousled mess. “What’s wrong?”

Her skirts have been hiked up to drape over her thighs. Did he do that? Is she still not wearing any smallclothes? Jon spins around before his dumb self tries taking a peek.

“Jon?”

“Eh…” he says, smartly, and gestures vaguely as he searches for words. “I need to tell you something.”

Then he turns back around and recounts his and Brienne’s conversation this morning, while Sansa arranges her skirts and smooths down her hair until she looks proper again.

“Is that what you want?” she asks when he’s done. “To wait.”

“Aye. I do. I want to do this the right way. And if I put a babe in your belly and something happens to me…”

“If we marry now, that won’t be a problem. We have ships. We can find a septon or a godswood somewhere.”

“I don’t want that. I want to get married at Winterfell. In the godswood. I’ve wanted it for as long as I can remember. I want our wedding to be perfect. I want our wedding night to be perfect. You may think that’s silly, but I--”

“I don’t think that’s silly at all,” Sansa says, crossing the distance between them. “I want it too.”

When she leans in for a kiss, Jon stops her with his hands on her shoulders. “Which is why we need to slow down. I think we should sleep in separate chambers until we’re wed.”

“No!”

“Sansa, Brienne is more than happy to--"
“I don’t care. I want to sleep with you. I feel safe with you.”

“If we keep sleeping in the same bed, something’s bound to happen. Especially if you wear frilly nightgowns with no smallclothes!”

“Mine were dirty! I’d just taken a bath and I didn’t want to wear Daenerys’ handmaiden’s underthings.” Sansa crosses her arms over her chest, glaring at him. “I didn’t mean to entice you.”

“Sansa,” he says and takes her hands, “you would entice me even if you wore maester robes and rolled around in mud.”

The confession earns him a smile but not a concession. “Please,” she says sweetly. “I’ll wear smallclothes from now on, just let me sleep in your chambers.” She lowers her chin and looks up at him through her lashes. “Please.”

“I’m not going to win this, am I?”

“Do you want to win?"

“No,” he says, laughing, “can’t say I do.” He lifts her hands to his mouth and kisses her knuckles, murmuring into her skin, “All right. I yield. But you’re telling Brienne.”

The obsidian ring on her right index finger gleams prettily in the light, but looks clunky and wrong on her delicate hands and he can’t remember her ever wearing it before the abduction.

“This ring… Where did you get it?”

“It was Joffrey’s. Cersei’s worn it ever since he died, so Qyburn conditioned ser Gregor to obey whoever wears it. It’s how I’ve been able to control him.”

“Did you know that would work when you jumped in front of me?”

“I was fairly certain.”

“Oh, Sansa.”

He drops another kiss to her hands, then pulls her into a hug, and when she angles her head to receive a kiss on the mouth as well, they both keep it chaste and appropriate and that’s good too. So good they’re both beaming when they enter the dining hall for supper.

Brienne keeps her eyes on them during this meal as well, but Sansa’s no longer preoccupied with problems to solve and now she shoots him tender looks and sweet smiles and even holds his hand beneath the table.

Heart beating a little faster than necessary, Jon glances at Brienne through the corner of his eye. She locks her gaze with his. Jon holds his breath and waits for that look of disapproval to return. Ages pass, it seems, but then Brienne’s cold stare thaws and she nods her approval.

“Ser Jaime told me the crown is in debt. The Tyrell gold helped, but...”

They’re in bed, smallclothes and sleepwear on, with Jon resting on Sansa’s shoulder this time, toying
with the bow at the neckline of another nightgown. This one is blue and still translucent enough that he can see the pink of her nipples through the fabric. And she smells clean, her hair still damp from the bath and her skin smooth and shining after Tisiph massaged lavender oil onto her body.

“I’m not a money man, and neither are you, Sansa. Tyrion used to be Master of Coin. I have no love for the man. I don’t wish to defend him or protect him, but we might need him.”

“Mm, and he’s a Lannister,” she says, playing with the curls at the nape of his neck. “We might need him and ser Jaime as allies. The last thing the North or Westeros needs is another war between the Starks and the Lannisters.”

She moves her free hand to his and weaves their fingers together so that their joined hands rest on her belly. They look right together, his large, coarse hand with her slender, soft…

Jon frowns.

“Sansa. Where’s the ring?”

“I took it off before my bath and I suppose I forgot to--”

Sansa sucks in a breath, flies off the bed and darts out of the room and into her chambers, with Jon following suit. He finds her standing by a table in front of the hearth, where she stares at its empty blank surface before looking up at him with wide eyes, stricken.

“Tisiph,” she whispers. “She’s going to kill Tyrion after all.”
“I coming,” Sansa says, slipping on a robe and a pair of boots.

“You’re staying here. I’ll go.”

She wraps Jon’s cloak around her shoulders. “Tisiph listens to me. We’re friends.”

Jon raises his eyebrows, blinking at her.

“I know how it looks. I do. But I can talk to her. If she succeeds in killing Tyrion, she’ll be afraid. She’ll want to get away. And that might mean she’ll end up hurting more people. You included. I need to come with you. I won’t get a scratch on me. I swear.”

Jon heaves a sigh. “All right. But you’re staying behind me, and we’re bringing ser Finn. I don’t trust Brienne’s loyalty on this. If Jaime learns about this… He’s already mourning Cersei. Tyrion is the only person he has left and the last thing we need is him accusing you and Tisiph of conspiring together. This castle is full of his men. We won’t stand a chance. Do you understand?”

“Yes. No one can know.”

The hallways of Dragonstone lie quiet and dim, the torches on the wall flickering when they stride past. At this hour, people are either asleep or linger in the kitchens or the dining hall for drink and company. The few guards and servants they pass find nothing strange in the King, his cousin, and her knight taking a midnight stroll. Only when they run into Gendry does Sansa think they’ll have to come up with an explanation.

He walks in a sleepy daze with Linette’s hand in his. From the looks of the girl’s messy brown locks their sleep-flushed cheeks, they must’ve dozed off while visiting Arya. They spent almost all day in there, Sansa knows, where Nettie told a slumbering Arya and Bran stories about princesses and evil witches with the help of her dolls. When Gendry’s eyes land on them, they widen with interest but before he’s had a chance to open his mouth, Nettie rubs her little eyes and murmurs, “I’m sleepy, uncle,” and he only gives them a smile in greeting before scooping up the child and moving on.

Tyrion has given his old chambers to a highborn family, while he now resides in Daenerys’ chambers which are located in the highest tower, where they take up the whole floor. When Tyrion sought out Sansa earlier today, she assumed he wanted to discuss his becoming lord of Dragonstone, that it was his reason for claiming the chambers Jon refused—but then she learned Jaime had no interest in Casterly Rock and aimed to give it to his little brother. That with Cersei and their child
gone, the last thing he wants is to settle down in a castle and marry some lady and do his duty as the eldest Lannister.

Perhaps Tisiph is the reason for Tyrion choosing to take those chambers. The maids only venture up there a few times per day; she couldn’t find a better place to kill Tyrion without anyone noticing. His body won’t be found until the chambermaid comes in the morning to change the sheets and feed the fire. And looking at how she’s already wrapped the man around her finger...

The double doors leading to Daenerys’ chambers are huge and imposing: massive dragons are hewn in the walls, their bodies stretching over the stone canvas and their jaws opening wide as though they’re about to swallow the entrance. Pressing an ear to the door, Jon takes a moment to listen and then, without knocking, pushes it open.

A knocked-over table. Two goblets on the floor, wine splattered around them. A larger pool of red grows on the flagstone, it’s shining surface reflecting the hand lying at its shore. A large hand with long fingers curled against the palm. Her eyes follow the length of the arm up to shoulders drenched with blood and a neck that ends in a jagged, gory line.

Jon pulls the door shut. “Bronn’s dead. No sign of Tyrion.”

Sansa nods, pacing as she thinks. Bronn must’ve been a surprise and scared Tisiph into finding a better place to murder Tyrion. Perhaps she was afraid they were expecting more company and didn’t want anyone else to get hurt. But where can she have taken him?

“Tisiph doesn’t just want him dead; she wants justice. She will take her time and she can’t risk getting caught. Are there any secluded places here?”

“The caves?” Jon says, already making his way down the stairs. “The entrance is down at the beach. No one will hear them down there, and once she’s done, she can leave.”

“How? She can’t steal a ship.”

“A skiff. That’s how Gendry got away when he was held here by Stannis and the Red Woman. He rowed back to the mainland, and with the Mountain at the oars... It’s worth a shot.”

The moon, round and proud, stands high in the inky, cloudless sky and only a breeze whispers over the courtyard. The storm has come and gone, and if Davos is right the weather will stay clear for days. Sansa breathes in deeply of the crisp air, breathes in deeply the smell of winter. As a child of the North, she finds it invigorating.

Ser Finn, on the other hand, Southern boy as he is, pulls up his shoulders to his ears and wraps his cloak tighter around his body as they cross the courtyard.

“What is the priority?” he asks.

“Protect lady Sansa first and foremost. And we’ll try to solve this without violence, if we can. If not, go for the Mountain. Slicing his head off should work, shouldn’t it? You think you can do it?”
“Yes, Your Grace. I’m very familiar with his armor, and he’s slow and heavy. I’ll be fine.”

“Good lad,” Jon says, but his voice sounds far away and his attention has already shifted to their surroundings.

He’s looking around the courtyard with furrowed brow. It’s quiet out here. A guard is dozing against the wall by the door they just exited. He didn’t even stir when they passed him. Another patrols the eastern wall, the gorgeous midnight sky his only companion and a brazier his only warmth. From the boisterous noises coming from the kitchens, the rest of them are in there to warm up by the hearth with a cup of ale in their hands and a kitchen maid on their lap. Now that all enemies are gone, they’ve grown docile and lazy and she can’t begrudge them that. This must be the coldest winter the South has seen in centuries.

That’s not what Jon focuses on, though. No his eyes are locked on a wooden door so plain she’s never noticed it despite having crossed the courtyard repeatedly the past two days.

“I’ve never seen that door used before,” he says, squinting as he traipses forward. “Not even when I was stuck here, but look at the snow.”

Much snow has fallen over the South the past few weeks, and the courtyard of Dragonstone is full of trampled and shoveled paths that lead from castle to servant quarters, from barracks to dungeons, from kitchen to well. But in the otherwise unmarred snow in front of the plain door--snow that reaches to Sansa’s knees--there are holes in the white surface from at least two pairs of feet. The tracks look fresh as well, the snow kicked up still powdery instead of crystalized.

There’s blood too, just a couple of drops, but it’s enough for Jon to order Sansa to return to his chamber and lock the door. When she refuses, he takes a long, steeling breath, and Sansa lifts her chin and tells him with one look that he should know better than to argue when she’s made up her mind. She’ll not have ser Gregor grab Jon by the throat and-- She fights the instinct to squeeze her eyes shut when she remembers Theon's ragdoll body lying on deck.

“Then stay behind me,” Jon says. "And at any sign of danger--any at all--you run.”

Jon pushes the door open and they enter complete darkness. Needing a torch, he pats the walls as he ventures into the black. Sansa hears the clink of metal against stone, an empty torch holder, she gathers, when Jon keeps moving. Then she hears a thud. A muffled groan. She sucks in a breath, heart racing in her chest, but Jon whispers that he’s fine and then there are two more clinks of metal against stone, and then Jon returns. He lights the torch with firesteel and showers walls, ceiling, and floor in warm light.

“Bodies,” he tells Sansa with a hard look in his eyes, a smear of blood on his cheek and more still on his fingers. “Still warm. Lannister guards, if I were to guess. Three at least, dumped in here.”

He moves backwards a tad and the light spills over the heap of men and the blood gathered beneath them. She recognizes all of them, knows they usually patrol the courtyard. They must’ve been close to catching Tisiph, then. Ser Gregor killed them and hid them in here--but why kill them if they could knock them out? Sansa’s come to know Tisiph as fiery and stubborn and thirsty for justice, yes, but not blood.

Trust no one, Shae once said. Everyone’s a better liar than you, Littlefinger once said. They were right, the both of them. Sansa can’t even trust herself and her judgment. And yet her instincts tell her she can, that she should, that Tisiph won’t hurt her, that what they went through together formed a bond between them not easily severed.
“Shouldn’t we go to the cave, Your Grace,” ser Finn asks.

“No, I think they’re in here, somewhere,” Jon says, leading Sansa and ser Finn deeper into the quiet tunnel. “One more torch is missing. And look”—he lowers the torch—“blood stains.”

With Jon in front of her and ser Finn behind her, Sansa makes her way down the dark corridor. In here the air is musty, damp, and unpleasantly chilly and she can’t help but shiver as they follow the blood stains spilled from Tyrion or dropped from ser Gregor’s well-fed sword.

They’ve not walked for long when the tunnel opens up into a huge cave-like room carved out of the rock, where the walls are decorated with old, moth-eaten tapestries and the floor is littered with wooden chests, broken furniture, rickety candelabra and tables, a painting or two, and even an old rocking dragon some little lordling must’ve ridden as a toddler. An old storage room with no other doors leading anywhere. How did Tisiph ever find this place—and why?

“Look,” Jon whispers, pointing at a tapestry of Aegon and his two sister-wives. “The blood ends there.”

A moth has taken a chunk out of Visenya’s face and Rhaenys’ body is so translucent Sansa can glimpse the wall behind it, as though someone’s stroked her image over and over until the threads wore away. Blood is smeared at the left-side edge of the tapestry, and Jon grabs it and pulls it aside and finds a door. As plain as the one that lead them here.

When Jon lays his hand on the handle, Sansa stops him.

“It should be me,” she whispers. “If she sees you, she’ll attack.” Exhaling, Sansa focuses herself and knocks. “Tisiph,” she says, opening the door, “it’s only me and I’m not here to--

A hand grabs her arm and yanks her into the room. Spins her around and presses her against a hard body. An arm closes around her waist. A blade presses against her throat.

“Get inside. Close the door behind you. Any sudden movements, anything clever, and your precious sister dies. Do you understand me?”

Daenerys’ swollen top lip trembles with rage. Her hair is half braids and half a woolen silver cloud caked with mud and blood. Dirt and blood streaks her clothes and face. A dark purple bruise covers most of her left cheek, the eye bloodshot. The seam where her sleeve connects to the shoulder of her fur coat is broken and gaping, and the hems of both coat and dress have been torn into shreds.

Jon and ser Finn place their swords on the floor, their eyes sharp and watchful as they take in their foes. Four bloodriders flank Daenerys, their eyes glittering in the light of the torches they’ve hung on the wall. Ser Jorah stands behind her, a wooden chest in his arms. And from the smell of cinnamon oil Sansa remembers well from the bloodriders in Winterfell, she knows the man holding her is one too. That’s six to two—and she realizes with a sinking feeling in her stomach that they don’t stand a chance.

Ser Jorah hands Daenerys the wooden chest, and approaches Jon and ser Finn to remove the dropped weapons. Like Daenerys, he looks as if he’s gone through all seven hells and back, but the bloodriders look to be in fine condition, their weapons sharp and plenty, the blood staining their hands and armor not their own.

“Check his boot,” Daenerys says. “He keeps a dagger there. Don’t you, Aegon?”

“Dany, please--”
“The next time you call me Dany is the last time you speak at all.”

Jon presses his lips together, glaring at her as ser Jorah fishes the dagger from his boot.

“So…” Daenerys’ eyes are cool, her voice soft and airy. “You’re finally fucking your sister. I’m happy for you, Jon.”

“I’m not.”


“Let her go, Your Grace. I’ve not taken the throne. It’s yours. No one will stop you.”

“The throne? The throne? Look at me!” She stalks closer as she speaks, her lips curled in anger and fire blazing in her wide eyes. “They tried to kill me! They don’t deserve Daenerys Targaryen as their queen. They deserve nothing but fire and blood—and I will give it to them. Once my dragons are grown, I will return to Westeros and I will destroy those who have wronged me. I will feast on your screams as my children roast you and eat you alive! I will lay waste to this continent. I will burn down King’s Landing and I will burn down the North. Nothing you love will remain. Nothing! I promise you this, nephew.”

“And how are you to do that? The dragons are all gone.”

“Do you take me for a fool? You’re here, aren’t you? The moment you realized someone had broken into the castle, you ran straight for my treasure. But it’s mine. They’re mine.” Daenerys hugs the chest to her body. “You’ve made your choice. You could’ve been a dragon, but you chose to be a wolf.”

“I don’t want your treasure. Take it and go. No one will stop you.”

“How dare you tell me what to do. I am your superior in every way. I am the last Targaryen, Jon Snow, and I will finish what I started. You cannot stop me. No one can.”

“You’re right. No one can stop you, not once your dragons are grown. So why not let us live until then?”

“I’ll let you live, Jon.” Daenerys smiles sweetly. “Mm, but not her.”

“No!” Jon takes a step forward, and ser Jorah stops him with a sword against Jon’s chest, the tip of it digging into the leather of his doublet. “Please. I’ll do anything you want. I’ll kneel! I will. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? I’ll kneel.”

“Then kneel.” Her nostrils flare. “Get down on your knees and beg for her life.”

Jon sinks to his knees. “Please. It’s me you’re angry with, not her. It’s me you want to punish, so punish me. Please, Dany, I--”

“What did I tell you? Do not call me that!” Her mouth twists with pain, with bitterness, and there’s nothing of the Dragon Queen in her now. Only a scorned young woman with a broken heart. “They were going to be ours. Yours and mine. Our children would ride them. I saw it all so clearly, how we would raise our house from the ashes and rule the world. Together. But it was all lies! You tricked me. You betrayed me. My own blood. How could you?”
When Jon stays silent, Daenerys takes another step forward so that she looms over him like a vengeful god. “Answer me!”

“I did what I had to to protect the people I love.”

“But what about me? Why didn’t you ever think about me?”

“I did.”

“But I didn’t matter, did I?”

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. I am.”

“You will be.” Nodding, Daenerys sniffs, licks her lips, and then schools her features into a mask as hard as the rock surrounding them. “You’ll be sorry for the rest of your life.”

The blade is sharp against Sansa’s neck and this time she has no tricks up her sleeve, no clever plans or solutions. Hiding their love won’t help. Fighting is useless and more likely to kill all three of them. It'll be quick, though, bleeding out. That's a comfort. At least it was quick for Littlefinger.

And perhaps it’s only right, that she dies the way he did. Perhaps this is the gods punishing her for killing a man she’d invited to stay in her home. It has to be, why else would the gods put everything she’s ever wanted within reach only to snatch it away right before she wrapped her fingers around it? She’ll never have a life with Jon. She’ll never know the feeling of him inside her. She’ll never see her belly grow round with their child. They won’t grow old together at Winterfell and see their children raise children of their own.

“Please,” Jon whispers. “Not her. Please. I’ll do anything. I’ll come with you. I’ll be a dragon for you, Daenerys. I will. We'll find a healer. We'll have a child. A trueborn Targaryen child.”

Sansa sees him glancing at the bloodrider and she knows he’ll throw himself at the man any moment now, but he won’t be quick enough. Ser Jorah will pull him back and that blade will slice her open and then Daenerys’ bloodriders will kill Jon and ser Finn as well.

Jon can’t save her. But perhaps he can save himself--himself and Arya and Bran.

“Jon,” Sansa says, smiling through her tears. “It’s all right. I know what it’s like now, to be loved, because of you. It’s all I ever wanted. I’ll die happy. So let me go. Let me go--and kill her before she kills anyone else.”

Daenerys barks a command in Dothraki. Sansa closes her eyes. The blade bites at her flesh, hot and sharp--

A gurgle in her ear. Daenerys screams out in anger. The hold on Sansa loosens; the bloodrider collapses behind her; she stumbles forward. A hand closes around her arm before she falls and pulls her aside, and she finds herself shoved behind ser Finn. A dagger is lodged in the eye of the fallen bloodrider. Jon’s dagger. But ser Jorah took it. Confused, Sansa peers out from behind ser Finn and finds ser Jorah in a battle stance, his sword aimed at Daenerys’ bloodriders instead of Jon.

“Let lady Stark go, My Queen. This is between you and Jon. I will kill him for you. I’ll hold him down so that you can kill him yourself. But release the lady.”

Daenerys’ eyes narrows. Then another Dothraki command flows from her lips.

The bloodriders charge. Jon rolls forward, grabs his sword, jumps to his feet. Swords clash, spring
apart, clash again. A bloodrider attacks ser Finn, who ducks, throws himself on the floor and grabs his sword, shielding his body with it just as an arakh swoops down over him. Sansa fumbles behind her to find the door, but her hands meet only cold rock. Ser Jorah cries out as a sword slices his arm. Jon ducks a swing, but doesn’t see a kick coming, loses his balance when it connects with his knee. Jon falls back with a cry of pain. Another bloodrider stomps on his arm and Jon drops the sword and then they’re two standing above him with their arakhs raised and her blood is rushing in her ears and she doesn’t know what to do. He’ll die. They’ll kill him. They’ll shove their arakhs into his heart and cut off his head and--

A flash of iron. The bulky head of a warhammer slams into one of the bloodrider’s faces with a sickening crunch and he falls the floor. Gendry changes his grip. The other bloodrider evades the blow, but isn’t quick enough to avoid Jon’s blade when he finds the hilt of Longclaw and thrusts the sword into the man’s belly with a roar.

Sansa’s knees give out and she sags to the floor, her breaths fast and trembling as she witness the fight ending as quickly as it began. Ser Finn has bested his enemy, and ser Jorah his, and now the Mormont man has switched sides again. He shields Daenerys with his body, his sword gleaming red in the torchlight, blood running from a wound in his arm and another on his thigh. He’s panting, blinking hard, shaking his head as though to clear it from dizziness.

“It’s over,” Jon says. “You won’t win, and if you die there’s no one left to protect her. Lay down your sword. We won’t harm you. Either of you.”

Daenerys glances at the torches and Sansa remembers the stories Bran told. The way the Dragon Queen amassed that great Dothraki army.

“Fire. She’s going to burn us alive.”

Daenerys flies toward the wall, but ser Finn’s long legs are quicker and before her fingers have closed around the torch, he’s grabbed her. As he pins her arms behind her back, the chest falls to the floor and Daenerys bucks in ser Finn’s hold, wild as an unbroken horse, gaze locked at the chest as if she can will it to return to her.

Kneeling, Jon opens the chest. Inside on a bed of black velvet lie two scaly eggs: one black and gold; one silver and blue.

“They’re mine! Don’t you dare touch them!”

Jon runs his fingers over the eggs, slowly, mapping out every scale, every swirl of metallic shine.

“If you sell those, Your Grace,” Gendry says, “we’ll have food for years to come.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Sell…” Jon murmurs, gazing down at the eggs, spellbound by their otherworldly beauty that calls to the Targaryen blood running through his veins. As though they sing to him to nurture them, to place them on a pyre and feed the fire well until they hatch, his hands close around one to lift it. But then he breaks the spell by shaking his head and holds out the hand to Gendry. “Your hammer.”

An ear-shattering cry is ripped from Daenerys’ throat and she kicks and snarls and even tries to bite ser Finn’s arm, while ser Jorah looks on, defeated, his whole body sagging.

“Jon! I’ll give you one. We can have one each. I’ll teach you how to ride it. I know you want it. I know you felt the connection with Rhaegal. You can have it again! You could do good with it. You could--”
Jon lifts the hammer.

Daenerys screams are unlike anything Sansa’s ever heard, drowning out even the beat of the hammer as shards of glittering eggshell fly with each blow until there’s nothing left but a gooey mess of wood splinters and broken scales. Daenerys’ cries muffle into whimpers, her legs hanging like two strings of yarn as the fight leaves her body. Had ser Finn not held her, she would’ve collapsed to the floor.

Jon hands back the hammer to Gendry and pulls Sansa to her feet, cups her cheeks, and looks deeply into her eyes. “Are you all right?”

Smiling, she dabs away the blood seeping from the nick on her throat. “Just a scratch.”

Jon sighs and rests his forehead against hers, then his mouth finds hers and he kisses her with the desperate heat of a man who thought he’d never get another chance. His arms wind around her body, pressing her so close it feels as if they’re melding together, and it wakes a greedy hunger in her that has her pulling away before she pushes him against the wall and takes him before it’s too late. Panting, Jon watches her with dark eyes, his hands tight around her waist and she feels herself move in again for another kiss—but just as their lips are about to meet, she manages to gain control of herself.

“We have work to do,” she whispers against his mouth. “The faster we get done, the faster…”

“Aye.” He squeezes her hips. “Let’s get to it, then.”

Despite his weakened state, ser Jorah insists on being the one who carries the limp Daenerys to the dungeons. Despite his betrayal, she clings to the only person in the world who still supports her and sobs into his neck. And despite everything horrible Daenerys has ever done, Sansa can’t help but feel sorry for her, can’t help but pity her. In a mere few days, she’s lost everything that mattered to her and Sansa knows that despair all too well.

It doesn’t change things, though.

Soon ser Jorah and Daenerys are locked in a cell, where she lies curled up on the bunk with her head in his lap while he strokes her hair and stares in front of him without seeing.

“I’m not going to let you go,” Jon says. “You know that, don’t you? We’ll hold a trial for you, for all the crimes you’ve committed against the realm. The both of you.”

“I know. It’s nothing I don’t deserve. The consequences of my actions have chased me for years and years. I should’ve stopped running long ago, but...” Ser Jorah breathes out in a self-deprecating chuckle. “I see myself in you, you know. Love makes us weak, makes us into fools. And I’ve been one. I’ve done unspeakable things to please the women I love, to make them love me. I suppose that’s the difference between us.”

He looks up at Jon and Sansa with red-shot eyes, his gaze lingering at their joined hands. “Your queen loves you back. So be with her. Marry her. Make her with child so that you have an heir. Raise him well and once he’s grown, put that sword in his hand and teach him how to use it wisely.” Ser Jorah closes his eyes and leans back against the wall, fingers trailing over silver-pale braids. “I think my father would’ve liked that.”
“I’m glad you came,” Jon says to Gendry as they make their way down to the beach in search of Tisiph and Tyrion and another disaster to divert. “I don’t know how you did it. But I’m glad you did.”

“Knew something was wrong when I saw you. Left Nettie with Davos and tracked you down.”

“I can’t thank you enough. If you hadn’t shown up…”

Gendry tries for a casual shrug but can’t hide how his eyes shine with pride. “Anyone would’ve done the same.”


Gendry struggles to contain his pleased grin, and when he loses the fight, he aims a teasing look at her and Jon. “So you two… About time, yeah?”

“About time?” Jon’s lips quirk in a crooked smile. “You’ve barely seen us together.”

“I’ve spent weeks on a boat with you, sailing north and south and north again. It was always Sansa this and Sansa that. ‘Oh, you like this cloak?’” Gendry says, mocking Jon’s Northern burr, “‘Sansa made it. She sings when she sews, isn’t that grand?’”

“I did not say that.” Jon scowls. “I didn’t say it was grand.”

“Mm, I love oatcakes, but Sansa’s favorites are lemoncakes.”

“And I said that Arya prefers honey cakes!”

“‘This ale is good! You should’ve tasted the one at the Wall. Awful, that was. Sansa hated it.’ And then he laughed and said, ‘She started coughing,’ as if that was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen and me and Davos just looked at each other.”

“He’s lying,” Jon tells Sansa while ser Finn does his best to muffle a laughter. “I didn’t talk about you that much.”

“That’s just cos you don’t talk much at all. But whenever I told him something about me or mine, he always mentioned m’lady. Unless Daenerys was around, cos then it was as if he’d never learned to talk in the first place and-- Oh.” Gendry stops. “There he is, then.”

Against the snowy cliffs, on a bedspear of silver brocade, sits Tyrion with a piece of rolled-up parchment in his hand and a golden chain gleaming around his neck. Although the skies are clear, the ocean breeze has brushed snow off the cliffs and dusted it over his still body. He looks almost serene, as if he spread out a blanket and sat down to read for a spell in the quiet moonlight.

The cold air stings Sansa’s eyes and she blinks to clear her vision.

Farther out on the ocean, against a backdrop of velvet black, a skiff is braving the waves. Sansa raises her hand in goodbye. At this distance she can’t make out Tisiph’s face, but she does see the woman raising her hand in return while ser Gregor rows on without pause. Something surges through Sansa’s chest, relief, loss. She’ll never see Tisiph again--and she can’t tell whether that
leaves her happy or hoping she’s wrong, hoping that one day, when life’s a little easier, Tisiph will show up outside the walls of Winterfell with a smile on her face and a thousand stories to tell.

Sansa kneels by Tyrion. His hands are still warm, still soft, and her stomach lurches with guilt when she gently pries the scroll from his fingers. *I’m sorry.* She wipes her eyes discreetly and unfurls the scroll as she rises. A confession signed by Tisiph, clearing Sansa of any blame. It’s a lovely effort, but it won’t stop Sansa from being implicated in yet another Lannister murder. Joffrey. Cersei. Tyrion… On an island full of Lannister men. And it won’t protect Tisiph if ser Jaime decided to find her and get his revenge.

*No one can know.*

“Ser Finn,” she says, voice as cool as the winter night. “Wrap him in that bedspread and carry him back to his chambers. Be discreet.” Sansa takes the gold chain and tucks it behind her belt along with the scroll. “And lay something on the bed—the tie of a bedrobe, perhaps. Something Daenerys could’ve used when she strangled him.” She feels Jon’s eyes on her but ignores it. “When she sneaked up to her chambers and found him there, she must’ve snapped. She killed him for betraying her. How awful.”

“I’ll make it look right, my lady,” ser Finn says, hoisting the bundle up on his shoulder. “Then what?”

“Then you and Jon go to ser Jaime’s chamber and inform him that Daenerys and her bloodriders broke into the castle to retrieve her eggs, but that she was stopped, apprehended, and now is locked up in the dungeons. That there’s nothing to worry about.”

Jon shakes his head. “And what happens if ser Jaime is worried about his brother and heads to his chambers? What if he then demands to see Daenerys?”

Sansa glances up at the castle. “Leave that to me.”

Qyburn loved teaching. He told her about every poison in his arsenal, describing their tastes and smells and effects, sharing how they were made and how to mask them in wine or ale or food with a dollop of honey or a pinch of salt or a dash of lemon juice. He even let her smell them and examine the little flasks against the light, while he watched her and soaked up her fascination.

Tears of Lys is expensive and rare and leaves no trace and causes sickness in the belly. Demon’s dance reeks of death and is sickly sweet on the tongue, and once ingested, it plays with the body, twitches the arms and the legs in a mad dance until the poison has run its course and the heart gives out. Widow’s blood is red like wine, a cruel thing that shuts down bladder and bowels until one’s victim drowns in their own poisons.

And then there’s wolfsbane.

*No one can know.*

Sansa stands by the cell for only a moment before ser Jorah opens his eyes. Arya is like that as well, ever vigilant. He’s still sitting on the bunk with his queen in his lap, who twitches and whines in her sleep. Sansa pulls the hood of her cloak back a touch to reveal her face to him. It’s simple and dove gray, the cloak, and belonged to the handmaiden who once stayed in her chambers, a woman who
either died in the battle of Winterfell or is on a ship right now that will take her and the other handmaidens and Unsullied back to Essos.

“My lady.” Ser Jorah eyes the tray in Sansa’s hands, which holds bread and a jug of watered down wine. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“You must be starving.” Holding the jug and bread, she reaches in between the bars, lays the tray and the floor and placed the food and drink on it. “Bread and watered Dornish red. For you and your queen. It’s the best I can do, I’m afraid. Food is scarce and the castle is full of hungry people.”

“A maid’s work. A maid’s cloak.” He glances down at the tray. “I trust it’s poisoned?”

“It’s not.” From her pocket, Sansa pulls a vial she nicked from Ozeah’s chambers while the woman snored in her bed. “This is the poison. Wolfsbane. Quick. Painless. A bit sweet, perhaps, but I doubt your queen will notice. Wake her. Offer her some wine and bread to help her sleep easier.”

“Are you not brave enough to take a life, my lady?”

Sansa hums, nodding slowly. “When I was a little girl, I had to watch my father die. A public execution in front of the blood-thirsty masses who wanted nothing more than to see him dead. When I tried to run to him, guards held me back and he had to die listening to my screams mingling with the cheers of the people. It still haunts me, how powerless I was, how the blade shone in the sunlight. The smell when—”

She releases a shuddering breath. “Some days, though, I’m grateful they took his head instead of hanging him. That’s even worse, I hear. It can take a moment and then you have to dance there like a puppet on strings until the death throes have left your body. Not a very dignified way to go, is it? This castle is full of survivors from King’s Landing, people who fled as your queen rained fire and blood over them. Tomorrow Jon will hold a trial and they’ll all be there to watch the Dragon Queen hang or lose her head.” Sansa lays the vial on the tray. “I’m trying to help you.”

“I thought you hated her.”

“I do. I hate her. But I owe you my life, ser. And while I can’t save yours, I can give you one last kindness: falling into eternal sleep together with the woman you love. I would’ve wanted that, had it been me and Jon.”

“And could you have poisoned him? Could you kill someone you love?”

Sansa looks into his eyes, smiling sadly. “You wouldn’t be killing her, ser Jorah. You would be sparing her an awful end.”

He stares at the vial for a beat, then he gingerly slides out from under Daenerys’ head and picks up the vial. “Will you bury us together?”

“If you wish. On my honor as a Stark.”

“Honor.” He laughs hollowly. “A trait none among us possess anymore.” He pulls the cork out of the vial. “Do you swear it’s painless?”

“You will grow tired soon after drinking it. You’ll want to lie down-and you can. You can hold her, ser. You can stroke her hair until you both fall asleep and then you’ll rest, you and her, forever.”

“Forever,” ser Jorah whispers and empties the vial into the jug.
Sansa tugs the cloak to better cover her face and hair and walks away, but at the stairs leading back to the courtyard she lingers for a moment. She hears ser Jorah rousing Daenerys awake, hears the woman’s moan a protest like a sleepy child, hears ser Jorah coaxing her to eat and drink, to stay strong.

Then Sansa leaves. She doesn’t need to hear the rest to know.
So... Jon and Sansa were desperate to get it on. A little bit of smut happened. ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ 
Therefore this chapter is NSFW (mostly toward the end). This is also most likely the penultimate chapter. I HOPE. Keep your fingers crossed.

On her way back to Jon’s chamber, Sansa stops by Davos’ room. While Nettie sleeps in his bed with her dolls, he’s seated by the hearth with a piece of driftwood and his whittling knife as he waits for Gendry to return. Handing him the gold chain, Sansa whispers that he should keep it hidden until he reaches Essos. Good old Davos accepts it with nothing but a nod and returns to his whittling. The written confession, however, she’s not yet ready to part with and, once in Jon’s chamber, Sansa cuts a hole into the bottom of the mattress where she hides it, just in case. Then she strips off boots, cloak, and robe and collapses in Jon’s bed, the blue nightgown whispering around her tired limbs.

She’s nosing at the edges of sleep when the door creaks open, and without stirring she listens as Jon sheds his layers with a groan and pours water into the basin. The sound of water splashing and dripping, of his satisfied hums as he washes off blood and sweat soothes her into a light slumber. And in that moment, she believes she’s home. The rough-hewn walls around her become Winterfell’s solid old stones. The featherbed becomes her own, one she’s not slept in in moons and moons. The hearth and the window shift places. She even hears Ghost padding across the room and settling down by the bed to protect her and she thinks maybe they’re already married, Jon and her, married and home and safe.

Cold hands against her sleep-warm skin pulls her from that dream. Her eyes fly open, landing on a room that’s all wrong and the world topples over. Her blood thunders like waterfalls in her ears and her lungs can’t take anything but short bursts of breaths and she’s scrambling for something to protect her, but then Jon curls his soap-scented body around hers and it grounds her, makes her limbs slack and her heart steady and her mind calm. She’s safe. She’s with Jon.

“Any disasters?” he whispers, snuggling his face into the crook of her neck, and she shakes her head. “Good. Talk tomorrow? I just...” He lets out an uneven breath. “I just want to hold you.”

Sansa hums and shifts to lie more comfortably, his arm snug around her waist, hers wrapped around his back, their legs entangled.

“I thought I was going to lose you,” he murmurs into her skin. “I can’t lose you, Sansa.”

“You’re not going to lose me.”

He lifts his head and looks at her with tortured eyes. “You have to be careful from now on. Promise me.”

“If I have to be careful then so do you.”

Jon sighs, his mouth a sad curve. She has no soothing words to offer; all she can do is bring her lips to his and prove they’re still alive and together. He meets her kisses with the same desperate hunger as before, and when she rolls over on her back he follows readily. The weight of him is a comfort,
and she wraps her arms around his back and a leg around his waist to weigh him down further until she feels safer than she has in years. His tongue is hot and eager and soon her body is too, writhing against him and what grows hard between them.

Jon releases her lips with a wet sound. “Sansa?”

She hums and rocks her hips in a way that has him rubbing her where she’s swollen and it’s so good she moans her disappointment when he plants his hands on either side of her head and lifts himself up on straight arms.

“We shouldn’t.” Careful not to let their bodies touch, he gives her another kiss. “We agreed to wait.”

“It can take weeks before we can leave Dragonstone, and it’ll take weeks for us to reach Winterfell and then another few weeks before we can wed. That’s months, Jon. Months. Can’t we do something?”

“Something can very easily lead to... other things. Waiting will make it better.”

“But I want you now.”

It comes out whiny and needy, and she can’t help but pout when Jon is rude enough to chuckle at her.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because,” he says, eyes warm and voice tender, “you make me more happy than I ever thought I could be.”

He allows them one last kiss, then he scoots away from her, all the way to edge of the bed, and lets her fall asleep with a hunger raging in her body she can’t sate. A hunger that only grows in the night, when she dreams of Jon tasting every part of her only to pull back whenever she’s close, and when she wakes up all wet and swollen and feels him hard against her backside, his hand cupped around her breast, Sansa slips out of his embrace with a groan and builds a wall of pillows between them. Jon rolls over on his back, stretching out his arms, and the blankets slide down his chest and she watches his muscles play underneath his silky skin and perhaps sharing a bed wasn’t a very good idea after all.

After everything she’s gone through, she never thought she’d be this wanton. But Jon’s kisses and touches and the smell of his skin and his body’s response to hers, they all stoke the passion that’s been smoldering within her ever since they argued in that tent. After everything she’s gone through, she thought she’d have to get used to Jon’s touch little by little. But now she finds she can’t get enough, her body, her lips, her skin all craving contact with his and needing his generous, gentle hands to replace the memories of all those cruel, unwanted hands that have pawed at her ever since she flowered.

Sharing his bed is going to drive her mad.

(But so will sleeping apart, and she’d rather be driven mad with need than with fear.)

Jon folds his arms under his head. “We should talk before we break our fast,” he mumbles, eyes still closed. “Ser Jaime was asleep when we knocked on his door. Asleep and drunk. Really drunk. Told us that news could’ve waited till morning and then he stumbled back to bed without remembering to close the door.”

She curls a hand over the swell of his upper arm, just to keep touching him. “Lucky.”
“For us. Less so for the chambermaid. She’ll have a fright.”

“Tyrion’s chambermaid used to be a Meereenese slave. I have a feeling she’s seen worse.”

“Aye. And you? How did it go?”

“They’re gone.”

Jon lifts his head and watches her with furrowed brow. “You all right?” he asks and she nods. “It was a mercy. That trial would’ve been ugly.”

“That’s not why I did it.”

“I know,” he says, stroking her cheek. “Still. It was a mercy.”

She takes his hand and follows the lines in his palm, the calluses formed by years of sword wielding. “I’m proud of you. For destroying the eggs. It can’t have been easy.”

“It had to be done.” Jon pauses, regarding her with concern in his eyes. “Sansa. Was I touching you in my sleep?”

“You were.”

“I’m sorry.” He pats the pillows between them. “This is a good idea.”

“Jon,” she says, “it’s ridiculous. I want to go home. I want to marry you and start our life together.”

And I want that life at Winterfell, she wants to say. I want to stay after our wedding so that our children can grow up where we did. I want them to play in the godswood and practice swordplay in the courtyard and learn falconry in the Wolfswood. I want to grow old there with you.

But Jon has yet to talk about his plans for the future—the only thing she’s heard him say is that he’ll send Gendry to his old master smith to oversee the Iron Throne being melted down and turned into tools to rebuild the city—and if Jon wants to replace the Iron Throne with a throne of his own and rule the Seven Kingdom, she’s going to support it, as a good wife should.

So she keeps her thoughts to herself and pokes at the wall she built. “I want to lie next to you without a bunch of pillows between us.”

“Aye, I want that too. Davos is leaving for Essos today. As soon as he comes back, we’ll go home and marry. All right? And perhaps…” Jon’s eyes drifts over her body. “Perhaps we can ask him to buy fabric. For your wedding dress.”

Sansa smiles at him. “You’ve imagined me in my wedding dress?”

“Not really,” he says but his grin says the opposite.

“Then what color would you like me to wear, my love. Purple? Pink? Green?”

“Blue. The dress with the wolf bit, it was blue, wasn’t it?”

“You like that one?”

“You didn’t notice? I couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

“Blue it is, then,” she murmurs against his lips. “What else have you planned for our wedding, Jon?”
His only reply is a deep kiss that doesn't last long enough before he pulls away to get dressed.

Clad in a cream-colored gown that washes out her complexion but has a high enough collar to hide the cut on her neck, Sansa sits at the end of the world next to Jon, while Jaime paces by the southern shores. The Maester has his water cup on Casterly Rock, while Davos taps his thumb against the Dreadfort, and Ozeah follows the furrows of the Fingers with her own. Ser Finn and Brienne have followed them to the meeting and stand by the door, while two Lannister guards stand by the window. It's the first time Sansa’s seen ser Jaime using guards since they arrived, and she pretends to be unnerved by their presence, as though she doesn’t know why they’ve been summoned to the map room.

Ser Jaime sighs and settles down. His hair is uncombed, his eyes red-rimmed, and his jaw tight, and despite the early hour he pours wine into a cup and empties it in one go.

“I have a fuzzy memory of the King in the North knocking on my door last night. You and ser Finn.”

“Aye. Daenerys, ser Jorah, and five bloodriders sneaked into the castle. They’d killed a few guards, so we followed the blood trail to a storage room where we fought them and won. There were eggs--dragon eggs--”

The Maester sucks in a sharp breath, and the uninitiated in the room all gape at Jon in horror.

“I destroyed them,” Jon says and their company visibly relaxes. “Only ser Jorah and Daenerys survived, so we locked them in a cell. I’m holding the trial as soon as possible for all their crimes against the realm.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Ser,” Sansa says, “if you’re worried we’ll put Tyrion on trial as well, I assure you we have no--”

“Tyrion is dead.”

Sansa gasps and looks at Jon in alarm, but Jon has schooled his features and is watching ser Jaime as though he’s interested in nothing but hearing more of this new information.

“He was found this morning.” Jaime splashes more wine into his cup. “Him and Bronn. There’s only me left now.” He drains the cup. “The last Lannister.”

“We believe the Mad King’s daughter is guilty of the crime,” the Maester says. “Tyrion Lannister was strangled while ser Bronn had his head chopped off. Nasty business. Quite a horrible sight. I’ve always found there's a touch of intimacy to strangulation,” he continues, oblivious to Jaime’s appalled look. "It tells you something about the murderer's state of mind that they would choose that over, say, poison or a dagger.”

Ser Finn clears his throat and steps forward. “Ser, she was unhinged when we saw her, screaming about revenge and destroying all of Westeros once her dragons had grown. She wanted to hurt His Grace as well.”

“And she believed Tyrion had betrayed her,” Jaime says. “And Bronn tried to kill Drogon when
Daenerys attacked us. And I tried to kill her. Suppose I was lucky I turned down Tyrion’s invitation to drink with him and Bronn.” His mouth twists into a bitter smile. “Suppose I was lucky I wanted to mourn my sister alone instead of spending the evening with a man who despised her.”

“I’m sorry, ser,” Sansa says. “Tyrion was a good man and a good Hand. Daenerys will pay for her crimes. We’ll see to that.”

“She’s already dead.”

“You killed her?”

“No. She was found dead in her cell. Her and ser Jorah.” Jaime puts an empty vial on the table. “He had this in his hand.”

“I’ve gone through my inventory,” the Maester says, “and nothing is missing.”

Sansa’s heart drops to her stomach. She didn’t think of that at all. The urge to fidget buzzes in her limbs, but she fights that impulse and keeps her expression cool as she moves her eyes to Ozeah when the healer woman starts speaking.

“I too have gone through my inventory. Nothing is missing, ser.”

Sansa suppresses a sigh of relief and, despite Jon not moving a muscle, she can feel him doing the same. Ozeah gestures at ser Jaime for him to hand her the vial, and she puts it to her nose and takes a sniff.

“This is wolfsbane. In Essos, it is a common suicide poison, for it is as quick as it is painless.”

“Ah, yes, wolfsbane. Just so.” The Maester nods. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the Mormont traitor had it on his person for this very purpose. He must’ve known the risk they were taking, sneaking into a castle full of armed guards. The arrogance on that woman.” He tuts, shaking his head. “If I’m not mistaken, Mormont has a history of fleeing his trials. This is no different.”

“He loved her,” Jon says. “If ser Jorah poisoned them, he did it for her.”

“I don’t really care why.” Jaime stands, swaying slightly, and grabs his cup and flagon of wine. “I thought you should know and now you do. If you need me, I’ll be in my chambers, drinking myself into oblivion.”

Brienne gives Sansa a look as if to ask for permission, and when Sansa nods Brienne follows Jaime out of the map room along with the Lannister guards. The Maester, however, lingers.

“Your Grace,” he says, “I’ve been in contact with the Citadel and they’re inquiring after your plans. Will you take the Iron Throne soon? As the legitimate son of Rhaegar Targaryen, you do have a claim. And, I daresay, the constitution for it.” He shoots Sansa an oily smile. "And a bride with a good pedigree by your side."

Jon fills himself with air and exhales slowly, rubbing at his forehead. “I’ve not given it much thought, yet. I’ll let you know.”

The Maester hides his dissatisfaction poorly but accepts Jon’s answer and leaves for the rookery to write Sam about the news, while Jon and Sansa follow Ozeah to the healer’s chamber. She says nothing about why she lied about her inventory and only walks on without even looking at them—at least not until they reach the chamber, where she gives them a smile and opens the door to reveal something wonderful.
Arya sits by Bran’s bed, feeding him broth with a spoon. He’s awake! Sansa rushes to her brother’s side where she closes her arms around him in as tight a hug as she dares.

“We’ve been so worried. How are you?”

Bran slurps broth from the spoon, smacks his lips. “I’m me again.” The words come out in a hoarse whisper, but his eyes shine in a way she hasn’t seen since he was a little boy. “I poured it all into the Night King and now all there’s left is me. I’m not the Three-Eyed Raven anymore.”

Tears well up in Sansa’s eyes and she and Jon both hug Bran until he protests and they back away a touch. He eats another spoonful of broth before gesturing to Arya that he’s had enough and easing himself to lie down. “I’m tired. I wish to sleep.”

“He woke up in the early hours of the wolf,” Ozeah says while Sansa tucks the blankets around her brother. “Not long after someone sneaked into my chamber and stole poison from my stores.”

Sansa stills her movements and looks up at Ozeah with bated breath.

“Yes, copper lady, I knew. When your brother woke, I thought the news could wait until morning. No need waking the whole castle when its lady is poisoning someone. Then morning came and other news with it. And so my good news had to wait a little while longer. You understand.”

“Yes, of course. Thank you, Ozeah. For protecting us.”

“When the truth causes little but strife, should it be told?” Ozeah takes Bran’s wrist, holds her long, slender fingers against his pulse point. “A destructive woman died tonight. A good boy lived. A loving family is safe and together and can return home to their people. And so can I.”

“You’re going with Davos.”

“I am.” Ozeah releases Bran’s wrist and starts moving bottles from a shelf to a chest. “Ser Davos is a good man. I have an eye for it. His ship will see me home, I have no doubt.”

“And Arya and Bran?”

“Will be good and strong. That Maester can tend to them from now on.”

“I can’t express how grateful I am--how grateful we all--”

Ozeah waves off Sansa’s gratitude. “I healed those who needed healing, that is all. Now let your brother rest and leave an old woman be to her packing.”

While Bran naps, they borrow his chair and wheel Arya outside for some well-needed fresh air. She grumbles about being able to walk on her own, and once outside the castle walls she grabs the armrests and pushes herself to stand. But after two shaky steps, Jon puts a stern mask on his face and two solid hands on Arya’s shoulders and moves her back into the chair, which she accepts with relief hidden behind an exaggerated eye roll.

They wheel her out to the bluff, where the pale sky stretches on and on, the wind fills their cloaks and lungs, and the snow has scattered to reveal patches of green grass the chair has no trouble crossing. Ser Finn walks a few steps behind them, always prepared to protect, and Jon waves him
close so that they can tell Arya the truth about Daenerys.

When Jon praises ser Finn for protecting Sansa and besting a bloodrider in single combat, the boy shines with pride and once they’re done, he approaches Jon with his head bowed and a nervous look in his eyes.

“Your Grace. I’m told a ship leaves for King’s Landing at noon. I’m loathe to leave your side, but I have a friend… I want to look for him. And if I find him, I… Ser Nyles is a magnificent fighter, Your Grace. He’s taught me everything I know and I believe he’d serve you well. That we both would.”

“You would, aye. But not him. He might be a good fighter when you spar, but if he’s too craven to fight when it counts, he’s not a good fighter. He shouldn’t protect anyone. A man like that is a liability and nothing else.”

Finn’s face falls and his eyes flit to Sansa, pleading for her to help.

Sansa lays a hand on Jon’s arm. “There must be something for him to do.”

Jon nods, brow knitted as he thinks. “You said he taught you. What is he like as a teacher?”

“Very good,” ser Finn says. “Patient but strict. Determined that you learn. And when we spar, he’s not craven at all.”

“Well, then. He can teach. We’ll need someone who can train both boys and girls. If he proves to be good at it, he can stay.”

Beaming, ser Finn bows to them and takes his leave to prepare himself for the journey. Once he’s left, Arya looks up at them with an amused quirk of her mouth.

“You’re acting like you’re married. He’s treating you like you’re married.”

Sansa takes a deep breath. “Arya, there’s something we need to tell you.”

“I already know. I’m not blind.” She gives Jon a wry look. “Told you she was upset about Daenerys, didn’t I? You didn’t believe me, but I was right.”

“Aye, you were.” Jon’s face lights up with joy and he pulls Sansa closer by the waist to kiss her.

Arya scrunches up her face. “You don’t have to be all”—she emits a disgusted noise—”I don’t want to see that.”

Cheeks red from more than just the biting wind, Jon takes a big step away from Sansa who gives her sister a crooked smile and promises that they’ll behave.

It’s hard, though, behaving. It’s silly how quickly it becomes a habit to stroke his arm or run her fingers through the curls at his neck or give him a quick peck on the lips when they meet or part. It’s silly how she yearns for intimacy whenever they spend a moment apart. And when work takes her to her office and Sansa finds her desk moved into his, she uses the excuse to throw herself onto his lap and kiss him because there’s no one around in front of whom to behave.

“You approve?” he asks once he’s caught his breath.

“I do. But Jon?” She tugs his beard gently. “Next time you make a change, ask me first.”

“I will.”
He strokes her thigh, palm smoothing from knee to hip, and looks up at her with a soft smile. He’s so handsome, her Jon, especially when he looks at her that way, with his lips swollen from her kisses and his hair wild from her exploring fingers and his eyes shining with love.

“There’s something else I should ask too.” He squeezes her hip. “Something I should’ve asked already. Do you want me to take the throne? Do you want us to rule the Seven Kingdoms?”

_The throne is a cage_, she wants to tell him. _As long as you sit on it, we’ll never be free. We’ll never be safe. There’s always someone else who wants it more and who will stop at nothing to get it._

“If you want the throne, you should take it. But only if _you_ want it. I’ll support you no matter what you choose.” She tucks the loose strands of his hair back into the bun. “That is what good wives do.”

“And good husbands listen to their wives.”

Sansa sighs. “After all these wars, Westeros needs a good king. And I believe you’d be one. The people would love you, the lords would respect you and--”

“But what about you? If you’re not happy, I’m not happy. What do _you_ want? Do you still want to be queen of the Seven Kingdoms?”

“When I was a little girl, I wanted a romance lifted from the pages of a book or from the lines of a song. _That’s_ why I wanted to marry a handsome prince and have his babies, because it was romantic. But regardless of whether we stay at home after the wedding or leave again for the south, I will have my fairytale marriage because I’ll marry you.”

“Home. That’s what you said this morning. You wanted to go home.”

“Yes,” she murmurs and leans her forehead against his, "but home is wherever I’m with you.”

She angles her head for another kiss, plunges her fingers back into his hair, and when Jon’s lips leave hers to flutter down the column of her neck, she tries to shift in the chair so that she can straddle him. But the moment she moves, Jon pulls away and lifts her off his lap and returns to work as though nothing happened, as though he’s not hard in his breeches, and Sansa swallows her frustration and settles down in her own chair.

As the days pass, it happens again and again: they kiss in their office, in their chamber, in their bed. They kiss in a nook in the hallway on their way to breakfast, on the bluff during a midday walk, in the map room after everyone else have left a meeting. Some evenings they even choose to sup in his chamber so they can be alone and the food grows cold on the forgotten tray while they grow hot in the featherbed until Jon breaks away, panting.

It’s a dangerous game they’re playing and yet they can’t stop. She lifts his hand to cup her breast; he bucks into her hand when she palms his breeches. She sucks at the skin of his neck until it leaves a mark; he kisses his way down her chest until his lips brushes over her nipple. And then he always, _always_, pulls away.

With Jaime shut in his room, work piles up and becomes a welcome distraction. They ship some of the highborn back to the mainland and talk with every servant in the castle about their future and make a list of every Essosi who wants to board the ship coming from Winterfell with the Unsullied. They hold funeral rites for the fallen, go through Daenerys’ neglected piles of paperwork, pay servants who’ve received only promises of coin once Daenerys takes the throne, and discuss with the Maester on how to proceed with the restoration of King’s Landing.

It takes ser Jaime three days to finally emerge from his chamber and attend Tyrion’s funeral, three
days still to trim the beard that has grown wild during his days of mourning, and another three for that haunted gaunt look to leave his face because he finally starts eating properly again.

The meetings with the Maester move to the map room, where Jaime takes an important role and helps them choose men to oversee the work in King’s Landing. Sansa is always invited but often finds herself too busy working with the steward in running the castle to attend. Today, however, she once more sits with Jon at the end of the world while ser Jaime lounges at the shores of Dorne.

He’s all alone, now. His family, gone. His best friend, gone. The child his sister carried in her womb, gone. Once upon a time, Sansa thought everyone was gone too. Father, Mother, Robb. Bran and Rickon. Arya. She knows that heartbreak so well, and guilt lies like a rock in her stomach, heavy and jagged, and every time she’s seen him this past week, she’s held her breath and waited for him to ask her about Tisiph but he never did. Not until today.


Sansa can’t help but jolt at the question, but ser Jaime keeps his eyes on the lion piece still standing on King’s Landing and doesn’t notice.

“Tisiph,” she says. “She joined ser Davos when he sailed to Essos. She wanted to go home.”

“She followed the gold, more like. I knew it. I knew she only wanted his gold, but... At least he’ll never know the truth. He’ll never know she only batted her lashes at him for that Lannister gold. There’s not much riches to be had for a handmaiden. Fucking lords, however? You knew she was a whore, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“You did? I’m surprised you didn’t send her away yourself. A queen can’t have a whore as a handmaiden. Because that’s what you’ll be soon, won’t you? A queen. The queen. Little Sansa Stark marrying a prince and becoming queen of the Seven Kingdoms after all. Your childhood dreams come true.”

Jon takes her hand, rubs a soothing thumb over her knuckles. “We’re getting married, yes. But I’m not taking the throne.”

“You’re not taking the throne?” Sansa whispers, eyes searching Jon’s for the truth she wants too much to believe fully.

Jon gives her an assuring smile. “Once Davos comes back, we’re going home and we’re staying home. I promise.”

“But,” the Maester says, “Your Grace, the Iron Throne!”

“It doesn’t exist anymore. It’s been melted down and crafted into tools to repair the city.”

“Yes.” Jaime frowns. “And the Red Keep has been looted to fund the rebuilding of King’s Landing. We know all that. We helped in arranging all that. I handpicked the lords and master builders to oversee it myself! It doesn’t mean there’s no position left to fill.”

“Well, my father’s family was overthrown, and last time I looked, a Lannister sat on the throne. I’m not the heir. You are.”

Jaime’s mouth drops open. “You want me to be king of the Seven Kingdoms?”
“I don’t care. As long as the North remains independent, I don’t care. Take the throne. Put someone else on it, or go home and let each kingdom rule itself. Do whatever you want. All I want is to return to Winterfell with my family, marry the woman I love, and get some peace and quiet. This?” Jon gestures at the map table. “It’s not my responsibility. But if you come for me or mine, if you try to subjugate the North…”

“I don’t care about the North.”

“Good. You can stay at Dragonstone for now. But it belongs to my family and eventually I’ll give it to whom I see fit. Do we have an understanding?”

For a moment, Jaime watches Jon’s determined tilt of his chin and Sansa’s barely held back beam of pride. Then a smile tugs at Jaime’s lips and he stands and offers his left hand for a shake.

Sansa beams all the way back to their chamber. They’re going home! They’re staying home. She’s brimming with happiness, with a need to show her gratitude, and the door has barely closed behind them before she’s thrown her arms around her man. Jon meets her lips and tongue eagerly, and when her fingers find the straps of his jerkin, his move to the laces of her dress. It’s not the first time they’ve undressed each other in a fit of passion, but it’s the first time they get far enough to fall into bed together with her in nothing but a shift and him in nothing but smallclothes.

Any moment now, he’ll pull away, she knows, he’ll pull away and she’ll have to fall asleep throbbing, but when she straddles him he only keeps kissing her and each stroke of his tongue sends sparks of pleasure through her body. He even drags his hands up her thighs, pushing the hem of the shift higher and higher, and soon he’ll discover she’s not wearing smallclothes. She only has the one pair and when they’re getting washed she goes without and she knows she could’ve sewn a hundred pairs by now but she hasn’t and she holds her breath and waits for him to realize. To stop. But when Jon finds nothing but skin beneath her shift, he only groans and digs his fingers into the flesh of her hips.

She nips at his bottom lip and lowers herself until the fabric of his smallclothes brushes against her. Her heart is beating like mad, hard enough that she feels that beat pulsing between her legs, and when he releases her lips and tastes her neck, nips and sucks his way down to her collarbone, she can’t control her hips. Sansa bucks against him, his hard length pushing between her lower lips, the linen trapped between them a delicious friction. But it gives no relief, only leaves her desperate for more and it feels so good to rock against him and she moans a little too loudly and Jon releases her throat with a pop and lets go of her hips and seven hells.

“Sansa, stop,” he says and she stills with a frustrated noise. “Listen. I promised I wouldn’t touch you before the wedding and this—”

“You’re not touching me,” she whispers and he tries giving her an admonishing look that barely works for his eyes are deep and dark and hungry. “Do you really want me to stop?”

When he doesn't answer, she lifts herself up and prepares mentally for another torturous night, but Jon’s hands shoot to her hips and slams her back down on his cock and she grinds against him with a grateful moan.

“You don’t have to be inside me,” she murmurs, rocking with her eyes fluttering closed. “We can just…”

Jon hums his consent, and with a firm grip on her hips, he urges her on and she loses herself in how their bodies move together. After days and days of teasing, she’s so ready she could burst, but she doesn’t want this to be quick. She wants to draw it out, to revel in the feeling of finally seeking
pleasure together and, with a hand on his chest for purchase, she arches her back and rocks languidly against him, her breasts swaying beneath the shift, brushing against the soft, cool silk. Her nipples grow taut and sensitive and she cups a breast, rolling the peak between her fingers, and out of instinct, she shifts the hand on his chest so that she can give his nipple a soft squeeze too.

Jon hisses out a curse. “Wait. Stop.” His chest heaves with breaths. “Sansa, I won’t… I can’t hold it back. I—” He nudges the back of her thighs, motioning her to move up his body. “Come here.” He nudges her some more and she shuffles forward on her knees. “I want to taste you. Can I taste you?”

Taste her? Confused, Sansa looks down and finds him trapped between her knees and gazing up at her, at her cunt, with unabashed hunger. He even licks his lips and she feels her core tighten with anticipation. She’s heard about this, the tasting, the kissing, the licking, but she never thought it would be like this, with her sitting on him, and she knows this isn’t proper or ladylike and yet she holds the headboard for balance and spreads her knees and eases herself down until she feels his breath against her flesh and his chest against her bottom.

He kisses her thigh, gives it a soft bite, moves up the delicate skin, noses at the line between her thigh and her mound. Then he moves his face against her and she hears him breathe in deeply of her scent before his tongue moves hot and wet against her folds. At first he’s light, almost tentative, but soon he loses his restraint and tastes every part of her as if he’s dreamed of little else the past few weeks, tongue dipping inside her, mouth sucking on her folds, tongue swirling around her swollen bud. Kneading her bum, he brings her even closer to his mouth and feasts on her with needy grunts and slurps and she’s never felt anything like it, never felt pleasure so good the world falls away until the only thing she knows is the feel of Jon’s lips and tongue. When he urges her to move, to set the rhythm and grind against his face, she tightens her grip on the headboard and ruts against him in a way she knows should shame her, but her body is simmers, every bit of her simmers, singing, tingling, and she can’t stop, not until she reaches that high she’s chasing—and then Jon makes the oddest noise. A long muffled, desperate moan. As if he can’t breathe.

Her heart jumps to her throat and she tries flying off him, but Jon pulls her back down with one hand, keeps her flush against his mouth with strong fingers, and encourages her to keep moving and she does, gods shame her, she does. Gazing into his beautiful dark eyes, she rides his face until the tingling is so intense, so powerful, she goes completely still, cups his head, and lets his tongue work her bud until the pleasure explodes and surges through her body, all warm and golden.

Jon’s still lapping at her, his tongue slow and gentle, and her thighs are shaking and her ears are ringing and she thinks she might’ve moaned loudly enough for everyone to hear, but she’s too fogged up to tell. Sansa folds her arms on the headboard and leans her forehead against them, trying to catch her breath. Jon’s panting too, and yet he’s pressing more kisses to her. To the insides of her thighs. To the bud that’s so sensitive now she shies away from his lips.

“Are you all right?” She caresses his hair, wipes beads of sweat off his forehead. “Did I hurt you? It sounded like I was suffocating you.”

Jon chuckles, his red cheeks rounded with a smile. “Uh, I…” He shrugs and nods down his body. “I peaked. That’s all.”

Sansa looks over her shoulder. His seed as soaked through the linen of his smallclothes. “I didn’t even touch you.”

“No. But I did. Didn’t need much. I was close and…” He clears his throat and goes even more red. “I might’ve wanted this. For a while. You doing that.”

Sansa moves off him and lies down by his side, one leg slung over his, her fingers brushing over his
scars. “You’ve fantasized about me?”

“Aye. Haven’t you?”

Smiling shyly, she kisses his chest. She might’ve just sat on his face and sought out her pleasure with wild abandon, but now she feels oddly exposed and the words won’t come to her lips.

"Oh. That's... That's all right."

He says it casually, but there’s a touch of vulnerability in his voice, in that easy smile, that makes her heart clench and it loosens her lips after all.

“After you left. That was the first time. You left without saying goodbye and I was so upset and that night, when I went to bed, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. But I was angry. I was so angry that you’d make this decision without me, that you’d leave me all alone, that you wouldn’t even say goodbye. And I thought about all the things I wanted to say to you, and about all the things I wanted to say during our fight, in that tent. And... We started fighting, like we did that time. But in my fantasy it escalated and then I kissed you and you swept everything off that table and you took me, right there in that tent, and I started touching myself and I cried your name into my pillow and I was so ashamed, Jon. I was glad you weren’t home after all, because I don’t think I could’ve looked you in the eye. I didn’t allow myself to do it again. I told myself I was confused. That I was angry and missing you and it got twisted, somehow.” She exhales and pillows her head on his shoulder. “Oh, Jon. I’ve carried so much shame.”

“We both have,” he whispers. “But no more.”

He tips her head up with two fingers beneath her chin and kisses her, and he tastes of her, smells of her, and perhaps that’s another thing that should shame her, but she loves it and sucks her taste off his lips and tongue while the blood rushes back to her core.

“Jon? Did you like it? What we did. Was it as good as you’d imagined?”

“Better,” he says and she hears the smile in his voice, “much, much better. I was wrong, Sansa. Not about waiting—I still want to wait—but about thinking we should wait with everything. It only makes it harder and there are so many things we can do, so many things. I’ll show you, if you like?”

“Now?”

It comes out so eagerly, she can’t help but blush and Jon laughs at her and gives her another kiss. Then he rolls out of bed, slips out of his smallclothes and moves to the basin. Sansa’s shift flutters to the floor and she lies back in bed, watching him washing himself, and it’s so easy to imagine the rough-hewn walls around them becoming Winterfell’s solid old stones and the featherbed becoming their own--for they are married, Jon and her, married and home and safe.

At least that last part is true, isn’t it? Their enemies are dead, truly, and Tisiph’s letter isn’t needed anymore. Sansa fishes the scroll out of the mattress and walks over to the hearth, feeling Jon’s eyes on her with every step. It dawns on her that he can see her every scar, that he must’ve kissed her scars when she sat atop him, but she was too aroused then to even remember that someone once broke her body. And when Jon joins her by the fire and wraps his arms around her waist, leans his head on her shoulder, and they watch the letter disappear in the flames, that thought disappears too. Old hurts don’t matter anymore. All that matters is Jon’s hand in hers as he leads her back to bed.
I'd like to give a huge thank you to everyone who’s taken this journey with me. Your kudos and kind comments mean more to me than I can express. You guys rock and I would never have made it to the end without you. Seriously. Writing is a lonely, lonely thing, and getting to share my work with you and hearing your thoughts and knowing that you want to see the story unfold is such a joy and privilege. I can't thank you enough for that. It's people like you who keep us fic writers going. <3 I hope you've had a great holiday season and that the new year will be fantastic! Thank you again!

Sam walks to the beat of the hammer in the hand of Sharp Spear repairing one of the walkways. He swerves a wheelbarrow full of rubble, passes the forge where the blacksmith makes nails, doorknobs, hinges, locks, and keys, and finds the steward by the fully repaired kitchens. They focused on that first—even before the Great Hall. Workers need their bellies full, after all. Out of the surviving Unsullied, almost a third followed Grey Worm and Missandei’s lead and chose to stay at Winterfell. Something that worried Sam at first, for how was he to feed and house them all?

But fighting together makes friends of strangers, and to his great relief the Free Folk opened their tents and the Wintertown families their homes and, as the weeks passed, the Unsullied became integrated into the community. Their lack of fear has them scaling the tallest towers to repair walls and roofs with ease, and their ease with spears quickly had them master the pronged spears used to catch fish in streams and rivers. And once night falls, they take the coin they've earned and spend it on cuddling with Wintertown whores and drinking with the locals at the Smoking Log and, well, that has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated.

It’s a bit like being back at the Wall, this. A motley team of people working together in the terrible cold. Well, it’s not that cold anymore. They knew the moment the Night King died for the winter winds went from biting to crisp. Oh, and they’d kept one wight in the dungeons, of course, for the purpose of knowing and when it collapsed they celebrated the whole night through. But the weather did change. It really did. The Northerners claim it’s a rather mild winter, in fact, and have no trouble working from morning to night to ensure the King won’t have to stay at the Dreadfort after all. Some even forgo gloves, which Sam finds rather reckless, and he reminds them daily to treat their hands with wool wax to prevent dry and cracked skin.

“The raven, my lord?”

“Ah yes!” Sam rolls out the scroll in his hand. “They’re returning with food from Essos. Meats, grain, dried fruit, preserves, pickled vegetables, nuts and seeds, fish, sausages, cheese… Whatever you need to use for the welcoming feast, use it. Their shipment will fill our stores.”

The steward bows his head lightly. “Very well, my lord.”

“And more’s coming.” Sam beams. “We won’t go hungry in winter after all.”

In the corner of his eye, he catches Gilly’s moss green skirts as she leaves the library and makes her way to the guest house. During the evenings, Missandei holds reading and writing lessons in there for anyone who wants it. Mostly the Unsullied, but quite a few Wintertowners have snuck inside to
learn, and they all huddle together under the broken roof, seeking warmth from one another and the braziers placed in there. Gilly is helping as well. Missandei says she’s a born teacher and Gilly is blossoming from the responsibility and walks around Winterfell with a new confidence that warms him down to his toes.

Sam’s not certain he’s a born leader, though, and sometimes he wonders how he ended up ruling the North in Jon’s stead. But someone had to step up and Gilly nudged him forward--shoved him, really--so here he is! Perhaps it’s because he’s the closest thing they have to a maester after Wolkan passed. Or perhaps it’s because Ghost follows him around whenever he’s not out on a hunt. People respect Ghost and Ghost likes Sam--and not purely because Sam feeds him tasty morsels beneath the supper table. They did grow rather close at the Wall and Ghost knows Sam loves Jon like a brother. Either way, people listen to Sam and now he’s the one ensuring everything will be as ready as it possibly can for the King’s return.

The King and his betrothed. Now, Jon’s letters have said nothing of the sort, but Sam can read between the lines. If Jon and Sansa are not betrothed, they’re at least well on their way. There’s a lightness in Jon’s later ravens, a hopefulness that doesn’t sound like the old brooding Jon. Then there’s the choosing to return to Winterfell, to Sansa’s home, instead of taking the throne or leaving for Essos to get warm or going back to the Wall. That’s what he said, didn’t he? That he’d take the black because Sansa didn’t love him back.

But she does--Sam’s certain of it. Today he’s planning the restoration of Winterfell; soon he’ll be planning a wedding! But first he must send his ravens and invite the lords back for the welcoming feast. Only Yohn Royce remains at Winterfell and despite his intense dislike for Targaryens, he’s been an invaluable help in convincing the rest to accept Jon back as king. In the days after the battle, when all still stayed to recuperate and heal, Sam took his time speaking to all of them. Separately. Many were hesitant to accept his words at first, Sam must admit, but the only truly difficulty was Lord Glover. The thought of Jon and Sansa together made his mouth curl in distaste. But Sam has convinced them all by now. He’s certain of that too. Well. Fairly certain.

Sam rolls up the last scroll and attaches it to the raven’s leg and sends it on its way. He’ll find out soon enough.

Jon sits agog in the Great Hall, eyes wandering over evergreens bound into wreaths, chandeliers showering guests with golden light, serving maids filling the tables with food and drink, and the musicians plucking their strings. He’s worn that face ever since he rode into the courtyard earlier today and found it teeming with people eager to welcome their king home. Too busy sorting everything, Sam has neither had time to tell him about the reparations nor the preparations, but it’s almost better this way. Watching Jon’s bemused reaction to it all. And it’ll be better still, if everything unfolds the way Sam expects it too.

Sansa didn’t arrive by horseback but by carriage, together with her brother, ser Davos, Gendry, and a gaggle of King’s Landing orphans. But as the carriage stopped, Jon was there instantly to take her hand and help her down the steps. She even wore his cloak. Now, though, it hangs from Jon’s shoulders while Sansa has dressed in a pretty blue gown with a wolf embroidery, her own cloak back on her shoulders. They look good together, as majestic as the mountains north of Winterfell which shield the people from the cold winds blowing in from the Lands of Always Winter, and a good feeling settles in Sam’s stomach. This is just as it should be.
Once the din of people coming together mellows, Yohn Royce gets it to quiet completely by rising to his feet and clearing his throat. After addressing the king and Lady Stark, he tells them about how bravely everyone fought to defend the castle from the Others. He tells them about Gendry and Podrick shooting down Viserion, about Daenerys leaving and the Night King resurrecting Rhaegal to follow her, about Brienne and Grey Worm killing two of the three White Walkers still alive, about Sandor Clegane giving his life as he fought and killed the third. And he tells them about how, as their general, he insisted on Bran and Brienne and the rest sailing south to defeat Daenerys, Cersei, and the Night King while Royce and their forces stayed to fight the remaining wights.

“I never thought I’d find myself supping with Wildlings and Unsullied—I must admit I never thought I’d care to—but we’re brothers in arms and…” He trails off when he notices Lyanna Mormont’s narrowed eyes on him. “And sisters in arms, of course. Ahem. Aah, yes, and we’ve all worked together to rebuild what was torn down while the King in the North was in the South to finally put an end to the Targaryen tyranny. I am proud to sup with everyone in this hall. And I know that my good friend Eddard Stark, the man who raised King Jon as his own son, would be proud to see his nephew finishing what Robert’s Rebellion started. He’d be proud to see his nephew filling his seat.” Royce raises his cup. “To the King in the North!”

When Lord Glover stands as well, Sam’s stomach flips nervously. This is it, then. If he raises concerns, more will follow and then...

“I’ve had my doubts,” Glover says and Sam holds his breath. “You all know this and, I think it’s safe to say, many of you have shared those doubts. But… Jon Snow did avenge the Red Wedding. And he rode south to save our lady Stark. He killed the Night King. He stopped the Mad King’s daughter, and when he smashed the last remaining dragon eggs, he smashed my remaining doubts. And now, instead of chasing a southern throne, he’s secured our independence and returned home to his people. To the King in the North!”

Sam has barely breathed out in relief before Lyanna Mormont stands as well. “Targaryen blood might run through his veins, but so does the blood of the Starks and the First Men. I don’t care what man sired him. He’s Lyanna Stark’s son. A true Northerner. A true Stark! And he’s still my king from this day until his last day. The King in the North!”

Her little girl voice carries across the room and rallies the rest of the guests to lift their cups and chant in Jon’s honor, their “The King in the North!” reaching such a volume, Sam doesn’t hear the scrape of chair legs against stone when Sansa stands. He doesn’t notice her at all until the clamor simmers to a stop and all eyes are directed at Lady Stark.

Worrying her hands, Sansa looks out over the diverse crowd with flushed cheeks. “My lords, my ladies. Jon’s not a true Stark but…”

A confused murmur rising in the room strangles her voice. She draws an uneven breath through her nose and releases it through tense lips, hands clasped so tightly now the knuckles pale. But then Jon gets to his feet and takes one of her hands with his own, rubbing his thumb soothingly over her knuckles until they’re pink again, and as though she draws strength from his touch, Sansa tries once more with a steady voice.

“My lady, you once told us you know no king but the king in the North whose name is Stark. And Jon’s not a Stark by name, but his children could be. Your future king or queen could be a Stark.” Sansa swallows and smiles softly at Jon before turning back to the crowd. “If Jon were to marry me and let our children take my name.”

Everything stills, the echoes of her vulnerable plea soaked up by a quiet audience. They’re so quiet Sam can hear even the flames flickering on the wicks from the draft flowing in through the shutters.
And for half a heartbeat he fears all his greasing was for naught, that the thought of Jon and Sansa together might’ve been acceptable, but that seeing them inside the walls of Winterfell is too stark a reminder of their previous relationship. Perhaps that’s all people see now: the brother and sister they once knew. Perhaps a musty old book stolen from the Citadel and Sam’s carefully worded arguments didn’t change people’s perception after all.

Sam places his hands on the table to push himself to stand and do is best to sway them again, but then someone shouts, "Hear, hear," and it shatters the silence and prompts the guests to voice their approval and raise their cups to their king and future queen and express their joy over a royal wedding, and Sam slumps down in his seat with relief. Yohn Royce meets his gaze across the room, nods, and Sam knows whom he has to thank. Then Royce's gaze shifts to Jon and Sansa and there’s a tenderness there Sam has never before seen on the stoic man's features. A tenderness Sam finds in the eyes of many gathered in the Great Hall as they witness how Jon and Sansa's smiles bloom slowly, almost tentatively, as though the people's acceptance is a thing too good to be true.

“I trust you’re behind this?” Jon says much later, once food, drink, and war stories occupy the guests enough for them to share a private word.

Sam gives a casual shrug and manages just barely to hold back the grin trying its best to spread on his face. “I might’ve prepared them a bit.”

“A bit?” Jon laughs. “I think you’ve done more than a bit, Sam.”

“The betrothal,” Sansa says. “I thought we would have to fight for it.”

This time Sam fails to hold back the grin, and it stretches from ear to ear. “I might’ve prepared them for that too.”

Jon exhales in a chuckle and shows his gratitude by squeezing Sam’s shoulder, but Sansa shows it by pulling Sam into a teary embrace and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you so much, Samwell.”

As though any display of love and affection will scare the lords into rescinding their approval, Jon and Sansa keep their distance in the weeks that follow. And even though Jon, one evening when they share a pitcher of ale in his solar, admits to Sam that he and Sansa slept in the same bed on Dragonstone (after making it abundantly clear they’re still waiting to consummate until after the wedding), they now sleep separately. But no matter how careful they are, they can’t hide their palpable yearning, and soon everyone in the castle whispers about the king’s love for his intended, and some even take bets on how long it’ll take before they share a bed after all.

Something that only makes Jon and Sansa work even harder to stay apart. During the days, Jon takes over all the responsibilities Sam shouldered in his absence, with ser Davos and a boy knight called Finn following him around, while lady Brienne sees to it that lady Sansa is protected as she digs into her responsibilities as Lady of Winterfell.

“Paying the Citadel for a new maester is expensive,” Sansa tells Sam one morning after summoning him to her solar, the ledger he’s become intimately familiar with open at her desk. “And I know you’re eager to return to your mother and sister, but…”
“But paying to rebuild Winterfell is expensive as well. As is paying all the workers. Yes, I know.”

“As soon as we can, we’ll save up for it. I promise.”

“It’s all right,” Sam says and it is.

Ravens fly frequently between Winterfell and Horn Hill. Varys has traveled south again and helped ser Jaime getting crowned as king of the Westerlands, the Crownlands, and the Reach, and according to Sam’s mother, peace has settled in the area. Soldiers have returned home, food is being distributed, and people are perhaps not thriving but at least surviving and, all things considered, that is rather good news. In return, Sam calms his mother by telling her about his work: tending to the sick, managing the rookery, advising the King in the North, helping Lady Stark in finding new families for the orphans of King’s Landing, organizing the library and restoring the books damaged in the battle, and acting as diplomat whenever trouble arises between Unsullied, Free Folk, lowborn, and highborn.

He also does his best to ease the tension between lady Sansa and Missandei.

One of his favorite moments each week is joining the ladies who sew, knit, and embroider, often bringing one of his books to read aloud once the gossiping dwindles. And thanks to the sewing and the teaching, Missandei and Gilly have grown close over the months since the battle. But the moment lady Sansa came back and joined the circle, a strained silence settled in the group. Oh, Sansa’s never rude or unwelcoming. No, she’s too well bred for that. But she’s never personal either, and as she’s the highest ranking woman at Winterfell, everyone but Gilly takes her lead.

He can’t blame Sansa for it. Trust doesn’t come easily to her—and trusting Missandei in particular must be quite the challenge. But he’s seen the young Naathi woman become an integral part of life at Winterfell (and Gilly’s closest friend), so even though it’s not his story to tell, he stops by Lady Stark’s solar to share what he hopes will change things.

“Missandei tried to stop Daenerys from leaving us all to die. Instead of asking Daenerys to take her with her, she risked the Dragon Queen’s wrath and begged Daenerys to stay. Not that it worked, but… I understand why you don’t trust Missandei, but she chose us that day. Not her queen.”

Sansa picks a freshwater pearl from a small box and attaches it to the blue fabric in her lap. Whenever she has a moment to spare, she picks up her wedding dress and works on the intricate pattern of pearls and silver thread climbing up the skirts and the bodice.

“She loved her,” Sansa murmurs. “Love and loss and the need for revenge. They all make you do things you never imagined yourself capable of.”

“Sansa.” Sam scoots his chair closer. “She and Varys both tried to stop Daenerys—and she threatened to burn them alive. It broke her poor heart. She carried that pain for weeks before she opened up to Gilly and me. Missandei is a loyal soul, but her loyalty to Daenerys died that day. She’s been one of us ever since.”

Sansa licks her lips, nodding. “If she wanted revenge, I suppose she would’ve taken it by now.”

“She doesn’t want revenge. She wants a home. A family. Children. We’ve not found homes for Jeyne and Alyn yet, and Missandei and Grey Worm would love to parent them. But she’s too nervous to ask you. They want to be a part of Winterfell. They want to make a home here, but they’ll never be able to unless you accept them.”

“You’re right.” Sansa lays down the needle with a sigh. “Jeyne keeps sneaking out to watch Grey
Worm and ser Nyles teaching the older children how to fight, even though she’s barely five. And Alyn is hanging in Missandei’s skirts and soaking up everything she says about letters and numbers. I’ll talk to her. Jeyne and Alyn will have a good home with her and Grey Worm. And I’ll… I’ll try harder.” She gives Sam a tired smile. “I promise.”

And try she does. She visits the guest house during lessons, invites Grey Worm and Missandei to sup with her family, and even stops by the home the Essosi couple have made for themselves in one of the Wintertown houses whose owners perished in the battle. It doesn’t take long before Sansa’s aloof politeness softens into genuine warmth and as the wedding grows nearer, both Gilly and Missandei help her with all the preparations, and he often finds them whispering and giggling together in a way Arya tells him Sansa hasn’t done since she was a little girl.

Arya changes as well. Instead of skulking around the castle and seeing dangers in every shadow, she spends her days with Gendry and Linette and they often take little Sam off Gilly’s hands to give her time to study the history books that so fascinates her. And Bran… Well, Bran has changed most of all. While he can still warg and often does, and while he still has the greensight, the weight of the world and its history and future has left his young shoulders. His only worry now is whether Meera Reed will attend the wedding. A messenger has been sent, but Greywater Watch is hard to find and they’ve yet to receive a reply, and now that Bran is Bran once more, he struggles to hide his emotions.

“Perhaps you should fly a raven to her,” Sam says, nodding encouragingly at Bran. “Then we’ll know she’s received your letter.”

“I hurt her feelings.” Bran blinks his sad brown eyes. “I really hurt her.”

“I’ll write the letter. You choose a raven.”

Sam gives the boy a comforting pat on the shoulder and heads to the rookery. He’s done little else but sending ravens lately. It’s the first royal wedding the North has seen in centuries--and even though Jon and Sansa would prefer a small and intimate celebration, they know the people want a grand affair. Highborn and lowborn all gush about it and so ravens have flown to holdfasts all over Westeros. Not many south of the Neck will come, though, Sam suspects. With no Iron Throne and no dragons, and with so many houses ended or at the brink of ending, the kingdoms are too busy crowning their own rulers and finding their bearings to travel for weeks in winter.

But Meera? He takes care to explain that Bran is himself again--underlining it twice--and smiles at the raven who’s hopped to his desk.

“I’ll be all right, Bran. She’ll come.”

Two days before the wedding, after weeks of Bran barely sleeping or eating, Meera turns up outside the walls of Winterfell with her father in tow. But while Howland Reed tells anyone who’ll listen about how he and Ned found baby Jon, now that he finally can share the truth of that day, Meera keeps her distance and spends the whole day watching Bran interacting with others. Not until supper is served in a small audience chamber for the Starks and their guests, does Meera sit down next to Bran and strike up a monosyllabic conversation.

While not the most riveting interaction Sam has ever witnessed, it is a start and he leaves them to it
and gives his support to someone in more urgent need.

Jon's so nervous and excited by the wedding he barely says a word to anyone, his eyes constantly seeking out his betrothed and shooting her soppy smiles, and Sam stays by his side to ensure Jon utters enough pleasantries to keep his guests happy. Winterfell is brimming with them, guests coming from near and far, but only the couple’s closest friends and family are invited to witness the actual union.

Even though it’s mid-afternoon and winter has kept its milder temperature, darkness still falls early and casts the wood in the amethyst haze of twilight. Braziers light up the path leading to the heart-tree, and lanterns hang like fat little suns from the naked branches of old oaks and beeches. Huddled close to Gilly, with little Sam on his arm, Sam watches his best friend in all the world take his spot beneath the heart-tree.

Even though he protested for quite a bit at first, this morning Jon finally accepted Gendry’s gift—one that took the blacksmith weeks to create now that his injured lungs demand frequent breaks: an open circlet of hammered silver, engraved with the runes of the First Men and adorned with spikes of dragonglass. A crown for the King in the North who fought the Others and won. It glitters against Jon’s dark curls, which flow freely in the light breeze, brushing the fur of the cloak Sansa once sewed him. He’s all in black, the rich wool decorated with discreet direwolf clasps in silver with the ruby eyes of his companion. The snow-white wolf is so large now that even as he’s seated at the roots of the heart-tree, his enormous head reaches over Jon’s shoulders. Like the heart-tree itself, Ghost looks old and ancient, as if the old gods sent a guardian of their own to protect and bless the union.

A puff of white breath blooms in front of Jon’s face. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, hands twitching restlessly, eyes wide and trained at the path where his bride will appear. An eternity passes. Jon expels another breath. Taps his fingers against his thigh. Shifts his weight again. Then an awed murmur whispers through the crowd and Jon’s face lights up with anticipation.

Ushered by her brother, whose chair is pushed by their sister, Sansa strides down the path in a dress as blue as the sky of a bright winter's day. Swaths of fabric fall from her waist and, as though it’s soaking up snow with each step, hoarfrost embroidery of silver thread and fresh-water pearls climbs in glittering waves from the hem. It returns at the waist, where it spreads up the bodice like frost on window panes and, at this distance, it looks as if a thousand snowflakes cling to Sansa’s body, but Sam has seen her work up close. He knows loping wolves, dancing trouts, and winter roses hide among the ice crystals. And while Sansa wears no crown, mistletoe is weaved into the braided bun at the crown of her head, the silver green leaves and ivory berries striking against her copper locks which tumbles down over her shoulders in soft waves.

Jon stares at her as if she were the Maiden come alive and gracing his godswood with her radiance. The Night King himself could appear, the dragons could return with a deafening roar, and wights could creep through the wood, and yet Sam’s certain Jon wouldn’t notice. He’s so mesmerized by his bride he doesn’t even blink until she’s in front of him and takes his proffered hands.

The young pair stammers themselves through their vows with trembling voices, but their eyes sparkle and their cheeks are flushed, and when Jon hangs his cloak over Sansa’s shoulders and gingerly lifts her hair to fan out over the fur, tears glitter like diamonds in her lashes. Jon’s face softens with a loving smile and, gently, he cups her face and kisses away the fallen tears before claiming her mouth in the sweetest of kisses, and through the godswood winds the susurration of the collective content sigh of their captivated audience.

The carefully crafted masks behind which they’ve hidden their feelings this past moon between
homecoming and wedding now fall away. And as they lead the way through the throng of smallfolk gathered in the courtyard, their beaming smiles spread warmth among their people like a mild summer breeze. No matter where Sam looks, he finds only happy faces as the onlookers shower their king and queen with well-wishes and cheers. Even as they enter the Great Hall, where countless more guests have already started the celebration, he sees nothing but smiles.

And Sam knows this unadulterated elation comes from so much more than sharing in Jon and Sansa’s love for each other. It comes from the promise of better times ahead, of a mild winter giving way to a prosperous spring, of the Starks back at Winterfell to rule a free and independent North. Of peace and a chance to heal. That’s what they all celebrate. Even the musicians play with their lips curled happily and the serving maids flow between the tables on light feet and when a Wintertown child sneaks inside the Great Hall to nick a grilled chicken, the lords at the table only laugh and order the maids to bring the child some baked apples too.

Once their bellies are full, someone cries out for a dance, and when Jon leads Sansa out on the floor, even the serving maids stop what they’re doing to witness the King and Queen dancing. Jon treads carefully around his wife, eyes darting down to his feet every so often, while Sansa only laughs at him and pulls him in so close he can forget about the steps and only sway softly with her to the melody weaved by lute, harp, fiddle, and flute.

When Sam came to Winterfell, he was welcomed by a Sansa Stark who was nothing like the friendly Winterfell boys he’d met. While she was kind to both him and his little family, there was always a distance between them, created by a sad longing in her she wouldn't let anyone understand. Not until Jon returned home and Sam starting putting it all together. He didn’t lie to Jon that night so long ago now when he tried sussing out Jon’s feelings for his cousin. Sansa was miserable without him—and grew more miserable still when he returned with Daenerys. And seeing her happiness now, how it affects Jon as well, fills Sam’s chest with such bubbly joy he can’t contain himself and, even though he’s seated with Yohn Royce and Brienne and other people he finds intimidating, he turns to his Gilly with a breathless smile.

“Perhaps we should get married as well!”

“You don’t see me as your wife?” Gilly gives him a cute little frown. “You stole me, Sam. That makes me your wife.”

“Yes, but…” Sam sighs. “I want a real wedding. With guests and a feast and you in a pretty dress.”

Gilly glances at the floor, where more dancers have joined the bride and groom. “Everyone does seem rather happy. And lady Sansa’s dress is very beautiful.”

“I’d love to see you in a wedding dress.” Sam takes Gilly’s hand. “We can marry right here at Winterfell. Or at Horn Hill in spring.”

She hums, eyes traveling back to Sansa. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her looking that happy.”

“Nor have I.” Yohn Royce follows the dancing Jon and Sansa with his gaze. “I met lady Sansa once, when she was little. And the King, of course, sullen boy that he was back then. My son was taking the black and we stopped at Winterfell to visit my old friend Ned. And lady Sansa… Well, I daresay she grew fond of my son and she and her friend followed us around wherever we went, giggling and blushing. She was such a happy girl, always smiling.” He nods slowly, mouth tight as he controls the mistiness springing up in his eyes. “Life has not been gentle to her and it’s made me forget the girl she once was. But I remember her well now. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a happier bride.” Royce
gives a rare laugh, shaking his head. “And it’s all because of that sullen boy.”

"Nor have I." Brienne smiles softly. “Seen a happier bride, that is. Or a happier groom. I have to admit I was worried when they told me about the betrothal. I was worried it wasn’t what she wanted, but I can happily say I’ve been proved wrong. Now, you’ll have to excuse me. I promised ser Davos a dance. He’s been practicing his steps and is eager to show them off."

She says it in an exasperated tone, but as ser Davos whisks her out on the dance floor, Brienne’s eyes sparkle with delight. It’s full of dancers now, that small cleared space in the Great Hall. Grey Worm and Missandei, Arya and Gendry, Podrick and Alys Karstark... Even Bran has been wheeled out by Meera, who now dances with him by holding his hands, both of them beaming. Sam watches Gilly through the corner of his eye to see whether she expects them to dance as well, but she seems content to sit at the table with little Sam on her lap, feeding him morsels off her plate, while Yohn Royce does his best at keeping the conversation flowing by asking her more about this Wildling way of stealing wives.

As they talk, Sam tunes them out and returns his attention to Jon and Sansa. They’ve wound their arms around each other, foreheads pressed together, and for what must be the hundredth time, Sam wonders when this started, this forbidden love of theirs that by sheer luck turned out to be quite appropriate after all.

Later in the evening, when Arya and Gendry have volunteered to take Linette, little Sam, Alyn, Jeyne, and the other children under ten and tuck them into bed, and Sansa is teaching Missandei and Gilly the steps of her favorite dance, Jon weaves through the crowd with a tankard of ale and settles down next to Sam. His eyes shine with happiness and ale, and his crown sits askew atop his wild mop of curls. Sam adjusts the crown with a grin and feels no shame at all in taking the opportunity to ask the inebriated Jon, one final time, about his feelings for Sansa and when they began.

“When we were at the Wall,” Sam says, “you told me all about your life. Arya and Robb. Bran and Hodor and all the wolves. Even Theon and little Rickon. But never her. You never talked about Sansa.”

“No, I didn’t.” Jon swallows a mouthful of ale and, when he notices that Sam still watches him expectantly, adds: “There wasn’t much to tell.”

“What was she like?”

“A lady. Every bit a lady. And I was a... Nothing. I was nothing. Most of the time I didn’t exist to her, but sometimes... Sometimes she forgot to be her mother’s daughter. Sometimes she forgot to please her and then she was kind and sweet. Helpful. Gentle.” Jon breathes out in a drunken smile. “She taught me how to talk to girls.”

“You loved her even then.”

“We were children.”

“And children can’t fall in love?”

Jon doesn’t hear his question, though. His eyes have found Sansa again, and he watches her laugh and skip and twirl with her friends. “Do you think I’ll make her happy, Sam?”

“Haven’t you already?”

“I hope so,” Jon whispers without taking his eyes off her. “I don't know what I did to get this lucky.”
"You saved the world, Jon."

"No, I didn't. Bran, Brienne, ser Jaime, Gendry, Arya... We did it together, all of us. And you. With your books." He empties the tankard and puts it on the table. "So the world's saved. What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I've not had time to think about it, really."

"Dragonstone is mine. And one day, I'll give it to my son or daughter. I want them to know. Everything. The history of the Targaryens and all the awful things they've done in the name of power. But until then... If you want it, it's yours. You should see the cave paintings there. You'll love it. Or you can stay here, for as long as you want." Jon claps Sam's back. "We might not be brothers of the Night's Watch anymore, but you'll always be my brother, Sam."

Then Sansa smiles at Jon across the room and he forgets everything else and floats over the flagstones until he can grabs his wife by the waist and spin her round and round, slower and slower until they fall back into that swaying dance of theirs. Their lips find each other and only ever part to draw the shortest of breaths before meeting again and that good feeling returns to Sam's stomach. This is how it should be. They get swallowed by the sea of dancers and soon Sam loses track of them completely and he doesn't realize they're long gone until someone shouts about a bedding ceremony and the guests find the chairs at the head table empty.

But Sam gets to his feet and vows to himself that when some clever drunk inevitably suggests they all run to the Keep to listen outside the Lord's chamber, he will make sure they stay put. He and Ghost and Brienne and ser Finn.

The King and Queen in the North might belong to the people, but this night belongs to Jon and Sansa. And Jon and Sansa deserve some time alone, finally. They deserve to love one another in peace.

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